

*Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov*

*volume II*

*Prose, Plays, and Supersagas*

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*Velimir Khlebnikov*

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*Prose, Plays,  
and Supersagas*

*translated by Paul Schmidt*

*edited by Ronald Vroon*

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## Preface

This volume includes all of Velimir Khlebnikov's published artistic prose, dramatic texts, and those syncretic works for which he invented the name "supersaga." The few pieces that have been omitted are preparatory sketches or fragmentary drafts of the pieces included here. The translations were based on texts drawn from three collections of Khlebnikov's works. The first and textually most reliable is *Tvoreniiia* (Works), ed. M. Ia. Poliakov, V. P. Grigoriev, and A. E. Parnis (Moscow: Sovetsky pisatel, 1986). For works not contained in that volume we turned to the original *Sobranie proizvedenii Velimira Khlebnikova* (Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov), ed. N. Stepanov and Iu. Tynianov (Leningrad: Izdatelstvo pisatelei v Leningrade, 1928–1933), and *Neizdannye proizvedeniia* (Unpublished Works), ed. N. Khardzhiev and T. Grits (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1940). These three collections also served as the principal sources for annotations. *Tvoreniiia*, in particular, contains a wealth of background material illuminating difficult and obscure passages in Khlebnikov's oeuvre. Other major sources consulted include Khlebnikov's *Stikhotvoreniiia. Poemy. Dramy. Proza* (Poems, Plays, Prose), ed. R. V. Duganov (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1986), and Henryk Baran, "Khlebnikov's *Deti Vydry* [Otter's Children]: Texts, Commentaries, Interpretations" (dissertation, Harvard University, 1976). The translations, notes, and commentary also reflect our examination of manuscripts made available by the Central State Archive of Literature and Art in Moscow.

The date and source for each Russian text are indicated at the end of its translation. Abbreviations are as follows:

Roman and arabic numbers—volume and page of *Sobranie proizvedenii* (Collected Works)

NP—*Neizdannye proizvedeniia* (Unpublished Works)

T—*Tvoreniiia* (Works)

TsGALI—Central State Archive of Literature and Art

Transliteration throughout follows the U.S. Library of Congress system, slightly simplified. In the text we have used the normal spelling for proper names when an English common usage has been established; for example, the Russian *-skii* ending has been rendered *-sky*.

Places in the text marked “[illegible]” are so marked in the Soviet editions. In the plays and supersagas, any stage directions set in square brackets are interpolations we have introduced for the sake of clarity. Ellipses in the Russian text—it is sometimes difficult to ascertain whether they are Khlebnikov’s or the editor’s omissions—are marked here by five dots; gaps in the copy-texts are marked by three. The reader should be aware that those texts in the present volume appearing previously in *The King of Time* (Harvard University Press, 1985) have been revised, sometimes significantly.

A concise biography of Khlebnikov may be found in Volume I of this edition, *Letters and Theoretical Writings* (1987). Those who wish to explore the critical literature in greater depth should consult the bibliographies in three recent studies of Khlebnikov’s works: Raymond Cooke, *Velimir Khlebnikov: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); V. P. Grigoriev, *Slovotvorchestvo i smezhnye problemy iazyka poeta* (Word Creation and Other Problems Relating to the Poet’s Language; Moscow: Nauka, 1987); and Ronald Vroon, *The Shorter Poems of Velimir Xlebnikov: A Key to the Coinages* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Studies, 1983).

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## *Translator's Introduction*

Khlebnikov (1885–1922) ranks with Mallarmé, Joyce, Pound, and Stein among the great innovators of literary modernism. He blurred the distinctions between verse and prose and between one literary genre and another. His experiments helped to break the hold of traditional verse patterns in Russian poetry, as he worked with irregularities, unequal line lengths, meters that varied from line to line in a single poem, variable stanza lengths, irregular rhyme patterns. He made use of patterns and tropes from folklore and from chants, incantations, and shamanistic language. He managed to create an entire poetics in that area of language the Anglo-American tradition tends to belittle as “play”—neologisms, palindromes, riddles, puns. And, under the same impulse that led Pound to the *Cantos*, he invented the supersaga, a new genre capable of containing the diverse elements of the universe that determine human history.

An astonishing aspect of Khlebnikov's work is the way in which he *structures* his poetic imagination—or lets it structure itself. New forms, from the composition of a line of verse to the creation of a genre, seem to grow organically through the cracking surfaces of old forms, producing something rich and strange. This aspect of his writing seems to me revealed especially clearly in this volume, where the texts listed as “plays” and “supersagas,” taken as a whole, chart the paths taken on his search for a new dramatic form. In *Snowwhite* what begins as a kind of fairy-tale operetta libretto is invaded first by outrageous parody and then by cultural sloganeering. In *The Girl-God*, an attempt to treat mythic history in the style of symbolist drama, the dramatic structure falls apart under the shock of stylistic shifts and under the pressure of the writing. (“*The Girl-God* was written in twelve hours straight,” he tells us, “without a single correction, from morning to evening. I smoked and drank strong tea, writing feverishly the whole time.”) Khlebnikov can find no dramatic form to contain his vision and seems almost to be groping here for the superimpositions and dissolves

of film. In *The Little Devil* and *The Marquise des S.* Khlebnikov finds a stageable theatrical form: a surreal fusion of topical satire, stick, and parody with profoundly beautiful poetry about art, death, and immortality. The subsequent short plays (*Asparuh*, *Mrs. Laa Backworlds*, *The Gods*, and *The Tuberculosis Spirochete*) are all brief explorations of varying dramatic possibilities, while *Miss Death Makes a take* is unique, a beautifully constructed play in an almost Mayan manner that integrates popular folklore, colloquial speech, voice, music, and workable theatrical devices.

But it is in *Otter's Children* and *Zangezi* that we find what seems to be the outcome of Khlebnikov's search for a dramatic form that would contain his vision of the universe. Like Wagner, he tries to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a fusion of dramatic action, poetry, narrative, ideology, theory, and the music implied by his rhythms and chants. These texts were intended, in some sense, as librettos for operas that had yet to be imagined, but can be guessed at today in the work of artists like Robert Wilson or Philip Glass.

This on-going search for a suitable dramatic form illustrates a quality of all Khlebnikov's writing: the willingness to allow form to form itself. He allows accidents to happen. A primary note in Khlebnikov's writing, as I read it, is the sense of wonder at the play of language, of sound allowed to move freely in search of its own sense, yielding what Khlebnikov and his contemporaries called "beyond-sound" (*zaum* in Russian). For Khlebnikov, the shift in sound that produced a shift in meaning was a shift in the structure of the universe. That shift becomes *word* when a consonant vanished gave him a vertiginous sense of the power of language to influence the natural world. The shift from consonant to vowel was all that distinguished *inventors* from *investors* or *exploiters*—and suddenly there appears the image of a struggle between *N* and *S*, between *R* and *T*. The movement of consonant to vowel came a metaphor for political and economic conflict.

This kind of writing must give any serious translator pause; it certainly did me, and it was a while before I came to see my task as the creation of process rather than result. Instead of merely attempting a simulacrum of any given text, I would have to work upon American English the same sorts of transformations that Khlebnikov works in Russian, and see what kind of texts resulted. This approach helped to avoid fetishizing the text of the original; it had the advantage of seeing translation as *transaction*, as a cultural and temporal response.

the original text. The translation thus becomes a self-sufficient text, a product of response in its own time and place.

Two further problems must be mentioned: Khlebnikov is for the most part unknown in America. When a poet translates a poem by Baudelaire into American English, he enters immediately into a literary dialogue with translators who have preceded him. He is able—probably he is required—to offer us *his* Baudelaire: the French poem refined through his particular sensibility and style. In the case of Khlebnikov, when the work of a poet is offered for the first time to an audience almost totally unfamiliar with it, the translator is less free. Rather than assimilate the writer to himself, he must assimilate himself to Khlebnikov. The translator must perform the part of Khlebnikov in somewhat the same way that an actor prepares, in a similar language act, to create a character on the stage.

A second problem arises from the attempt to translate the whole of a writer's work. To offer all—or most—of one poet's work means to show the development of his themes, treatments, and vocabulary; to make perceptible in the American text the words, patterns, and stylistic devices that unify the Russian texts. To translate the whole of a writer's work means to discover, as far as you can, what makes it a whole.

Finally, the translator must trust in a positive answer to the question: what sense will Khlebnikov's structures make in late twentieth-century American English? Beyond a vague notion of the writer as a futurist, there is in literary America no myth of Khlebnikov already in place to build on. The adjective "Khlebnikovian" has no meaning here, in the sense that "Baudelairean" or "Proustian" means something more than the work in question. There is a powerful and growing mythology of Khlebnikov in Russia, an appreciation of him as a true Futurian—a poet who could foresee the twenty-first century. Can that mythology and appreciation live here in America? I hope this volume, and the volume of poems to follow, will prove that it can.

P. S.



## *Introduction*

Khlebnikov's prose occupies a relatively minor place in his oeuvre—less than one fifth of the total, if one leaves out the letters and the treatises on time and history. What the whole lacks in quantity the individual works lack in size. The longest is a short story of less than twenty pages; most of the others average a mere four or five. Yet the prose has been praised as among the poet's most significant accomplishments. Writers as diverse as Yury Olesha and Vsevolod Ivanov expressed their admiration in the most laudatory terms. Given Khlebnikov's reputation as a neologizer, it is ironic that the lucidity of his diction in the prose works is what most impressed them.

By no means all of the pieces included here fit this description, and that speaks in the poet's favor. His earliest prose is experimental in the extreme—more so, perhaps, than even the notorious poem "Incantation by Laughter" or the other neological tours de force of the early years. Without the constraints of regular rhythm and rhyme, such pieces seek a formal coherence in narrative, but here, for the first time in Russian letters, the subject matter of the narrative is dictated by the language itself: these are not so much stylizations as "narratizations" of style. In his "Self-Statement" Khlebnikov speaks of his quest for the "magic touchstone of all Slavic words, the magic that transforms one into another." Words so created generate a world that itself seems prehistoric and proto-Slavic. In pieces such as "The I-Singer of Univer-song" or "Hooder" the stems and flexions of the language are let loose to wander and recombine in odd and wonderful ways. They have real meaning, but the objects they designate—sweetrees and thockets, thoughtlandish bodies and chattergummed goblins, herdboys and gleamgirls—are projections of a Slavic Adam in the Language of Eden.

By 1911 Khlebnikov had more or less abandoned such experiments, but Eden remained in his mind, and he sought it in more real settings. Several stories written between 1911 and 1915 attempt to recreate worlds untouched or undistressed by modern civilization. Some of these, such

as “Easter Day,” “Mountain People,” and “A Heart of Steel,” are expressly Slavic in their orientation and are liberally sprinkled with words and phrases native to the stories’ settings—the Ukraine, Montenegro, the Galician highlands. Others eschew this sort of local coloring and pursue a more Rousseauian goal: depicting individuals who have rejected modern urban life in favor of one more in harmony with nature. “Nikolai” and “Usa-Gali” belong to this group. At the time Khlebnikov was writing these pieces, he also began composing works based on his own life. This tendency is already apparent in “Nikolai.” Others that reflect this tendency—“Kolya was a handsome boy” and “Lubny is a strange, godforsaken town,” for example, or the somewhat later “Notes from the Past”—reveal the same simplicity of diction as the portraits of rustic life and pay increasingly greater attention to the psychology of self.

A new cluster of works makes its appearance in 1915. Ostensibly surrealistic, the pieces are based on a very serious literary and political platform to which Khlebnikov alluded as early as 1909 when he wrote to his friend, Vasily Kamensky, about a projected story that would break all the “logical rules of time and space.” The most ambitious of these texts is “Ka.” Khlebnikov found in Egyptian mythology the perfect occasion for a narrative that defied temporal causality: the concept of a person’s double, who represents his immortal, timeless self. We have a picture of the poet in pursuit of the same ideal world he had earlier hoped to project linguistically or to find outside the mainstream of contemporary culture. The emphasis now, however, is not on the object of the search but on the search itself. The journey takes him into the distant past and the distant future, and everywhere he seems to be asking the same question: where is Numbergod? Where or what is the key to the harmony that must exist between past, present, and future?

This question is also asked indirectly in “Yasir,” an unsurrealistic work written in 1918–19 that some regard as Khlebnikov’s prose masterpiece. It too describes a quest on the part of its hero, but an unwilling quest. The hero is Istoma, a fisherman in seventeenth-century Astrakhan, who is abducted and sold into slavery, eventually reaching the shores of India. There he finds sages who contemplate the same questions that seem to be troubling the narrator of the tale, but Istoma’s response is noncommittal. He eventually returns to find his home in ruins, and moves on in a direction that even the narrator cannot predict.

Khlebnikov's last major prose work, "Razin: Two Trinities," was never finished, and perhaps that is fitting. Here he returns to the autobiographical mode, describing two disparate events in his past that promise to illuminate his future if he can only elaborate the connection between them. The story is a synthesis of all the modes of narration Khlebnikov had been experimenting with. It circumscribes two worlds, one northern and Slavic, the other southern and Asian, that represent the polarities of his own life. He moves between past and present, not in his own right but by adopting as his double the seventeenth-century rebel, Stenka Razin, and traveling backward through his life. What he says of Razin's quest is most appropriately applied to his own: he wishes to "seek out the structural axes of the human world, the central pilings of his own beliefs."

## Self-Statement

In *The Girl-God* I wanted the pure Slavic element in all its golden linden-light, with threads that stretched from the Volga to Greece. I used Slavic Polabian words, like *leuna*. Valery Briusov was wrong when he said I invented those words.

In *Otter's Children* I touched the strings of Asia, its swarthy cast-iron wing, and told the different fates of two beings over the course of centuries; and then, using the legends of the Oroches—the oldest legends in the world—about the fiery fabric of the earth, I made Son of Otter attack the sun with a spear and destroy two of the three suns, the red one and the black one. And so, the cast-iron wings of Son of Otter from the East, golden linden-light from the West. The separate canvas panels make up a complicated structure and tell of the Volga as an Indo-Russian river, and treat Persia as the angle where two straight lines—the Russian and the Macedonian—meet. The sagas of the Oroches, that ancient Amur tribe, had a profound influence on me, and I conceived the idea of creating a pan-Asian consciousness in my poems.

In “Ka” I offered an echo to “Egyptian Nights,” the attraction of northern snowstorms to the heat of the Nile. I have taken for the Egyptian period the year 1378 B.C., when Egypt smashed its religious beliefs like a handful of rotten sticks and individual deities were replaced by the hand-rayed Sun, shining with multitudes. The Unclothed Sun, the Naked Sun-Disk, became for a while, through the will of Egypt's Mohammed, Amenhotpe IV, the sole divinity of the ancient shrines.

If we want to make the distinction in terms of elements, then “Ka” has a silver sound, *The Girl-God* a golden sound, while the sound of *Otter's Children* is brazen, iron: the voice of Asia in *Otter's Children*; the voice of the Slavs in *The Girl-God*; the voice of Africa in “Ka.”

“Nymph and Gnome” mixes Balkan and Sarmatian images. The city is treated in *The Marquise des S.* and *The Little Devil*.

In certain essays I have tried to give a rational justification for

prophecy, by offering a true view of the laws of time, while in my studies on language I engage in frequent dialogue with Leibniz's  $\sqrt{-}$ .

"Crimea" was written in free verse.

Little things are significant when they mark the start of the future, the way a falling star leaves a strip of fire behind it; they have to be going fast enough to pierce through the present. So far we haven't figured out where they get that speed. But we know a thing is right when it sets the present on fire, like a flint of the future. There were nodes of the future in "The Grasshopper," in "BO BEH O BEE," in "Incantation by Laughter"—a brief appearance by the fire god and his joyful gleam. Whenever I saw old lines of writing suddenly grow dim, and their hidden content become the present day, then I understood that creation finds its homeland in the future. Out of the future blows the word-gods' wind.

I wrote "Turnaturn" in a state of pure irrationality. Only after I had lived through on my own its lines *Chin zvan . . . mechom navznich* (the war) and had experienced for myself how they turned empty afterwards—*Pal a norov khud i dukh vorona lap*—did I realize what they were: reflected rays of the future cast by a subconscious "I" upon the sky of the rational mind. Thongs cut from the shadow of fate remain, and the soul remains entangled in them, until the moment when the future becomes the present, when the waters of the future, where reason bathes, dry up and only the bottom remains.

To find—without breaking the circle of roots—the magic touchstone of all Slavic words, the magic that transforms one into another, and so freely to fuse all Slavic words together: this was my first approach to language. This self-sufficient language stands outside historical fact and everyday utility. I observed that the roots of words are only phantoms behind which stand the strings of the alphabet, and so my second approach to language was to find the unity of the world's languages in general, built from units of the alphabet. A path to a universal beyonsense language.

When I was writing the beyonsense words of the dying Akhenaton in "Ka"—"Manch, Manch"—they almost hurt to look at; I couldn't read them, I kept seeing lightning bolts between them and myself. But now they don't move me at all. And I don't know why that is.

David Burliuk was right when he painted a heart with the uncompromising cannon of the future passing through it. He was showing us

how inspiration works: it is a highway for the hooves of the future, its horseshoes of iron.

“Ka” took a week to write, *Otter’s Children* took more than a year, *The Girl-God* was written in twelve hours straight, without a single correction, from morning to evening. I smoked and drank strong tea. I wrote feverishly the whole time. I note these facts in order to show how varied are the circumstances of creation. “Zoo” was written in the Moscow zoo. In *Mrs. Laneen* I wanted to discover the “infinitesimals” of artistic language. *Otter’s Children* conceals a complex study of magnitudes—the play of quantities beyond the predawn of qualities. *The Girl-God* came out as suddenly and as casually as a wave, without the slightest correction, like a bullet of creativity, and so it may serve as a study of irrationality. *The Little Devil* was written just as fast, a sudden conflagration of layers of silence. Any desire to understand the “sense”—and not the beyonsense—of language destroyed all artistic involvement in language. I mention this as a warning.

I swore to discover the Laws of Time and carved that promise on a birch tree (in the village of Burmakino, Yaroslavl) when I heard about the battle of Tsushima. I’ve been working at them for the last ten years. One brilliant result of my research was the prediction of the fall of the government in 1917, which I made a few years before it happened. Of course that’s not enough to convince science. I solemnly urge all artists of the future to keep exact spiritual records, to think of themselves as the sky and to keep exact notes on the rising and setting of their spiritual stars. In this area of endeavor, humanity possesses the diary of Marie Bashkirtseff and that’s all. Such spiritual poverty, such lack of knowledge of the soul’s sky, is the most glaring black Fraunhofer line in contemporary humanity. We might conceivably devise a law that correlates the frequency of wars in time with the string of humanity, but there is no way to devise such a law for the tiny time current of an individual life—the foundations aren’t there. We don’t have the diaries.

Recently I have begun writing with numbers, as Number-Artist of the eternal head of the universe, how I see it and where I see it from. This art form is now being developed out of bits and pieces of modern science, just like contemporary painting; it is accessible to all and is destined to swallow up the natural sciences. I am clearly aware of the spokes of a wheel turning within me, and I work at my diaries in order

## *Self-Statement*

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to catch in my net the law of those spokes' return. The desire to bring  
beyonsense language into the realm of sense is, I see, the return of an  
old spoke in my wheel. How I regret that I can talk of these spokes, of  
life's recurrences, only with words, allusive words!

But my situation may soon change.

[1919: II.7]

## *A Sinner's Seduction*

There were many of them, many of them, blackbirds with nightwings saying "death!" and truthflower ferns and a timethatch cottage and the face of an oldwomer in eternity's tripes and a snapping hound on a chain of days whose tongue was thought and there was a path, and on the path one day followed another and left behind prints of daytime and evening and morning, and a skybarked tree eaten up by fiddle beetles and a youngering lake and horneyed goats and astonishing centipusses and girleens with whinings where they might have had wings and love instead of lore, and a boy setting one world after another loose from a straw and laughing for he cared about nothing and there was a stretch of youngstones too and over it the swift and snapping water ran, and low across the land a doubtwing swallow flickered and the liquid lapping of the nightingale and the prickly gaze of the hedgerose, and there was a timewood fence and a sorrow-twigged suffertree bent above the water and there by a lake the rush of streams on time's stones. And sorrowwings rippled the sky above the lake. And the truthtailed sheatfish and the pike splashed circles, his teeth were equals signs, and backstepping justice, a pair of crab claws, moved in quick imperceptible scuttles. And the timebeaked crane stepping on pretty legs swallowed frogs full of universal egg sacs, and one old man tilled his field of wry and a hen downy with youngness stood stockstill at the sight of the furrow he made.

And a girl raised a dread to her lips as if it were a reedpipe and a dawnwing with prayerplumes flew over the sorrowsilted lakeside. The sky was flaired with women's glances. And sorrowwings rippled the heights and the lascivious flight of the sun-scattering cuckoo and a voice whiskered with silences floated in the air, and nightning eyes beneath the evening branches and straying mouths and nostils ecstatic and a snake with the voice "I live" and through shifty reeds sailed the pastwing drake toward the futurefeather duck, splashing in circles and lifting its wings, leaving silvery furrows in its wake, and these peacelong-



ing pipings in departed twilights, and the bird called godeater and the stilleaved buttercup and the horrormen on all the trails.

And torment in undone's eyes.

And the visions came faster and faster, and after the vision and regurgiting a chunk of immortality someone had swallowed, with the help of a hook and the sound of general laughter, after blizzards of horrible fearfaced idols there was Worldevour whose thighs were humans swooping over everything and some kind of Univerk moved up and down, something beyond anyone's conception, whose occasional feather as it fell marked the horror of his very existence.

And clackclack in answer from Manvour, whose beak wiped away the foam of living beings as he stepped from the human sea. And everywhere flights of hollowbodied ravens with vacuoiding eyes, and all that existed was only hollow stumps in emptiness. And the stilltail raven flew here and there above horror-havocked cornfields. And there was twisted truth and sorrowbirds rocked above the sorrowsilted lakeside and the minder of this forest was evil, and horror stood stockstill in fields whose earth was thought, and the singing bows and arrows of the me-killers . . . .

The pathmaker wolf began to howl, as he followed the deer with her hayrick horns. And the whole wide universe was the gaping beak of a raven.

But from its face there came no universing smile of strength, and time never tired of the black crutch tucked under its arm. . . .

[1907: IV.19]

## *The I-Singer of Unifersong*

Beside the lake, these peacefilling shores. Worldlings growing here and there, white between the ravens' nests. And the gloomgrass grew all around.

An elk descends, its antlers branching, shaking the shore, caressing its head. The whistler warbles, exulting, tendering birdsong in gambling actation. The deathface blackcock makes his mating call and never tires, flapping toward the deathground. And sweettree and thought-thicket grew all around.

The sky was calm.

Beauty displayed all the beauty of its limbs.

The sky was blue.

Torn tears, her weeping tearturn, and all joy gone forever.

Farewell, she cried, and wept a twig of tears.

The dearling trembled in the wildwood. The Worldwings sang their unflappable song. And who knows from where—the worldflock settling down upon branches, beginning their worldring.

And there was a boy who wore white clothes, his looks dark with sky-blue light; in his fresh bound bunting of bast he heard the Worldwing singing, and cut himself a reed where the gloomgrass grew, carved out a panpipe and called it his worldwhistle and himself the first worldwhistler.

The sounds of a silent flute had called up a playparty, scarlet and blue, onto green glitter, greener than grass, then stopped silent.

In the distance the wordbrethren beat out the word with their vocable hammers.

Sometimes the daughter of the forest would come to the white rock by the boat dock, lean her white head against her knees and cast her worldring gaze upon the dark water.

When power came over the waters and watery blue feet began to move in the dance, a sudden splashing and tossing of black hooves with

white curlylocks, then a ha-ha resounded and lotuses nodded their worldform flowers and worldrings flocked together to trumpet to the music of worldovering gleemen, and from a few low strings came a rhythmic racket, and from the blue waters of languor the watersprites arose, faces and limbs and eyes of belleblush femfolk, their pranky faces floating over the dark blue lake amid thick dark clouds, swansdown clouds and dewdrops universalized on flytraps.

In the airy thoughtlandish bodies of these beings sprouted eyes and glances of stone, and the worldbodies of trumpeting worldrings, carved from some primordial Whorold, twined themselves into double-sighted stare and sank slowly into the depths of the sea.

Those strains of thought, the racket of those strings! Who stretched you here, that I should come take you? Long strings stretched from stars to stones and thicket. Swaying, the leafy towertops of dreams! Blueness, wind, and song! Night and silence! Night highness of strings from there to here, like shifting shafts of time, straining strings, gauntlet thrown down from there to here.

Proud flew the heavy weagle of the world, hollowing all with the aquiline bent of its beak. He who finds the weagle's feather, who hears the battering weagle's wings, who hears the weagle wailing—he is oth-ered forever. Its beak, its beck and call "come hither," they set the grass ablaze.

Littlelife lulls itself and its idleness on the waterlily's leaves. Raising a pouting white mouth and chortling, the watery pufferbelly plays, blows froth from the watery greengrowth, holding his sides.

O bright white piper, young shepherd whistling on your world-whistle, in your white bast shoes and your white white clothes! And here is the song the worldwhistle sang:

Tearstung Belun, and chattergummed goblins with brazenlaughing hooves! They tighten the hair of their heads and pluck it like harpstrings, guityres, to the beat of a gallop, a rush of frisk and fly. Greatness—remember—is cousin to tears.

Belun, his hair a flow of antique time. Shining still, his unancient eyes. Beautiful storms on unalterable lips. Lakelike, lost, a tear caught in his curlclusters, a lake beneath woodwelkin, postpluvially blue.

This is the way the piping herdboy played. Pointy, pouty, the woodweirds drooped, you'd think their unpracticed eyes were hornets' nests, insensed in song. And the dwellers of the nearby settledown

brought to these greeny deeps their glances, in glittered blue and whitening garments, exchanging sacred mysterious whispers. Then they let their clothes grow white and blue . . . . .

This is the way the piping herdboy sang, with his pipe to his mouth, bound with gold hoops and figures.

The distance grew into a wiseman, the daytime silence grew sweet and lovely. And there was a glancing cup. And ceaselessly murmuring, falling and fluttering high and low, the mortoline doves of desire. The bark of treetrunks sparkled with eyes and the sticky running resins of desire . . . . .

This is the way he sang. And Horrowing at peace flew on.

A huddle of folk like a rune of worldwise letters stood fierce and brave, conjuring someone out of high heaven.

And this is the way the boy sang on.

Belun's blue eyes wet with a wetness.

And the boy took the pipe from his mouth. It fell by an oaktree trunk. And a willow-fingered woodwilly picked up the pipe and turned a tune.

I was still a very young woodwilly then, another Gorodetsky, my hair all unruly tousle, when I heard that voice.

We'd gone begging a blessing from every twig, when I heard that voice and saw that hand.

No, it's not worth bringing all that up here, not worth it at all! Old Belun snickered into his gray whiskers, and it reminded the boy of something.

The woodweirds lawghen with springtime mouths, and the tree-toilers smiled at him.

And here is the song the woodwilly sang:

The goers go and the getters get. The laufers laechen. Worldlings flocked and twined their virgin-feathered wings to start to be silent in the dove-dappled soundling. And in the sufferation of unbeseech, all the beauty of the sounds was heard. Ah, every rib of the fan was finialed with a shining face.

The sourdine, braiding itself into heavening, strong was its blue-ness, like silver or iron.

Silence descended, like unvocal chords.

The tear-riven cheeks were covered with cold. Tight lips closed ranks. Fierce eyes. Sticks stuck all over with doves. The brackets of the gatepost proceed from suffereyes.

You are a stare of sadness in a dungeon of bright blue sky.

Those delicate stringplayer fingers wafting blue darkness with a bluewater stone, set in a ring they wore.

And dawns covered his body, his head, and his boldpart with ribbing.

Divinity thinks of the flame of its heart as the architecture of palaces. Eyes did not dissipate the dark, and the mouth above the cherry tree, and the cloud.

Outpourings reddling the bluely blueing sea.

The whitefire underbellied clouds.

Whiter-than-whiteness, a cloud. Bluelies. Blueration.

Fame kept advancing with his broadsword. Prideful sheaf of vengeance in the eyes of one who sings with it, death winds its wings and smothers the small man where all are great, the great man where all are small, the coward where all are brave, the brave man where all are cowards. The vision of a bast shoe may be a worldring one. The rivers rolls, a silver singer.

See the hornmuzzleherdmanheadstream flow by the shores of the road. Munching a morsel of darkening dark bread, the white boy trails his switch. Dawns exchanged smiles and one of them kissed the edge of the ear bent down beneath his hat. And the kiss lit up his face as he chewed his bread. A twilit hound with a wicked bonfire eye.

Again came the racket of unseen guiltyres. The muteling sevenreed of a mysterious hand moves to a singer's hidden mouth.

There were the steppes, there were the swaying wings of silvery feathergrass. A gray-whiskered piper wended his way through the feathergrass. The airy piping wound long through the grass.

Beneath mighty wings and mighty necks, hours of vespering swanhordes pounded past, all slid into a sheaf, a holocaust.

The grassy rung of heaven was pleasant and near. And I kissed them all, those rungfingers.

Sufferation of solitude and place!

You were a flier in silver-gray shawls, simile of storm-anger. "Whose clansman are you?" they ask, and you answer: "I am of the race of heaven."

The wolf leapt forward, his fur all aflower with dying embers. Shadowy headdress of the princesses of evening who had gone to gather flowers. Clouds drape the shrine in embroidered veils. The flowers bowed and bent.

Blueish sky. Blueing water. Reddening pinetrees, naked . . . . .  
their bodies all horny elbows.

Greeningtailed previrginal serpent. Searippling scales. Naked curly  
baby, whose palm is a bodycurl at dawn. Girls who pierce their moth-  
er's house in glances, their deckings and wearings all heaven-skied with  
blueness, they lull the child into calm.

And mobfoot mindswarm. The morningface girl, nightbodied and  
dayhanded. And on the hum of a summons flew an admiral evildo,  
scourge of dreamdark, lover of light.

Learning lessens: death learns to be life, to take on a mouth and  
nose.

Mornfaced he and brightness-eyed. Blue-eye brightances.

Youngman jollijoe seizes a whistle from a tuft of plairs. Famiferous  
youngman, smartseer. Laeghen rippleflow. Youngbrightman eyedaz-  
zling everyone. Us and the femfolk too.

Woodwide thicket of torment. Sufferance in a gleamgirl's glances.

And in the woodwilly's cuttings they read: strength to see God.  
With no glass darkly, your heart is spearsteel. And the cutter's wild thin  
face peaked over his shoulder. And my un-other made her eyes an angry  
squinny, backstepping lak a turkledove. And the grave (oh fallow fur-  
row!) put on timebeak and eyeglasses, gave a diligent read: "How to  
raise delicious vegetables."

And the cutterwriter ran to get birchbark to condite another litter.

Press your anxious ears against moist mother earth!

Trust no one: they may be old, may be deaf, may be foe, may be  
slave . . . . .

Oh go carefully into the clatter of far-off horses!

And the heightest stars were all agreed.

Blue bunting in the eyes of loverings and the youngest brother  
bent to the forge, beating a broadsword, to have something to support  
him when he demanded his portion. And he took up the call and called  
to cold to be strongman among the strong. And the whistling was  
light and offleading, went right to the head.

And the I-name was lost in a thoughtress of forces, and mutemum  
stompled by introaders' merciless horses . . . . . to bridgers, no ridles.  
And lustriant starstare.

And he took her by the hand to the hallowhall, and here hung the  
lustrous faces of all the ancestors. Oh prayers for the birthing of earth,  
and the skyfurred beast and the futureheaded gleamgirl, and a world-

feathered “darling” and a big “thank you”—was it the size of a sparrow, the size of a dove, or the size of the universe?

And the thankhorned bull, the universetailed cat (there are some, alas).

And all only a stepping-off place to a name, even the nightname universe. And spreading bluetaw slipping soundless by.

And dreamer and dreamsleep are altered. The dreamsleeper’s fate is to understand reality. And a dreamsprite casts an altering shadow over everything, land and air, took up strings, supporters in the dim deeds of a Slavlover. And never stopping to catch me up, tormenting tormentor, and I a still sad herald of the world, the pooring of my orphan eye.

And in a soundary the high and mighty snatched up harps. Ah, that passing captivation, beautifix: forget not!

And in the expent from rootrace foundation to fatface these swarms of smudges swam, glooming the shine. And Slav-girls skier than sky!

And the glittergreening lacelove, veiling and vealing her elbows and fingerings, languing and luxuring with the shameless half-gape of her mouth, exporing with half-open eyes.

And the shadowy besetter, the potscold, the graying grassglade, and upon it a teetering tottering danceling. And tailgreening beneath a branch lay the previrginal serpent and the laughmarked oldlady age. And a trio of white standers, halfcircle enskied, gone greening. O fire-lock, darktail cockerel!

Boybattle, suffires, battleboy, manpain.

And the youngrings screamed all out, and sliver-smiling younglets began to laugh.

And the youngmouth sometime truth. And loverlady, runaway into double-dreamed dreams, you were the wing’s blueblush. And a whistleplayer, and the friendship of dreams. And his youngoreyed holynose.

And horse manes universized, made main, and a blaze between the eyes; two nights divided by a day.

Laughcaster from the boywhistle and a mouth that had no power to hold back laughter. And oldman’s laufish look; eternity popped in his pocket.

And one gave goodlooks and loving and then took it back. And mechanical clocks.

And treestumps flocked together, talking in treetalk.

And bright was quiet. And flare.

And bright stole over the sky. And a bold-faced honker flew across the bright.

Twilight and murk are two things that love me. My soul, got up in these peacocking getups.

And the bee-prophet in a friendship crown.

And ripplating smook, forming faces and flourishing horns.

And something glancing and branching to eat. Laughing not-knowers wrapped themselves in dovefeathered smaels. Joyful, the depth and droop of blue eyes in the blue settletown.

Knowsons on the move. A clutch of madbeaky masks and movement of mild-mannered freshoots tangled in dumbblind.

And skyseeking skoun drooped down its soundings to hearson. And racketing skystringations.

And the Venger of goodfaring ways.

And ever-widening deepgape of a mouth. The lovefeathered bird of murkdom.

“Our own wiser,” the dawns opined.

And notness flew toward brightning like a falconfeather cloud.

Uncle Borie put on boots of eternity, and a sunfeather hat on his headback. But even here the cradle kept rocking.

Overhead the azurewrite, neither moved away nor melted. And a say-telling and goldclouded goldrinning strings; soundron of its tender, tenderly tinkling hands and laffron of unsure mouths, loverlaching, smilestinging. And the smilestung shore, the sad streams, the happy birches there on the birchbank, the high bank, and the wild sorrowing treetrunks.

Thunder shows its face, and the stillorn of the whiting reeds. And a horse, flashing a festival tongue.

And carvered in the carvering of words, the curving carvator, and the writ he wrought—yours, and a smilish saddening, and a bearded ancient, and blue-figured girlsong. And the endless do-dens of a dead-handed death-scriber, and drifting across them the spirit of scripting and scribing.

Babblowing, babbloon, and sorrowing sorreen in the sorroons, and sorroweed, his eyes all sorrowed over, and the sorroneer-loveling stare of lovring lids; but his mouth a hatch of stillatinies, and stillorn fluttering upon it.



*The I-Singer of Universong*

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And someone's young face, universalizing.  
Skybove and earthlow whispering back and forth in a ceaseless  
whisper. Soundificance, and a differing soundatrice, a sounding soul.  
And a dancing woman spinning circles around a spring flower.  
But the people stand dumb.

[1907: IV.9]

## *Hooder*

And all in allation, Hooder went flying into the hearth-hole, then alled himself out and flew off again into the hut. And all we are is an alteration of allating will, of a will-armed Wilder. And the whitewhits were curling with sorrow, those footlaffers. Streaky with dove-blue skywash, gleaming gleamed, tirelessly.

And willwing wanted to be glitter-pretty, studied with woodwillys how to bat his bitty blues, how to be woosy and wild and not human. And the silence went on and on, handlaffing.

And Jollyjama in the boring bushes, flapping her woewings, her gigglefeather grustys. And Sorroon rocked in a noose, soaring over the Allord's fields. And the dreamstead demesne was full of quiet faces. Dreamdemesnes towered in gloomy spaces. And everything I write about is only the dream of a drome.

But the dreamdrowers were gorgeous, even in overhanging gloom. Enskied at last by my ideas, I went peaceward, went quiet to bed.

And all unremarkable, a face began doing the dole, dole-down, and the deaders went back to their dreams.

And her braidlets were weal by his mouth, and a wolf in daylight pelt came running, and his smiles were sneaky, but so what?

Sweetsleep slider, thoughtstuck Tallman, tallyteller tallytale tallteller . . . . and Nobod and Allman and allill all hanghair and nobrow and gonesong and hanger and nobebuts and noson and sonesome, nobod's unsang and noso noner univaller lackland and turntale sweetsort—notell untaled alldon noney notheringness, all downing myself and death was a raider's read nonoted by nobin, allwhere allwy.

And our dreamdemesne was a readrom for redable, readright for raidready runeread, ranroad rederearing roderoaring.

And littledoon laughed bellsilly where littlelay littered on the littoral, and lightlads belling the highbells, lillo univerly.

So the soundpinning timeteal streamed its bright twisters from the greatgrand's shoulders.

And sufferglancing girlhood flung high her dawnlit wings. Gorgeousness burst into laffing. There were deeps in her blue glances, slippery snakeshine. And a girl came down to the riverbank all joyful, throwing her hands to the thoughter, her mouth and her body all gleaming. All the naked knickers laffed. In the laufening laffter that wreathed her face two pools of sadness, and lauchening lips that glowed like dawnlight.

Sweetson dropped his flowers down, but who went to pick them up?

And the surface of the Univerald ruffled, with the slap-slap of cooling branches.

Fernword! Groundling groundfall! Wash down your dusty feet in the silent stream.

And the rage of peoplewaters and spring-faced youngsters, the universcream and lyretime and madwood treetrunks, all of them stunts.

And in the white moonface two cold unfroonly eyes: bared elbows overturning the skywash in its gloomgray washtubs, and the water poured out. A lauchenlad capered over gloomgray hoofpatter, uppity-uppity.

And lachenchildren came crawling out of eternity's sleepsacks, and a man was wrapped up in eternity, and the firehaired faces too.

And firebreathing snakes, shaggy peacevoice wonders and bit by bit the word "I!" began peaceabbling, silencing the solence of its size and drowning away in doomness.

And glowglory tangling in the gildring field, his head all curly with beauty and thought. And the mornings blazed with haystacks, and the gladdening gold of their curlblue tumble.

And Will and Wave, willing the wavy willfields. And the wheatfields' reaper. And flooning sweetly and weety over everything.

Peoplepopple of dark doon down quested them: "Who're you?" And they said "Sugarfeather."

Desire is a chomper, a shaggy dog. Tink goes tinkle with silvery necessity. Don't fence my will. And dove-daught feary, like bad forces. His face was earther than earth. And foulfeather all over the sorrow-acres; silence an "a," and silent palaces are empty places.

And the great eternitress, self-pregnant with size. And the saysong

of a saysonging stringsinger, a stillstring singer, and oh, it went stilly when somebody's strangefinger rippled over its strings.

And the sky put on its earthcoat, and the oldring of eldridgy blue-gray hair and the clearon of clear thought cuts through thinkering, and impurelings of splinter-thinking flitter as they singsong: "dear Dooth, die!"

Oh beaky felicity, and you dark-eyed treetrotter, light-light bush-beater, bird, flutterflyer, come to me here! And oh! Their yellowishing mouths, dumbdown on the graygrow little losters.

Silunce. Stillny and sadly swim swans, undowned flowers, soun-doner and spacker on some savage wordstone shore.

And the deathswan's lament: "My whiteneck wonder, come stay with me here."

Language is only soundish numbers without any . . . . eldring.

[1907: IV.31]

# *Murksong*

Murk and Murk, we advance hand in hand, stretching our legs, throwing back our heads on our skinny necks.

Murk and Murk, we strain the muscles of our long skinny bodies and stretch the ligaments of our hands in languorous extensions.

Murk and Murk, both of us wear our hair long.

Forests of sensation in confused murk. Rustling of confused dark feelings. A dark forest. A light shines. A brief powerful cry. O sun of illumination! From out of the confused dark forest appears a great mournful eagle; thrusting his powerful wings he advances moment by moment like the great misty morning, becoming constantly larger and brighter. See now how he folds his wings and lights on a tree.

He stretches his neck and cries out three times, a great heartless cry: "Thought. I am Thought. I have made up my mind and fold my wings."

In the thick murk: "He and I will die tomorrow."

A summons from afar: "Come, tenderness, passionate friendship, appear."

In the thick murk: "Here in this murk two young men have decided to die together with others for the good of the many. Weep, weep, shed tears of joy!"

From out of the murk: "We will die, he and I."

(Hope, whose movements are timid and delightful, flies up and perches on a branch of silence, and sits there with imploring eyes; then she flies away, leaving the branch of silence bare. Then again she flies fearfully up, perches on the branch, and stares imploringly. And then flies silently away.)

[1907: NP 281]

# *A Simple Story*

A sly-throat dove. Bills, and coos.

By the swings in the distance, wrinkling like evening, streams of a skirt.

A young man with yes in his eyes, he walks in the field by a poplar tree.

His feet disturb his balance, they move like day and night in rapid succession.

Evening flared, night was nowhere around, mornings occurred with upraised arms. Her eyelashes were like wintertime, when days have been uprooted and only the long black nights are left. Only the silky slumbering nights are left.

A girl in evening's dress, her hair all expectation.

Desire-maned horses graze in the field, they nibble occasional flowers.

Weeks of a girl's hair, tightly braided. Days of the week.

An arm is bent, as life is bent by marriage. In the hand is a flower.

The streamy evening drops, droops. Nothing needed now except flowers of deadly nightshade. One, then another, the yes-eyed young man's garments shift and slip away like birdwings.

He is dawn-chested. His antique coat is like time, his buttons bright as autumn days. Autumn.

A handkerchief falls from his hand. Oblivion.

Why do the ravens like soldiers surround and swallow the dying dawn?

But the housemaid answers her mistress' insistent calls, and brings her a crimson Morello.

[1908–1910: IV.34]

## *A Schoolgirl's Story*

“Universouled nightingale, you catch me in the cage of your song.

Sing, soundoon! Night comes on, and all love-horny and kiss-curly the sheep begin to amble home. I hear the shepherd's horn and he thralls my soul with his sound. Each moment of expectation is full of trepidation, as dust might jacket a flock of sheep.

Oh never torment me, since you fill me, my night's companion, my midnight-eyebrowed beauboy!”

That was the prayer of Liubochka Nadeeva, a Bestuzhev school-girl, as she sat in Hooder's hut, a soot-stained place that smelled of hay and drying medicinal herbs.

Perhaps that was his beard, that falling flaxen flow, or perhaps it was frosty morning on the fire-eyed huts that scattered the steppe.

If it wasn't winter's gray morning seen through a chink, through a window of stretched bull-bladder, then perhaps it was a charred log in its ash coat, a cooling log, where angry cherry-yellow fire-eyes flashed beneath Hooder's heavy lids.

“There's not just one hand to catch a glory-girl in wicked snares, there's a lot of hands, ready to grab you and shut you up in some sweet little shanty. You just remember that, girl, and don't fool around with fire. You got a gray-haired old mother with feeling eyes, she'll bust out weeping in her old age. And think of your doting old daddy.”

That's what Hooder said, rocking about with half-closed eyes. In the mysterious mirage of his expressions flickered the face of a handsome young mortal-boy with eyes dark as night and cheeks the ruddy red of dawn.

“But I want to!” the schoolgirl shouted. She wasn't in the habit of adjusting her whims to suit the moral imperatives of the older generation, and she stamped her little foot on the floor. The power of the latter and the resourceful freedom of the former were conflicted within her, but on this memorable occasion the voice of reason lost out, and she stood there girlishly universalizing with her universal-eyes, divinely

playful and indignant and impatient, disdain written all over a regular mouth that knew no equal.

She stood there with a prophetic feeling of self-love inside her, and she was young and beautiful because she'd only spent a year so far in the schoolery (she was suspended for nonpayment of tuition) so of course she hadn't had time to get ugly.

Something odd happened to Hooder's features, some youngblood stirred with a brightening flicker in the corners of his eyes. But he still had the same wavy graybeard and the same ashy-grove of hair.

Quick as he could, Hooder bent over the coals and began rummaging. He gave the girl a little piece of bread slathered with honey and said: "Eat this, young lady."

The wintry shine of the hair on his head, the strange gleam of young, dark-blue eyes, and through his tattered rags flashed a strong young body and gleaming dark hair. On his narrow wrist he wore dried green twiglets from which came a pleasant sweet odor and a light rustling sound.

With a furtive glance at Hooder the beautiful young girl—the schooler of the schoolery—flashed her pearly teeth and surrendered secretly to this mysterious new power.

Then suddenly he whirled around, grabbed a burning torch and held it close to his eyes. He stood at some distance and whispered: "What do you see?" Liubochka gasped and covered her face with her hands and kept saying over and over: "It's him! It's him!"

But he swept her hands away with a powerful gesture, and stern as a doctor he asked: "Who? Who is he?" But she made no answer, as horror and triumph mingled in her immensely closed eyes.

"Is he tawny as dawn?" "Yes!"

"Dawncurls blazing and breathing on his shoulders like the sky at morning?" "Yes!"

"Blue fathoms in his glances? A lake sky beneath the autumn gold of the reeds?" "Yes!"

"A high collar embroidered with gold?" "Yes!"

"An easy, elegant curve to his lip, which speaks of a life given over to pleasure and vice?" "Yes!"

"Has he a handsome new beard coming?" "Yes!"

"Do you see one or two gray hairs in his beard?" "Yes!"

"Does his gray beard cover his shoulders and chest?" "Yes!"

"Do his blue eyes lose their luster?" "Yes!"



“But doesn't that make him all the more attractive?” “Yes!”

Something thick with an evil joy stirred in Hooder's two-faced features. “A girl as smart and beautiful as you don't need no torches,” he remarked as he extinguished the torch. Then he dragged off the submissive, happy, love-filled girl, who kept whispering “You! You!”

Evil, evil moved in the wind that shuddered above their heads. What's there to say? Or explain?

Through her mind at that very moment flashed the names of two men reknowned in Muscovy, Bekhterev and Lossky, and their obscure teachings about the nature of the human soul—because she had studied those subjects and really liked them. So she passed through the doorway, in Hooder's power.

That very night a handsome young man stood all night long at a mica window, through which one could see moonlight reflected on hammered chests and Turkey carpets from far-off Cherkassian lands. All night long he kept answering the frightened questions of a nurse his own gold had bribed: “Not back yet?” “Not yet.” He had recently returned from the campaign against Pskov and a steel sword was still slung across his shoulders. Toward morning he was captured by a band of passing Oprichniks. And toward evening of the same day, a dry old man's head, pursing its lips, whispered: “And also Volodimerko, of the boyar lineage.” And then, bowed, with pious eyes, added: “and whom, oh God, thou knowest!”

When she arrived home in a large coach toward midday, the girl received the news of the young nobleman's fate with inutterable sadness. For many long days after that she could be found in church, sad and pale, listening to masses said for the repose of the dead man's soul. The pallor of her face and the blackness of her garments would have shamed a cloistered nun, and in her hand a constant candle burned with a thin clear flame. She ended her days in the forests beyond the Volga.

Thus all in vain did two lovers strive to break the chains of time.

[1907: IV.22]

## *Youngman Mecrocosm*

Youngman mecrocosm. Am I a cell from the brain or from a single hair of an enormous individual whose name is Russia?

Why shouldn't that make me proud?

That individual breathes and sees things. His bones complain whenever a crowd of my counterparts shouts "Hang 'em!" or "Hurrah!"

Ancient Rome was male, a man who covered the troubled dark femaleness of the Northland and shot his seed into her womanly young body.

Why should it be my fault, then, if I have the bones of an ancient Roman?

To be victorious in battle, to divide and conquer: that is the legacy of my ancestral blood.

[1908–1910: IV.35]

## *The Dead Son Leaves His Burial Mound*

The woman with him has a skull on her shoulders. Her white straw hat is trimmed with light blue braid.

A black auto leaving marks on the lawn. Here it is. Laughing, they lower their heads as they get in. The house is brightly lit; you can see in the windows how they enter through the glass door. They are met cordially, exchange salutations, cause the living no embarrassment at all. White collar standing high, its points bent sharply back. He draws one of the local people aside with a mysterious gesture, wraps his skull in newspaper—*New Times* or *Speech*—then takes him by the elbow and joins the company and the conversation. She holds a fan. The two guests leave embarrassingly early, hurry to the black auto, and drive off complaining loudly. The lights in the building grow brighter. Six o'clock. Pale stars appear in the sky. From the veranda of that same house, in six columns, the bridal procession descends, carrying white and light blue flowers. They have virtuous beautiful faces. Of course they are dressed exactly like the fugitives from the burial mound. As they leave the veranda, flowersellers offer their wares. Among them gleams one face, excessively bony; a bony figure touches the hollow of its cheek.

[?1910: IV,36]

# *Easter Day*

*After Gogol*

“Today is Easter—put on your khustka, you’ll look a lot more attractive,” said the woman tonelessly. Wielding her long fork by the stove, she turned to the young girl who sat by the window combing her hair, tossing her head back as she did so.

“Don’t you think I know that?” the girl answered impatiently as she raised her arm to fix a truant lock of hair that tickled her breast like a little snake.

Today is the holy day of Easter. A daughter of fire, she would join the throng of Ukrainian girls. All dressed alike they would go together to the tall old church on its high hill, surrounded by an ancient grove and a distant view of meadows, villages, rivers, where the one they honored in their hearts had died.

And when the ancient gold-bearded bellringer struck the bells, great and small, and the pigeons rose and wheeled over the world, then slowly, one by one, they would pass through the tall dark door and disappear from view.

A young man, member of some obscure group, stood watching eagerly: to him this was an entire new world. Those who filed into the church one after the other, their faces severe but full of feeling, had fought with Igor and wept with Yaroslavna; they looked with condescension at the idle young man. Dashing long cloaks called kerei hung from their shoulders. Even at a distance you could see the scarlet “Virgin,” the hoods sewn like red hearts in their collars.

Everything he saw awakened his reflections. He had stumbled upon a corner of immemorial Russia, totally unknown to him. The same question for the hundredth time perplexed him: Why didn’t all Russians wear clothes like this? Was one great nation to abandon another in the struggle for its own habits and customs? And was there anything shameful in the clothes one’s ancestors had fought and died in? The sight of his own yellow brass buttons, in their monotonous

rows, oppressed him a little. Why shouldn't he too wear an attractive cloak with its scarlet Virgin, just as his ancestors had done?

Lost in thought, he let his glance wander from the face of one charming Ukrainian girl to another, and suddenly encountered the mocking smile of the fire-daughter. She wore a wreath of paper flowers and a namisto, a necklace of elegant red and green beads, but something heavenly diabolical in her eyes and the enchanting curve of her mouth made him want to say: "Hey! This one won't be easy. She is either the most beautiful girl in the Ukraine or else heaven's own daughter. Either way, she means trouble." Something shuddered in the good young man's soul; it spoke a spell and shook the carved oak leaves of his soul. He shuddered in another way too, with physical desire and harsh reproach, and glanced at the rural enchantress. Happiness played on her face, and pride in the awareness of her own power. Whispering and laughter rippled around him.

"Look, young man!" whispered a few of the mischievous girls, while others asked in a mocking tone, "A, tse take?" and then laughed and answered, "I ne znaem tse take!"

At that moment a boy appeared, obviously in the care of a young woman in citified clothes, a boy who studied in the far-off capital. As if she had been shot, the divine girl began to tremble when she saw the city people approach. "Look!" she cried, pointing a finger at them. "Look," she repeated, gasping and taking off her wreath. Suddenly she waved her hands and shouted: "Why does this happen? Don't we Russian dawns dare show our faces for shame, dare look foreigners in the face? Isn't there a man who will stand up for us? Haidamaks! Where are the Haidamaks!" She threw her wreath on the ground, covered her face in her hands, burst into tears and ran away. Then, with a harsh but sorrowful look around him, the young man went after her, and he could be seen standing before her, pale and timid in the deep shade of the oak trees, swearing a warrior's harsh vow—to stand up for the fatherland and its customs. "You have been insulted, injured, and no one will stand up to defend you," he whispered. And he said to himself, "Russia for Russian customs."

"What's the matter with you, are you men or not?" she murmured through her tears. "Just look at yourselves, look at what you've become!" And she turned away, biting her lip. The young men angrily combed their forelocks and said: "She's just a girl, but you have to admit she's telling the truth. By God, she's right."

Meanwhile the local Social Democrats, men and women, settled like sparrows on the house benches and twittered about Kautsky, just like sparrows in good weather. As she passed by them, the girl darted angry glances. "Good-for-nothings," she muttered.

That very evening her old mother took her to task. "Where have you been all this time? You shouldn't say things like that. Besides you'll only get him in trouble, they'll torture him, give him the treatment with red-hot bayonets. It's nothing to you, but what'll happen to him? They've already done that to others."

"No, mama," the girl answered with a happy laugh. "We intend to make sure nothing like that ever happens again."

[1911: T 507]

# Okó

## *A Legend of the Oroches*

Okó!

Brother! My beautiful shy brother, my crimson-throated nightingale, you are afraid of your own beauty. Our meal is salt, and do you know why? It is salt from the salt of my tears. Someone trembles in the green grove to watch when you swim, and do you know who? It is I who hide in the willow thicket.

Once again you have gone to the greenwood, lightfoot and proud, and here I sit, all alone and lonely. Oh I know surely somewhere in the world there are lots of people living, more than just a pair like us, brother and sister. What happiness that would be, to live with many different people, not just as brother and sister. Oh if only you would say to me "I love you, sister!"

Oh yes, you often say "I love you, sister," and you've never done me wrong, but you speak to me in a way that means nothing to me.

Oh if only I had lots of brothers, but not brothers of my own, not my own blood, what happiness then! I would cover the dust of their feet with my kisses. I would tremble like a shaken birch tree whenever they looked at me! And in the evening, in the shadowy autumn, I would ask each one of them: "Do you love me, brother?"

If my eyes seemed as wide and bottomless as dark lakes, I would shiver and laugh with happiness. And if he whistled with scorn the way my brother does, I would dissolve in tears of despair. Poor me, poor unhappy me! Oh what feelings course through my body at night, as I sit by our campfire! I tremble like an aspen grove as the wind approaches! How I could dance for you! My body would bend and sway in the winds of autumn and spring!

As a piece of birchbark curls in the fire, so my body would curve before your looks, my brothers. I would hear every note in the falling of clear water and the songs of unfamiliar birds, and I would put all those sounds into my song! I would clasp and unclasp my hands, and I would dance my fire-dance before the firestorm of your glances.

“Brother! Love me, brother, love me!”

“What’s the matter with you? You sit there talking to someone and smiling. But it’s not me . . . . So that’s what you want! You want me to love you? You want me to do you wrong?”

“Do me wrong? Yes! Am I not beautiful? Is my body not attractive? Why won’t you look at me differently, brother, the way the tiger looks at you? Look. See what my clothes conceal. Believe my breasts, they want warmer words than your shout of displeasure or admiration. Look at them!”

“What’s the matter with you? Are you crazy? What are you saying, sister? What’s the matter with you?”

“I love you! Don’t you believe me? Won’t you believe me? Are you angry? Yes, you’re angry! Don’t be angry, forgive me, I love you. You look like the sky before lightning strikes.”

“Of course I’m angry! Why not? Pure as the snow—that’s the way I’ve always thought of you, and now these serpent words, they wound me to the quick. Why do you spin these spider webs? You know we will both be trapped in them and die! Stop saying such things, sister, forget all this!”

“Forgive me, brother, forgive me. Forget that this day ever existed. Forgive me.”

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He always sings his song about two different suns, the ones our ancestor killed. They fell into the sea, he sings, and their light went out and a third sun remained in the sky, and life was easier after that. But how can there be three suns? Still, what a beautiful story, what a sight to see, a stony sun shot from the sky by a frail arrow. How the sea must have hissed! What showers of spray rising on all sides! The great suns drowning their light in the water like smoldering logs. Here’s how it happened (*she takes a smouldering log from the campfire and suspends it from a birch tree hanging over the water; she shoots an arrow and the log falls into the water*). And if it happened at night, it must have been even more exciting. But can there be a sun at night? Why not? A lover’s blue eyes are the sun by day and a lover’s dark eyes are the sun at night. Of course there can be! But people then were mysterious and proud, like my brother, and who can understand him? And we are both as clever and smart as I am.



Well then, cruel brother! You'll see! If he comes back, let him believe that I shot an arrow into the sky and flew with it into the clouds.

You brooks, I am on my way to happiness. You squirrels, I am on my way to happiness. Smooth my path, you grasses, do not delay my happiness.

Is this the way? No, I must hurry to the clearing where I will set up a dwelling.

Do not sing so loud, you waters, I am on my way to happiness. Caress my legs, you flowers. Sweeten and soften your songs, you birds.

If only the bear could help me! If only the lynx could gather my branches. No, only I must build the lean-to where I will sit alone, laughing.

And now it is ready. How swiftly! I haven't had time to look around. Now I will set up the birchbark bucket and the skulls of animals, and leave tracks all around. So it will look as if someone has lived here for a while. No, better if the flowers and grasses near the lean-to seem untouched.

Here I will sit and wait for you, my beloved.

Ah, it is my brother, he is coming this way. Just as I planned. I will turn away from him and begin to wash my body.

Now we must part for a long time.

[1912: T 508]

## *“Lubny is a strange, godforsaken town”*

Lubny is a strange, godforsaken town.

A tall white courthouse asserts its authority high above the inhabitants [illegible]. Jewesses in hammocks swing back and forth in its gardens, and on its outskirts there are settlements of Great Russians, all of whom speak Ukrainian but remember a single, united Rus, how their forefathers had lived, had been born, in the north. They watch every newcomer with crafty glances, trying to make out whether he is friend or foe.

The place has superb, heavenly air, meadows and fields. The Sula river is supposed to be famous for its healthfulness, but you go there and—people don't just die of old age, they also die of galloping consumption. And they die in fires. In the Russian capitals a team of strong black or golden-hued [illegible] horses curve their handsome heads and carry out a band of ancient warriors to do battle with fire, their helmets all curving in a single line as they dash through the crowds assembling rapidly on all sides, and the old bellicose postures and motions, recalling combat, make the heart beat faster. . . . But it wasn't like that here. [illegible] and the commander in this battle gallops forward bugle in hand and lances his echoing commands.

But in this town fires occur more often than anywhere. And they always occur at night.

Bugle calls soar above the city, full of anger, power, and triumph, now distant, now fearfully close at hand. Constantly gathering in force they precede you, find you out everywhere, no matter in what dark corner of the town you might try to hide. They speak louder than words, and they proclaim it your duty to be there. Their sound summons the inhabitants to the conflagration more powerfully than words.

These angry sounds persist, intolerably. You can mount no defenses against them. They pass through your soul. You understand that on the day of the Last Judgment you will awake to the sound of trumpets like these. “Fire!” All the people passing respond in a single instant

and push in that direction. Immediately it is as if a wind had blown up all across the city, and madness begins: dogs bark, people start running, a cacophony of shouts and running feet. These bugles ignore you and your private passions; they know only the people as a mass and they twist its will like a serpent, as they hurl themselves forward to conquer fire.

"Wake up," they cry, "fire is loose, go put it out, bind and chain it and throw it back in its cage. Its time has not yet come, the final struggle between man and fire has yet to be joined. It is not yet time to tame the beast."

I thought for a long time about the immeasurability of their grandeur. I knew that all things that exist are only written signs and I have made constant efforts to understand them, for, after all, a grasp of number is the great translator between languages that bear no relationship to one another. In these sounds, agonizing and threatening, speaking a language of some kind or other, one could feel the breeding place of the resurrection of the dead. And in the terrifying howl that rose at an angle above the world, and fell back onto it like lava from heaven, was hidden the promise of a day when fire would be victorious, a precursor and sign dear to the hearts of the people. Is fire the natural state of the deceased? Are the deadly embraces of the sun so distant? For things living are more akin to this earth than things dead. And the combat of fire and earth with fire victorious, ripping open the covers of earthly graves and burning them up, that is what [illegible] disturbs you after [illegible].

And some day he will come, this angry crimson conqueror, this red fire.

If, in death, our mortal wax bids farewell to fire, then what we hear at such moments is the return of mankind as a thing of fire.

No, for a long time I could not forget the agonizing howl of those bugles.

No, on nights like those we do well to wander alone through the streets, waiting for the end of the world. But listen while the bugles blare their threat once more: "We must thrust fire back into its dark confines."

[1912-13: T 513]

## *“Kolya was a handsome boy”*

Kolya was a handsome boy. He had narrow dark eyebrows that seemed enormous at times, at other times perfectly ordinary, gray-green eyes, a mouth shaped by a shrewd smile, and a thin face that revealed good humor and health.

He grew up in a loving family. The only response his willfulness or naughtiness ever evoked was: “Child, why are you so upset?”

His large eyes were a constant play of color, pale bluish and green, as if a water-lily leaf were floating on a lake.

He had seven violins, including a Stradivarius. The boy seemed slightly abashed at this abundance of instruments. “You’re just a bit too skinny,” the grown-ups used to say, and laugh. He was quite short, thin and delicate. His parents called him their sphinx, promising an unexpected change in his mood.

Once we were out for a walk on a beach that is no longer there (it washed away in a single storm). An observant sailor thoughtfully recited “The Ant and the Grasshopper.” (I was the grasshopper.) He was, in fact, as tireless as an ant.

In Odessa, it happened in Odessa, lots of people had migrated to the beach and settled in flighty little shacks erected along the edges of the paths, where they offered expensive tea and cheap songs to the holiday crowds.

That semi-fisherman’s life was a source of delight. Children with their fat awkward hands lifted fishing rods caught in the seaweed. Other children, freed from their lessons, centered their existence on catching the little crabs that scuttled in throngs through the water. The waves were live shoals of swimmers; in the green garden strolling Jewesses cast the dark, sultry glances of their tribe. The dark pupils and the pale whites of their eyes were astonishing, and justly a source of pride.

Art is an uncompromising lash: it destroys families, it smashes lives and souls. With a wedge of dissent it divides one soul from an-

other, then hoists the corpse to the top of a tower, where the vultures of fame occasionally peck at a living being.

It is storm, when the roof blows off a windmill and its arms split and break, all the trees bend in one direction, their branches hiss with tension, and sheep stand shivering and bleating piteously, waiting for someone to open a gate.

But of course that's only a mannered image dredged up out of a despondent mind.

[1912–13: T 514]

## *Mountain People*

The harsh outline of the awesome citadel of the mountains, like the eyebrows of Old Believers raised in astonishment at their first sight of Kuchum, blinding peaks whose icy eyes turn upward, the muted silver of rivers in a tapestry of green, like bridesmaids who laugh and chatter as they put on their green garlands, who sing and wave green branches, the waterfall—a web of pearls on a bride's long throat filled with the rapturous foretaste of happiness, the zakatumanets with his shining saber, setting out to battle at Ostranitsa's call, and you blue skies, two blue daughters of the boyar race who laugh and gossip together, the mighty mountain ridge, like the race of Russians who rose to defend the land at Grünwald, the white rock edged with lightning flashes, its straight sides falling from a single point in every direction, like the power of the Muscovite state that towered over Novgorod, Pskov, Lithuania, and Poland, the broad thundering river—all this surrounded the white overlord, thronged toward him, bore away his living power like a powerful river, bowed low and stretched out at his feet as if worshipping him.

Dark ravines, dark as old men in poddyovkas worn by the Pomortsy, pushed cautiously into that green and whitetopped world.

Faces darkened by time lay concealed in chalky layers of rock. Snow lay like the stern headscarves of Old Believer maidens.

A single cloud glowed like a peasant's red calico shirt: with one hand he scattered seed-rays, with the other he held a basket full of grains of sunlight. There were other clouds whose edges curled like snowy snakes, like the half-dead face of a man who is told of his wife's death, and beyond them the sunset—Russian-red, hurrying across Bald Mountain toward Kiev on Paskha, the holy day of Easter.

Twisted black oaks covered the mountain ridges.

A farmhouse clung to a precipice, on the side from which the Mongols came. The cliff there lay shattered into pieces, like a helmet on the field of Kosovo.

An eagle circled above the high cliff and descended to rest there like a Russian on the throne of Byzantium, like Upravda.

Straight lines rose from the mighty central rock, like warriors on the field of Kulikovo.

Thus parts of the mountain-dark world thundered and crowded together like fragments of Russian life, and over it all streamed the bright glances of the heavenly eye. Evening was near, darkness thickened and fell.

The rocks loomed overhead like the uncompromising souls of those who went to the pyre for the sake of a transposed syllable. It was here that the Russians lived.

A girl stood near the edge of the precipice, singing. She carried a sheaf of flowers and grasses, and the faraway blue sea shone and swayed in her eyes.

The house loomed like the mind of a thinker contemplating the foggy chaos of the world; smoke rose from it. A man stepped outside. Deer antlers were slung over his shoulders, and a spot of fresh blood stained his trousers.

“Legin?”

“Yes?”

The thundering waterfall drowned his words as it flew whirling like an eternal arrow. But with renewed passion he exclaimed: “I love you, my sweetroot!” and began to tremble. This sad, meandering, monotonous song of the rushing waters covered his words and her answer, and a bird passing overhead gave a piercing cry. He exclaimed with new force: “I love you!”

An old woman standing at the entrance to the house threw up her hands and said: “A young falcon is about to ravish our dove.” But a sister laughed and said: “No, he’s the dove, and she’s the falcon.” The girl gave her a quick glance, said nothing, and turned away from him again.

He moved off and began singing:

People are dying.

Bullets in battle are flying.

The darkness surrounded them. He sighed something, then went off along the familiar pathway home.

She seemed to see an old man, white as moonlight with starry

eyes; a black bear stood like an evasive debtor before him, waiting for the old man to tear him off a crust of bread.

Or she saw herself as a mother, wide-eyed and meek, holding a child, and above her the stars and the heavens and wisemen approaching to worship.

The milky mist was so thick you couldn't see your own hands. And suddenly someone was standing beside her; he bent and kissed her cheek.

"Shame on you!" she exclaimed, and raised her arm, but there was no one there, only the milky mist around her. From somewhere she heard a hard, malicious laugh.

Dark blue, gray on top, the last thrush sang his song. Night's pickets arose from the water. Someone called out from inside the house. The dead deer lay by the threshold. Artem gave her a nasty smile; both his hands were stained with blood from the butchered carcass.

She returned his glance without saying anything and went off to her own room. Soon the fire that shone through the window went out. Night's transparence descended and cloaked the mountains. The sharp edges of the reed roofs were outlined above the whitewashed walls, like hair cut in a fringe.

Her father glanced at her inquisitively and said: "I heard he brought home three baby eagles; he wants to tame them and learn to fly through the sky with them."

"He'll fall and break his neck."

"He will, will he?"

Then the southern night overcame them all, and they slept like dead men.

But one of them was troubled by an evil spirit or dream, a stretch of cloud time, behind which flickered the ray of happiness of one who burned with sinful longing, a moment when clothes were laid aside and someone young laughed and swam and splashed in the water.

Morning came, and found the stream a rush of green and white and birds breaking into song. She put her gun on her shoulder and walked down to the stream. Slowly, glancing around to make sure no one was watching her, she took off her camisole and appeared at that moment more beautiful than ever. Her arm was raised, and only her head was hidden by the garment. Reassured, she took everything off, entered the water and swam. Just then a whistle sounded above her; he was coming along the mountain path carrying his gun, whistling like a



boy and looking about him. Her body shone white as the early morning mist, and she looked up at him angrily and shouted from the water: "Go away, I hate you!"

But then a shot, a bird of prey cried out, and a dark kite fell at her feet, its beak all bloody, its claws raking vainly in the sand. With a careless whistle, he continued on his way to hunt.

When he returned, carrying a mountain goat, he saw that she was fully dressed, her long sharp knife in its black leather sheath on her belt. He smiled and looked at her, but she turned away with a wary scowl. She went off into a grove of trees as if she were beckoning him, and he followed her hesitantly. She glanced sideways without saying anything and moved farther along, as if she were calling him, and in a green clearing began to gather firewood. Her snow-white neck bent and then straightened above the grass. From time to time she looked at him with her great wide eyes. He went up to her and took her by the shoulders. Suddenly with a hoarse shout of "Taste this" she whipped the knife from her belt; it rose and sank into his shoulder, wounding him in the chest. He merely gave a disdainful smile, held her close, and once more covered her with kisses. Frightened birds gathered and watched the two bodies grappling together.

Now she was covered with blood, because she had managed to cut her own hands, and he pressed against her with his arms around her, mumbling something. She covered her face with her hands and burst into sobs. Then he groaned and let his arms fall back, and remained lying on them. She took out a comb and began to comb her hair, watching him the whole time. He smiled weakly and sadly.

But once again a mist began to gather and clouds and wind appeared, inhabitants of these mountain heights. Their white shadows vanished like fish in the water.

"Give me your hand!" she shouted. He gave it to her.

"Let's sit here," she said. They sat down.

"Show me what love is all about," she whispered in his ear. "I don't know." He was silent.

"Are you angry?" Her voice was softer now. "Tell me what I should do," she said with a nervous laugh. "Listen," she said with a shiver, "you have to forgive me. I didn't mean to do that."

"I love you," she whispered suddenly, covering his face with kisses. "Lie on top of me, caress me, cover me the way the sky covers the earth."

“What’s gotten into you?” he exclaimed in horror and rapture. Silent and feverish, he bent over her and touched her lips.

“Ah!” she exclaimed passionately.

But the sun rose suddenly, and shone upon a virgin’s legs. She opened her eyes. Artem lay upon her, cold and dead.

[1912–13: T 510]

# *A Heart of Steel*

*Scenes from Montenegrin Life*

“Hold on, high and mighty, we’ll clip your wings for you,” Mirko muttered, ramming the barrel of his rifle with a wad of lamb’s wool.

He squinted into the distance. He was right; the flash of red behind that rock was a fez. Like a vulture’s wing rising, Mirko’s arms brought the butt of the gun to his shoulder, the sound of a shot echoed through the ravine, and the fez, its black tassel swinging, slipped down over the pale face of the dying Turk.

“Watch it, maybe there’s more of them,” Borisko whispered. He was standing close to his father and had seen what happened.

“You can expect anything in this world—except maybe a pregnant man,” Mirko responded grimly. He chewed the ends of his moustache and stared ominously into the distance. Suddenly he shook his rifle and shouted: “Sonsabitches! You’ll never get us up here, not til God grows apples on an oak tree.”

“Is he dead?” asked Borisko.

“Does a goat give milk? What do you think bullets are for? You wait here. Leave goat herding to cowards. Don’t be afraid, just keep your eyes open. Young buck like you, got eyes make an eagle look blind as a bat.”

With his giant stride he left the ravine, which began to be shadowed now with dark blue clouds.

“It’s always us young bucks have to wait here,” the young man thought, as he leaned on his rifle. He was already grown, had been for a while. They’d given him his own gunbelt, and his mother kissed his forehead and said: “You’re not my boy anymore! I’ll have to take orders from you from now on.” In response he kissed her wrinkled hands and promised with all his heart that he’d take care of her in her old age.

They had a tame eagle who lived on a perch beside the house. Borisko took the goats to pasture, used to drink milk right out of the udder when he got hungry and tired. That hadn’t been for a while, though.

“Remember, if you’re honey they’ll eat you up, if you’re poison they’ll spit you out,” Mirko had said to him, and he spent a long time wondering what he meant by the remark.

Other sounds and sights from the past went through his mind. Borisko understood that he was entering a new period in his life. He wasn’t just a nobody. His father and his grandfather and his grandfather’s father had all been somebodies, big men, looked up to. Their clan was well-known and respected all over Montenegro. Even as far off as Russia, people knew who his great-grandfather was; yes, he was descended from warriors.

He stood there, leaning on his rifle.

“I’d give my life to hold you in my arms. . . .” He remembered the passionate words of the old Serbian song. He remembered whispering them to Zora the other day, just at sunrise. High as the peaks of the Montenegrin mountains, leaping half their height from the ground and joining their linked hands above their heads, the girls had danced, and the young men hovered around them like eagles playing in the noonday sun, brave young men armed with curving daggers. They learned their dances from the eagles and from the mountains of their native land. A gray-haired Russian sat near them, observing their customs.

The young Montenegrin wrapped himself more tightly in his blanket; again his thoughts began to drift.

“A lonely man without his meat,” a carefree voice rang out.

He started. “Yes, a man is lonely without his meat,” he replied. “Where’s Zora? Where is she? With the flock?”

“Yes.” Stanka carried a jug of water and a pot of kasha. Her bare feet were covered with dust, and a struka, a light shawl, hung from her shoulders. Her sharp eyes noticed the body of the Turk.

“He was young”, she said, with an instinctive feeling of pity. She set the jug on the ground.

Borisko greedily picked up the cold vessel and began to drink. But before he could empty the jug a shot rang out, and a bullet shattered it into pieces. The yellow handle was all that remained in the hand that had just held a rifle. He stared at the spilled water, and another shot rang out. He reached for his gun.

“Get down!” he shouted. He grabbed his sister’s arm and dragged her to the ground. And just in time: a series of shots pinged over their heads and flattened on the rock walls, while puffs of smoke drifted from

nearby. The situation was not entirely hopeless, but when he noticed his sister's carefree smile, Borisko felt a wave of despair. She was laughing like a baby with a new toy. The bullets bounding off the walls of the ravine seemed to delight her.

Meanwhile the crossfire has ceased. Borisko looked around.

"What's the matter, kids, give you a scare?" Unexpectedly it was Mirko, peering down from above them. His moustache quivered with laughter, and his face was red.

"What's the matter, kids? You look like you've seen the devil himself! Good thing it was me, eh, and not some of them Turkos."

"Was that you shooting?" Borisko asked.

"Sure it was," Mirko said. "Your old man's bullets hit your jug, but he spares your heart. A Turk now, he'll miss the jug but get you in the chest."

Borisko stared. He was in awe of the harsh bravado of his father's joke, and his father's heart, tempered like steel by unceasing warfare.

[1913: T 520]

## *Nikolai*

Events are strange: sometimes you can move calmly past something that has terror written all over it, and at other times it's just the opposite: you stop to look for a deep, hidden meaning in an inconsequential event. One time I was walking down the street and stopped when I saw a crowd collected around a loaded freight wagon.

"What's happening?" I asked a passerby.

"See for yourself," he said with a laugh. And what was happening was, in the dead silence, an old black horse stood beating its hoof on the roadway in a regular rhythm. All the other horses nearby were listening to him, their heads bowed, silent, motionless. In that hoofbeat you could make out an idea, a grasp of fate and a command, and all the other horses bowed their heads and paid attention. A crowd soon gathered and stayed until the driver showed up from somewhere, grabbed the reins, pulled the horse up sharply and drove on.

But that old black horse had dully deciphered destiny and his companions had bowed their heads and listened, and the incident stayed in my mind.

A wandering life is full of hard knocks, but also of magic moments that make up for it. My meeting Nikolai was one of them. I doubt you'd pay much attention to him if you met him. Only his suntanned forehead and chin would give him away. His eyes, too openly expressive of nothing, might tell you that he was a hunter, indifferent to human society and even bored by it.

He was a loner, one who had his own life, and his own death.

He kept clear of people. He was like a house in the country shut off from the main highway by a high wall, one that faced the back road.

He was a plain and simple man, taciturn, guarded, and unsociable.

He could seem frankly ill-tempered. When he had been drinking he became crude and offensive to people he knew, constantly pestering them for money, but—and this was strange—he experienced a wave of tenderness for children: I wonder if this wasn't because they had not

yet grown into people? I have known this trait in others too. He would gather a crowd of kids around him and spend whatever spare change he had on cheap candies for them, cakes or cookies, the kind of things that line the cashier's counter in small shops. Perhaps he was trying to say: Look, all you people, why not treat each other the way I treat these children? Since such tenderness was so far removed from his trade, his silent sermon had more of an effect on me than the sermons of some other teacher with a worldwide reputation. At such times his direct eyes seemed to shine with some simple, harsh notion.

But who can really read the soul of an unsociable gray-haired hunter, the harsh adversary of boar and wild geese? He always made me think of the harsh verdict on life rendered by a dying Tatar, who left a note with the short but intriguing phrase: "To hell with the whole world."

For the Tatars, he was an apostate, a traitor; the Russian authorities, of course, looked on him as a dangerous hothead. I must confess I myself have more than once felt like adding my name to a note like that, full of indifference and despair. But that silent display of freedom from the iron laws of life and its harsh truth, and that old hickory tree with the flowers of the field gathered at his feet—both are deep images, concealing a simple harsh notion, one preserved, come what may, in his honest eyes.

In one particular photo album, a very old one, among old men stooped and past their prime with medals on their chests, among affected old ladies wearing gold chains on their wrists, all posed beside the same open book, you may one day come across the faded image of a modest man with an unremarkable face, his hair combed with a plain straight part, wearing a straight beard and holding a double-barreled rifle on his knees.

If you ask who the man in the faded photograph is, they will say that's Nikolai. It will be a short answer and I suspect there will be no details forthcoming. A slight shadow on your interlocuter's face will indicate that this man was someone special, not just a casual acquaintance.

I knew the man. One possible way to relate to people, in my opinion, is to think of them as different illuminations of one and the same head carved in white marble. That way, the endless variety of human faces becomes merely the contemplation of the same eyes and forehead in various illuminations, the play of light and shadow over the same

stone head, always the same for old and young, for doers and dreamers, in an endless number of repetitions.

And Nikolai too, of course, was simply one of the many possible illuminations of that same hair and eyes of white stone. But is it ever possible for someone *not* to be?

His hunting exploits have been described by many. When he was asked to bring in a certain animal, he would simply ask “how many?”—taciturnity was his striking feature—and vanish. And then, God knows how, he would appear with exactly the number that had been requested. The wild boars of the region knew him as a quiet and terrible enemy.

He knew the wooded ravines like the back of his hand. If it were possible to see into the souls of the feathered inhabitants at the mouth of the Volga, who knows what terrible image of this hunter would be stamped there! Whenever their cries rang out over a deserted shore, did that mournful sound not carry the news that the barque of Bird-Death was moored once more among them? Did he not appear to them as a terrifying creature with supernatural powers, with his double-barreled shotgun and his gray peaked cap?

This dreadful, implacable divinity appeared even on remote shores: black flock or white, long cries heralded the death of their companions. And yet pity had a place in his heart: he never touched a nest and would leave fledglings alone; they heard only his departing step.

He was taciturn and secretive, but more often uncommunicative, and only those to whom he had shown a corner of his soul realized that he had already condemned life and had the noble savage’s contempt for human destiny as a whole. Perhaps the state of his soul can best be understood if we say that this is how the soul of nature would condemn innovation if the life of this hunter was to be its passage from the world of the dying into the world that is coming to take its place; with a parting glance at blizzards of ducks, at the wilderness, a world whose seas were stained with the blood of red geese, to move into a land of white stone foundation-pilings pounded into the riverbed, the fragile lace of iron bridges, anthill cities, a powerful but cold and gloomy world.

He was simple, direct, harsh in a somewhat coarse way. He was a patient nurse: he knew how to sit quietly by a bedside and always took care of his sick friends. And where gentleness toward the weak was concerned, or readiness to protect them, any medieval knight in armor and a plumed helmet might have reason to envy him.



He set out to hunt in the following manner: He got into his boat with two dogs he had raised himself and set off downstream with his sail cleated. Sometimes he rowed, sometimes he had to tow. I must tell you that the Volga has a treacherous wind that will blow offshore in the middle of a dead calm and overturn the careless fisherman who hasn't managed to cast loose his sail. Once they had reached their destination, the boat was turned upside down and during the day it served as a shelter, supported on iron rods. Then began the long hunter's day near a campfire, until it was time to leave for an evening meal. The quiet, intelligent dogs were fed in the boat, which was always redolent of all the game to be found along the Volga: black cormorants and the drying haunch of a wild hog lay in a heap with bustards of all descriptions.

The wolves would begin their quiet howl: "That's them getting ready to leave, that's them leaving."

His desire was to die far away from people, with whom he was completely disillusioned. He spent time among people, but he despised them. His was a cruel trade. He felt at home with the nonpeople he hunted, and among them he must surely have been some sort of cruel prince who brings death—but in the struggle between people and the nonpeople he was on the side of the latter. In a similar way Melnikov, while persecuting the Old Believers, nevertheless wrote *In the Mountains* and *In the Forests*. There is in fact no way to imagine him except as Perun of the Birds, cruel yet keeping faith with his followers and conscious that they possessed a certain beauty.

He had people he was able to call friends. But the more his soul came out of its "shell," the more strongly and thoroughly did he destroy the equality of the friendship to his own advantage; he would become arrogant, and the friendship began to resemble a temporary truce between two warring parties. The least incident could trigger the break, and then he would fix upon you a look that said "No, you're not one of us," and become cold and distant.

Not many people were aware that he did not, strictly speaking, belong to the race of men. His thoughtful eyes, his tight-lipped mouth—for some twenty to thirty years, after all, he had been high priest in the temple of Slaughter and Death. Between the city and the wilderness there is the same axis, the same difference, as between devil and demon. Reason begins at the point where we are able to choose in favor of good or evil. Our hunter had made that choice in favor of

demon, the great desolation. He had expressed the firm intention never to be buried in a cemetery—but why? Why didn't want a quiet cross over his body? Was he a confirmed pagan? What had he learned from that book he alone had read, whose ashes no one else would ever be able to decipher?

But death respected his wishes.

One day a short notice in the local paper said that in a patch of scrub, known to the local people as the Horse Gates, a boat had been found, and next to it the body of an unidentified man. It added that a double-barreled shotgun had been found beside the body. That year was a plague year and the gophers, those pretty little creatures of the steppe, were dying in great numbers. As a result the nomads were leaving their usual encampments and fleeing in terror, and since our hunter was already a week overdue on his usual rounds, some people who knew him sent out a search party; they were full of apprehension and foreboding. When the searchers returned, they confirmed that the dead man was indeed the hunter. They reported the following story, which they had gotten from some fishermen.

For several nights they had been camping on a deserted island, and every night an unknown black dog came up, sat by their hut and howled softly. Neither beating nor shouts had any effect on her. They kept trying to chase her away, suspecting what her presence must mean, an unknown black dog on a deserted island. But she would invariably return the following night, with her eerie howling, disturbing the fishermen's slumbers.

At last a soft-hearted ranger went out after her: she yelped with joy and led him to an overturned boat. Nearby, gun in hand, lay the body of a man completely picked over by birds; the only flesh remaining was in his boots. A cloud of birds circled above the body. A second dog, half dead, lay at his feet.

It was impossible to tell whether he had died of a fever or whether it was the plague.

The waves beat steadily at the shoreline.

So he died as he had hoped; his strange desire was fulfilled. He ended his life far away from people.

His friends erected a little cross on his grave anyway. And that's how the wolf-killer died.

[1913: IV.40]

## *Usa-Gali*

Usa-Gali was a falconer, a hunter, and every now and then a thief. If they caught him he would act like it was all in fun. "You mean I can't?" he would say. "I thought I could!" If he saw a lark asleep in the open steppe, Usa-Gali would crawl up to it and pin its tail to the ground, and the bird would wake up captured.

An eagle was perched on a haystack. Gali moved silently toward the stack with a long rope that ended in a noose. The watchful eagle sees the hoop of hair. Full of suspicion he raises himself, ready to fly away, but he's caught already, beating his black wings, flapping and screaming. Usa-Gali jumps from behind the haystack and reels in the poor prince of the sky, a black captive with talons of iron; his wingspread reached over seven feet. Usa-Gali rides proudly through the steppe. That eagle would live for a long time in captivity, sharing his food with sheep dogs.

One time he was being chased, and a whole troop of men on horseback surrounded him. Gali wheels his horse in the middle of the trap, but there is no way out. And so what does he do? He turns his horse and gallops directly at one of the horsemen. The horseman doesn't know what to do and turns his horse flank to. Gali whirls his bullwhip, stuns the poor horse with a terrific wallop on the forehead. The horse falls to his knees and Usa-Gali gallops off. It's a wicked wallop and knocks the horse unconscious. They remembered that in the steppe for a long time, the stunned horse with his broken saddle girth and the horseman flat on his back.

In those days the Ukrainian oxcart drivers traveled in wagon trains, and they used to cover their loads with huge pieces of felt to keep them dry. Their oxen plodded along, constantly moving their wet black lips and swishing away the flies. Some of the hunters used to sneak behind the drivers, then suddenly gallop up and shove the end of the felt cover under one knee and make a dash with it off into the steppe. The drivers weren't dumb, so they started tying the felt covers to the wagons with

long pieces of rope. That was when Usa-Gali tried it. Of course once the rope was played out he was pulled off his horse, and he hit the ground so hard he broke his arm. The drivers all came running, and they took it out on him something good. "Had enough?" they kept asking him. "Enough," he said. "Enough, man, enough." But he couldn't say it very loud. That little game cost him a couple of ribs.

The bullwhip, which is a close cousin to the bolo they use farther north, was something he was a real expert with; he used it the way the Kirghiz tribesmen do. He used it to hunt wolves. His trained eagles were more relentless than Borzois, and they would track the wolf out into the steppe and follow him till he was worn out and didn't care anymore what happened to him.

Then the obedient ambler would quicken his pace to a gallop, and Gali would lean down and finish off the wolf with his bullwhip. By then the poor animal was worn out from the unequal contest.

Pity the lone wolf!

One time they found him with a long switch, very proud of himself, driving a whole herd of bustards ahead of him.

"Usa-Gali, what are you doing?"

"Froze their wings," he answered offhand. "I sell them a little bit at a time." That was once after an ice storm.

That was Usa-Gali for you.

The rest stop. A white horse grazing nearby. A flock of wood pigeons drifts down the wind. Swans shone in the bright blueness of the sky, like the edge of another world. Small white bustards were feeding on a sandy hillock.

The wood pigeons suddenly flutter up out of the grass and fly away. The murmur of conversation, someone telling a story. It's the start of the evening meal. Meanwhile some geese overhead had drawn a thin stripe right down the middle of the sky; the flock looked like a dragon kite. It disappeared somewhere far away, an endless thread; maybe that makes it easier for them to fly. The geese began to call to one another and their formation changed shape again; now they looked like the Milky Way, only dark.

Meanwhile the wind had risen, and a steppe swallow's nest began to swing more heavily; it looked like a warm mitten hung up on the willow tree. A harrier hawk drifted by, all black with a beautiful silvery head. Crows and magpies. They're a good sign, they cheer you up.

"Listen"—someone was telling a story about a Turkish woman, a

captive. “She used to go out into the field and lie down, and put her ear right up against the ground, and when you asked her what she was doing she would say: ‘I’m listening to them say Mass in heaven. It sounds real good!’”

The Russians were all standing around in a circle. Usa-Gali was there too, only off to one side eating something. You hardly noticed him. He was a real creature of the steppe. Uruss builds steamships, Uruss builds roads, he doesn’t even notice the life all around him in the steppe. Uruss is not to be trusted, he’s an infidel.

If you listened hard to the sound of the wild geese, you could hear them saying “We salute you! Those who are fated to die salute you!”

[1913: T 515]

# *Ka*

## I

I once had a Ka. Back in the days of White Kathay, Eve, as she stepped into a snowdrift from Andrée's air balloon, and a voice said "Go!" and she left in those Eskimo snows the print of her naked feet (don't you wish!)—Eve would have been astonished to hear that word. But the people of Masr had heard it thousands of years before. And they were right when they split up the soul into the Ka, the Hu, and the Ba. Hu and Ba are man's reputation, good or bad. But the Ka is the soul's shadow, its double, its envoy to the world some snoring gentleman dreams of. There are no barriers for the Ka in time; he moves from dream to dream, breaks through time, and reaches the goalposts of bronze (the bronze of time).

He occupies the centuries as comfortably as he does a rocking chair. Consciousness does the same thing—it brings together moments of time like chairs in a living room.

My Ka was energetic, attractive, dark-skinned, gentle; he had huge feverish eyes, the eyes of a Byzantine god. His brow, a brow of Egypt, seemed to be made of small separate dots. Either we are savages, definitely, and the people of Masr were not—or the things Masr supplied for the soul were needful and natural but somewhat extraneous.

And now, something about me.

I live in a city where signs say PUB IC BATHS, where the city administration calls upon the citizens to support wars but not warriors; where you cannot escape the watchful eyes of sneaky savages who breed like rabbits and swarm in the trees. One savage, there, that woman—a silver fire flickers in her eyes, she walks in the plumes of a bird who was once alive, and another sneaky savage, a dead one, is already hunting it in the other world, a spear in his dead hand. Herds of fine-furred people roam the streets, and nowhere else does the thought of human stud

farms come so easily to mind. "Otherwise the human race is finished," they all think. And there I was, writing a book about human stud farms, while all around me these herds of fine-furred people moved.

I have a collection of friends—a little zoo, really, but I like them for their pedigree. I live on the third or fourth planet out, starting from the sun, and I try to think of the place as no more than, oh, a pair of gloves—something you always want handy to throw in the faces of the rabbit-people.

Is there anything more I can tell you? I foresee huge fights over whether to spell my name with an *i* or an *e*. I have no mammae, no maxillae. And no antennae. Height: shorter than an elephant, taller than an ant. Eyes: two. But enough about me, no?

Ka was my friend. I loved him for his birdlike disposition, his serenity, his wit. He was as comfortable as a raincoat. He taught me words you can see with (eyewords) and words you can do with (hand-words).

And here are a few of the things he did.

2

One time we met people who held themselves together with buttons. Really. Their insides were accessible through a flap of skin, buttoned down by little round hornlike protuberances. Whenever they ate, a furnace of thoughts glowed through this flap. That's really true.

I stood on a great steel bridge and threw a coin into a river, a two-kopek piece. "Someone should be worried about the science of the future," I said. "I wonder if maybe someday some underwater archeologist will come along and find my sacrifice to the river."

And Ka introduced me to a scientist from the year 2222.

Ah! It was only a year after the first infant cry of the superstate ASTSU. "ASTSU!" the scientist said, glancing at the date on the coin. Back in those days people believed in space, didn't think much about time. He commissioned me to write up a description of human beings. I filled in all the blanks and handed in the form. "Number of eyes, two," he read. "Number of hands, two; number of feet, two; fingers, ten; toes, ten. Fingers and toes combined, twenty."

He slipped a thin, gleaming skull-ring onto his shadowy finger.

We discussed the advantages and disadvantages of that particular number. "These figures," he said, with a piercing look from his large intelligent eyes, "do they ever change?"

"Those are the maximum figures," I answered. "Of course people do turn up from time to time with only one arm or one leg. And there will be a significant increase in such people every 317 years."

"And yet," he answered, "this gives us enough information to calculate the equation of their death." "Language," remarked the scientist from the year 2222, "is the everlasting source of knowledge. What is the relationship between gravity and time? It's perfectly clear that in your language the word *vremia*, which means time, and the word *ves*, which means weight, stand in the same relation as the word *bremia*, which means burden, and the word *bes*, which is a name for the Fiend, the Evil One. But can one who sweats beneath a burden behave like the Fiend? No. *Bremia* absorbs the force of *bes*. Where there are burdens to be borne, the Fiend is absent. In the same way, therefore, *vremia* absorbs the force of *ves*, for do we not abandon weight when we enter into time? The very soul of your language shows us that weight and time are different absorptions of the same force."

He thought the whole thing over. "Yes," he said, "language contains more truths than we know."

At which point our acquaintance was broken off.

3

Another time Ka grabbed me by the arm and said, "Let's go see Amenhotpe."

I saw Ay there, and Shurura, and Nafertiti. Shurura had a black beard, all curls.

"Hello there," said Amenhotpe. He nodded at us and then continued: "O Aton! Thus speaks your son Noferkheperura. Some gods swim and some gods fly, and some gods even crawl around on the ground. Sukh, for instance, and Mnevis, and Bennu. In fact, is there a single mouse on the banks of Hapi-Nile who does not demand to be worshiped? All those gods quarrel among themselves, so a poor man is left with no god to pray to. He's happy if someone simply announces 'I am the One' and demands a fatted calf or two. By the Nine Bows and Arrows! Did you not tremble once, all of you, at the warcry of my



ancestors? And if I am here, while Sheshat holds my shade in her resourceful hand, does not her hand preserve me-here from me-there? Isn't my Ka at this very moment among the clouds, lighting the blue Hapi-Nile with pillars of fire? I-here command you to adore me-there! And you, strangers, convey what I say to your own times."

Ka introduced him to the scientist from the year 2222.

Amenhotpe had a very weak body but very broad cheekbones, and the curve of his large eyes was graceful, childlike.

Another time I visited Akbar and Asoka. On the way back we got very tired.

We tried to stay clear of trains and kept hearing the drone of Sikorsky airplanes. We were hiding from all of them, and learned how to sleep and keep moving. Our heads were asleep, but our feet kept moving; they were an independent unit. I met this one artist and asked him if he was going to war. "I'm already at war," he answered, "only it's a war to conquer time, not space. I crouch in my trench and grab scraps of time from the past. It's a rough assignment, just as bad as you'd have in a battle for space." He always painted people with only one eye. I looked at his chokecherry eyes, his pale cheeks. Ka was walking beside us. It was pouring rain. This painter (Filonov) painted a feast of corpses, a feast of vengeance. The dead ate vegetables in a solemn ceremony, and over them all, like the rays of the moon, shines a grief-stricken madness.

Another time, on Ka's advice, I shaved my head all over, smeared myself red with cranberry juice, put a vial full of red ink in my mouth so I could spit it out if I had to; then I tied a belt around me, climbed into these mighty Moslem robes, put on a turban and lay down like I was dead. While I was doing that, Ka kept making war noises; he threw rocks at the mirror, banged on a tray, yelled like a wild man and shouted "Arrgh!"

And what do you think happened? Right away these two beautiful astonished houris showed up, with wonderful dark eyes and astonished eyebrows. They thought I was dead and picked me right up and carried me off someplace far away.

While they were greeting the faithful, they touched my brows tenderly with their lips, and that's how they cured my wounds. They probably noticed what flavor my blood was, but they were too polite to say anything. Three more houris came up laughing; they smudged their enchanting mouths in my red ink and quickly wiped away my artificial

wounds—total recovery of an imaginary invalid! From time to time the houris danced, and their dark hair whirled behind them like black-birds at play or like the fleet of Syracuse after Alcibiades, just like little birds, one behind the other. It was a dance of joy. It was a wreath of heads, which seemed to blur madly into a single stream. Later that joy died down a little, but still as before they looked at me with exultant eyes, with glittering nighttime eyes, and whispered among themselves.

Mohammed came up and watched it all with a smile and with a wicked gleam in his eyes. Lots of things today weren't real, he said. "But that's all right, young man, you just keep right on the way you're going. That's the spirit."

The next morning I woke up a bit tired: the houris were looking at me, slightly astonished, as if they'd just noticed something strange. Their mouths were scrubbed clean, clean, clean. And the red ink was gone from their hands. They looked as if they wanted to say something but couldn't make up their minds. But just at that moment I noticed a sign; on it was a message written in my own red ink. It said: "Unauthorized entry strictly prohibited." Beneath it was some complicated signature. I disappeared, but I remember the hair and the hands of the houris all messy with red ink, and lots more, and that very evening I sailed with the warriors of Vijaya to Sakhali, in the year 543 B.C. The houris appeared to me as they had done the night before, but now they wore veils made of dragonfly wings and coats made of forget-me-nots, rough and heavy, matted with the plants and their soil; they looked like deer covered with pale blue curls.

Now many of you I know are gamblers and have more than a nodding acquaintance with a deck of cards; some of you even have bad dreams involving sevens, aces, and ladies of hearts. But have any of you had the experience of gambling not with some specific individual, some John Doe, but with a collective of some kind—if only with the universal will? I have, it's a kind of game I'm very familiar with. I considered it much more fascinating than ordinary gambling, whose distinguishing features are candles, midnight, green tables, and scores scribbled in chalk. And I note too that your choice of moves is quite unlimited. If the game required it and you could somehow manage it, you could even take a damp sponge and wipe the constellations from the sky, like yesterday's lesson from a blackboard in school. But every gambler has to find his own moves for crushing his opponent.

You think of your opponent as your equal despite his universal nature, and the game proceeds on a basis of mutual respect. And isn't that exactly what makes it so attractive? You feel that you know your opponent, and you become much more involved in the game than if you were betting against some ghost from the grave. Ka was my confident, my intimate, in this pastime.

## 4

Ka sat sadly by the seashore, dangling his legs. Watch out, watch out! Jellylike sea creatures broken by the waves piled up at the shoreline, driven there by the wind in shifting dead shoals; they gleamed dully as they slipped from the fingers of women swimmers who seemed to be dark green, or even dark red, the fabrics they wore clung so close to their bodies. Some of them laughed with genuine delight when a wave caught them unawares. Ka was lean, muscular, and suntanned. He sat completely naked, except for a derby hat. His hair darkened by sea water hung to his shoulders. The dull sheen of the waves and the glitter at their crest were visible right through him. A sea gull flew by beyond his gray form and was visible through his shoulders, although its colors faded at the moment of passage; as it flew on, its black and white plumage brightened again. A woman in a green bathing suit with silver spots cut through him as she swam by. He flinched, then returned to his former outlines. She smiled boldly and glanced at him. Ka hunched his back. Meanwhile a figure that had been swimming for a long time left the water and came up onto the shore, water streaming from it like fur; it was a beast leaving the water. It threw itself onto the ground and lay still. Ka watched as two or three observant worms wrote the number six on the sand three times in succession, and then looked at one another significantly. A Tatar, a Moslem, was watering his black buffalos; they snapped their harnesses and rushed so far into the water that only their dark eyes and nostrils were visible above the surface; their bodies caked with filth and matted hair were completely submerged. He smiled suddenly, turned to a Christian fisherman, and said "al-Masih al-Dajjal." The fisherman knew what he meant, reached casually for his pipe, lit it, and casually remarked: "Who knows who he is? We're no experts." "That's just something people say," he added. A man in mili-

tary uniform who had been watching the occasional swimmer through a spyglass lowered it on the cord around his neck, glanced coldly at the fisherman, turned and walked off down a barely noticeable path.

But evening had fallen, and a flock of sea serpents swam through the water. The shore was deserted. Only Ka remained sitting as he had been, arms folded over his knees. "All is vanity," he thought, "everything's finished." "Hey you! Shadow-hero!"—the voice seemed to come from the wind—"Watch out!" But Ka didn't move. Then a wave washed him away, and up swam a great Beluga sturgeon who swallowed him whole. In this new destiny he became a round pebble and lived among seashells, a life preserver, and a piece of chain from a steamship. The Beluga had a weakness for old junk. It had also swallowed a belt with the name Fatima Menneda written in Arabic letters, dating from the days when the eagle of death rose up among spears, cutlasses, oars, and ensigns. And now she herself was reflected in the water, trailing blue earrings, a gull with sad eyes wide open once and for all, and with a splash of oars the barque sailed on, farther and farther, reflected in the nighttime water, and the feet of a white cloud brushed the deck like the feelers of a nighttime moth.

And then the mighty Beluga dies in the fisherman's nets.

## 5

Ka got his freedom back.

Gray-haired fishermen with their trousers rolled to the knee sang the Eddas, the sad song of the seacoast, and hauled in their nets—fragile, close-woven, dripping, hung here and there with dark crabs that clung to the mesh by their claws—straining their sinewy arms; sometimes they straightened up and stared at the eternal sea. Ospreys perched silently some distance away, like great guard dogs. A sea gull sat on the stone that contained Ka, making wet footprints. The big fish now lay dead on the beach, glittering with the beetles that covered it.

But a girl found him and took him with her. She writes a tanka on one side of him: "If death had your hair and your eyes, I would gladly die." On the other side of the stone she paints a branch of ordinary green leaves; let them mark with their pattern the delicate surface of the flat white stone. The dark green pattern wrapped the rock in a net. He experienced the torments of Montezuma when everything became

cloudless, or when Layla picked up the stone and put it to her lips and kissed it softly, unaware that it contained a living being, and spoke the Gogolian phrase, “To one who knows how to smile.” Iron Tolstoy was nearby, a delicate red seashell, very shiny and covered with dots, and wrinkled flowers with stone petals. Then Ka got bored and lonely and went to visit his master, who sang: “We ate En Sao, the spit of sick swallow, and we will eat, eat, eat it till the friends of En Sao.” This indicated that he was angry.

“Oh,” he said gloomily. “Well, let’s hear what you have to say for yourself.” He murmured the tale of his tribulations: “She was full of that unearthly, ineffable expression,” and so on. What it amounted to was a list of complaints against destiny, its dark treasons, the nape of its neck.

Ka was ordered to return for sentry duty.

Ka saluted, touched his cap and disappeared, gray and winged.

6

The next morning he reported: “He’s awake, I’m on guard duty here” (a rifle gleamed on his shoulders). “Exclamation mark, question mark, three dots. The quarter the wind blows from, the wind of the gods, of the goddess Izanagi, of the fabric that covers her—snaky, half-silvered, ash gray. In order to understand her you must know that the ashen silver stripes alternate with transparent ones, like a window or an inkwell. The charm of this fabric can be fully grasped only when it is illuminated by the fitful fire of a joyful young arm. At such times a trace of fire runs across its waves of silver silk and then disappears, like wind over the grass. The fire of evening trembles on city buildings in the same way. Enormous, enchanting eyes. She calls herself adorable, enchanting.”

“Wrong,” I said, interrupting the flow of words. “You’re wrong,” I said severely.

“Really?” Ka replied. His voice was sad, somewhat forced.

“Try to understand,” he said a while later, cheering up a bit, as if he were announcing glad tidings: “Three mistakes: (1) in the city, (2) in the street, (3) in the house.” But where exactly?

“I don’t know,” Ka answered. His voice was vibrant with sincerity. Although I liked him a lot, we quarreled. He had to go away. He

waved his wings, all dressed in gray, and disappeared. Twilight shivered at his feet; he looked like a leaping monk, my proud and beautiful wanderer. "Why that's him," several people exclaimed as they passed by; "he has such deep eyes! But where is Tamara, where is Gudal?" (Their fear of city people thus provided an opportunity of weaving these artistic fragments into the story.)

Meanwhile I walked up and down on the embankment, the wind ripped at my derby hat and blew sharp drops into my face and the dark cloth I wore. I watched the path of a cloud as it turned gold, and cracked my knuckles.

I knew Ka felt offended.

Once again he glimmered in the distance, occasionally waving his wings. It seemed to me then that I was a solitary singer and held a harp of blood in my hands. I was a shepherd: I had flocks of souls. Now he was gone. Meanwhile someone wrinkled and old came up to me. He looked around, glanced at me significantly, and said "It's coming! Soon," nodded his head and disappeared. I followed him. We came to a grove of trees. Blackbirds and black-headed warblers hopped about in the foliage. Beautiful gray herons lowed and mooed like the hoarse-voiced cattle of the steppe, lifting their beaks high into heaven from the highest branch of a dried old oak. Then a hermit appeared, all in black, in a tall dry crumpled hat, among the oaks. His face was peevish and wrinkled. There was a hollow in one of the oaks; in it stood some icons and candles. The bark was gone from the tree, eaten up long ago by toothache sufferers. It was perpetual semi-twilight in the grove. Stag beetles scurried over the bark of the oak trees, dueling with one another, stabbing each other's wings. Between the black horns of one beetle you sometimes found the dried head of another. Made drunk by the sap of the oak trees, they were easy prey for young boys. I fell asleep there, and "Layla and Majnun," the greatest story of the Aramaic peoples, once more inspired the dreams of a tired mortal. I was returning home and walked through a flock of fine-furred people. An exhibit of curiosities was on display in the city, and there I saw a stuffed monkey with foam on its black wax lips; the black stitching was clearly visible on its breast; in his arms he held a woman made of wax. I left.

This strange and mysterious incidence of *co's*, this awful owl-fall, astonished me. I believe that before a major war the word *coward* has an especially frightening meaning, since *war*—even though as yet undreamed of—lurks in the middle of that word like a conspirator, a har-

binger lark. But among these overgrown brambles, these willows hung with thick rusty root-hairs, where everything was quiet and overcast, gray and uncompromising, where a solitary reveler tossed about in the air and the trees were severe and silent, some kind of dusty grass caught at my feet as if imploring me; it writhed on the ground like a sinner begging forgiveness. I kicked hard at the entangling grass, looked at it, and said, "The common foot shall swell with power, and trample down the modest flower."

I was on my way home. They expected my coming and were waiting for me; they came out to meet me with their hands over their eyes. A tame viper, elegantly coiled, hung from my arm. I loved it.

"I have acted the part of the raven," I thought. "I have brought the water of life, and then the water of death. And I won't do it again!"

7

Ka thought of that stone and the branch of ordinary gray-green leaves traced on it, and those words: "If death had curls and hair like yours, I would want to die," and flew into the blue expanse of the sky like a golden cloud among the crimson cloud peaks, steadily beating his wings, caught in a flock of red cranes, resembling, at that hour of early morning, the red ash of a fire-breathing mountain, and he too was red as they were and tied by red threads, by swirls and filaments, to the fiery dawn.

The journey had been a long one, and drops of sweat, reddened now by the rays of dawn, gleamed on Ka's dark face. And then the mighty crane-trumpet of his warlike ancestors began to sound from somewhere high beyond the chalky white masses.

Ka folded his wings and landed on the earth, dripping head to foot with morning dew. From each feather hung a pearl of dew, coarse and black. No one noticed that he had landed somewhere near the source of the Blue Nile. He shook himself and beat the air three times with his wings like a swan in the moonlight. There was no going back to the past. Friends, fame, glory—all lay ahead. Ka climbed onto a wild horse, a mean one that had never been broken before, with golden stripes, and Ka let him nibble his shadowy but still beautiful knees as they galloped across the field. A pack of striped and bristling wolves pursued him with their high-pitched cries. Something in their voices reminded him

of those who review young and gifted writers in the daily press and periodicals. But the golden steed bent his head stubbornly and bit Ka's shadowy elbow; he was wild as ever. The fierce gallop exhilarated him. Two or three Nyam-nyams shot poison arrows at him, and then fell to the ground in superstitious terror.

He saluted the earth with a flourish of his hand. He stopped by a waterfall. Here he joined a company of apes lounging with a certain sophisticated nonchalance on the roots and branches of trees. Some held infants in their pudgy hands and nursed them; young adolescents chattered as they swung through the trees. Black coats, powerful low skulls, and curved canines—all gave a fierce look to the hairy folk that made up the company. Cries of raucous delight rang through the twilight as evening approached. Ka joined their circle.

"In the old days," began a venerable old male with a calloused face, "things were very different. The Roc bird has vanished completely nowadays. Where has it gone? We do not fight with Hanno as we once did; once we grabbed away their swords and smashed them across our knees like rotten sticks, and covered ourselves with glory. He has gone away across the sea: And the Roc bird? No way now to wrap myself up in one of its great feathers, and then to lie down to sleep upon another! Long ago it used to wing its way down from the snowy mountains, its cry would wake the elephants each morning. And we used to say to ourselves: 'Listen! The Roc bird!' And in those days it would carry off baby elephants, up beyond the clouds; they would look down at earth, and their trunks would hang beneath the clouds and so would their legs, but their eyes and their gray foreheads and their ears would all poke out on top, above the blue edges of the clouds.

"And now the bird is gone! Farewell, Roc bird!"

And all the apes rose from their seats and cried out together, "Farewell!"

Not far away next to a fire sat the White One; she was wrapped in the remains of a shawl. She was clearly the one who had lit the fire, and on the strength of this accomplishment they accorded her a certain respect. The old ape addressed her.

"White One," he said, "when you were crossing the desert, we knew and we sent out our young braves to find you, and now you are one of us, even though many looked their last upon the stars. Sing us a song in your native tongue."



The White One stood up. She was very young. She glanced at an elderly ape sitting by the path. "Move, grandma," she said, and she shook out her golden hair; it enveloped her in a luxuriant golden haze.

Her hair made a soft murmur, descending like water on fire over her shoulders, which blushed hot and cold. An exquisite sorrow was expressed in her movements. She was strikingly beautiful as well, with a perfect body. Ka noticed that a toenail on her wonderfully proportioned foot reflected the whole of the clearing in the forest, the gathering of apes, the smoking fire, and a patch of sky. It was a minuscule mirror where you could see the elders of the tribe, their hairy bodies, the tiny young ones, the entire tribe of forest dwellers. Their faces seemed to be expecting the end of the world and the advent of Someone.

Their features were twisted with grief and anger; a low wail escaped their lips from time to time. Ka set an elephant tusk on end and at the top, as if they were pegs for strings, he fastened the years 411, 709, 1237, 1453, 1871; and below on the footboard the years 1491, 1193, 665, 449, 31. Strings joined the upper and the lower pegs; they vibrated faintly.

"Will you sing something?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. She placed her fingers on the strings and began:

By the will of the envious fates I stand among you.  
If the fates were artless dressmakers merely  
I would tell them they used their needle badly,  
I would never accept their designs,  
I would sit down myself at their benches.  
Steel itself beneath our hands  
will sing "Uthlofan, lauffling!"

She moved her hand across the strings; they sounded the thunder boom of a flock of swans that settles as one body onto a lake.

Ka observed that each string consisted of six parts, each part consisting of 317 years, 1902 years in all. And also that the top row of pegs indicated years when the East attacked the West, while the pegs at the lower end of the strings indicated an opposite movement, the West against the East. In the top row were the Vandals, Arabs, Tatars, Turks, and Germans; below were the Egyptians of Hatshepsut, the Greeks of Odysseus, the Scythians, the Greeks of Pericles, the Romans. Ka at-

tached one additional string: between the year 78, the invasion of the Scythians of Adia Saka, and the year 1980—the East. Ka studied the possibilities of playing on all seven strings.

Meanwhile Layla wept bitterly, her beautiful blonde hair trailing on the ground.

“You do your duty badly, you use your needle bitterly,” she said, and sobbed bitterly. Ka broke his branch and placed it beside the weeping girl.

Layla gave a start and said:

Once in my tranquil childhood days  
I had a rounded pebble,  
and on it was a branch like this.

Ka moved away into the twilight; suppressed sobs choked him; he dried his tears on green leaves and remembered a white-painted dormer, flowers, books.

“Listen,” the old one said, “and I will tell you of she who came as a guest among the apes. She came to visit us once, riding upon a moa. A dead butterfly, impaled on a porcupine quill and thrust into her black hair, took the place of her fan, and she fanned herself with it. In her hand was a willow twig with silvery buds, the hand of the Venus of the Apes; she clutched the moa, with her black palm she held onto its wings, to its breast. Her face was raven black, and curly black hair covered her softly like the fleece of night. She had an attractive, passionate smile. We thought of her as our little lamb. She laughed as she made her way across our land. She was our goddess of black breasts, our goddess of nocturnal sighs.”

Layla: “If death had hair and curls like yours, I would want to die.” She walked off into the twilight, arms clasped above her head.

“But where is Amenhotpe?” voices questioned. Ka realized someone was missing. “Who?” he asked. “Amenhotpe, son of Tiye,” they replied with particular deference. “We believe that he walks here by the waterfall, repeating the name Nafertiti.”

Ay, Tutu, Aziri, and Shurura, keeper of the sword, all stood around. But before the migration of souls our sovereign had been the sovereign of the muddy Hapi-Nile. And Ankhsepaaton walks through Hut Aton to Hapi to pick flowers. Isn't that what he dreams of now?

And now Amenhotpe arrives. The ape people fall silent; they rise. “Be seated,” said Amenhotpe, as he stretched out his hand. Deep in

meditation, he lowered himself to the ground. Everyone sat down. The fire flared up and, gathered beside it, four Ka's spoke about themselves: the Ka of Akhenaton, the Ka of Akbar, the Ka of Asoka, and my Ka. The word "superstate" was mentioned more often than it should have been. We whispered among ourselves. But a terrible uproar threw us into confusion; white men rushed in and attacked us like wild animals. A shot. Bullets whistled overhead.

"Amenhotpe is wounded, Amenhotpe is dying!" Word spread quickly through the ranks of our warriors. It became a rout, a disaster. Many individuals died bravely, but all in vain.

"Go, carry my spirit to him most worthy to receive it!" said Akhenaton to his Ka as he closed his eyes. "Give him my kiss."

"Save yourselves! Run for your lives!"

The four spirits flew for a long time through the threatening ash-smoke sky; they carried the White One, who had fallen into a deep swoon, her golden hair trailing behind her. Only once did a moth raise its head, while in an estuary a seahorse snorted. The escape was successful; no one saw them.

8

But what actually happened in that forest? How was Amenhotpe killed?

*I. Amenhotpe the son of Tiye*

1. I am Akhenaton.
2. The son of Amun.
3. What says Ay, father of the gods?
4. Will you not grant me a shawabty?
5. I am the god of gods; thus did rometu glorify me; and I hereby let you go, as if you were ordinary workers—Osiris, Hathor, Sobek, all of you. I have demoted you, like a rabisu. O sun, Ra Aton.
6. Ay, let us create words a plowman can understand. You priests, you are nothing but a cloud of gnats swarming by the stone reeds of the temples! In the beginning was the word . . . . .
7. O Nafertiti, help me!

I have inundated all the fields of Hapi,  
I have brought you unto the Sun, you rometu.  
I will carve into the stone of walls  
that I am Akhenaton, godfather of the sun.  
I have brushed away the clouds of superstition  
from the shining face of Ra.  
And in a quiet whisper the shawabty  
repeats after me: You are right!  
O Akhenaton, narrow-chested godfather of the sun!

8. Now grant me the turtle's shield. And your sounding strings,  
Ay! Is there a single mouse by Hapi to whom they would not  
erect a temple? They grunt, they moo, they roar; they chomp  
hay, they catch beetles and devour slaves. Entire holy cities grow  
up around them. There are more gods than there are nongods.  
The situation is chaotic.

*II. Amenhotpe the Black Ape  
(striped wolfcubs, a parrot)*

1. Haoo-haoo.
2. Zhrabr chap-chap!
3. Oogoom mkhee! Mkhee!
4. Bgaf! gkhaf ha! ha! ha!
5. Ebza chectoren! Epsai kai-kai! (*He wanders in a shadowy oak  
grove and picks flowers.*) Mgooom map! Map! Map! Map! (*He  
eats little baby birds.*)
6. Meeo bpeg! Viig.  
Ga kha! Mal! bgkhaf! gkhaf!
7. Egzheezeoo ravira!  
Mal! Mal! Mal! Mai, mai. Khaeeo khao kheecootseeoo.
8. R-r-r-ra ga-ga Ga! graf! Ennma meh-eh-eeoo-ooecai!

Amenhotpe, in a utang-skin, lives through the day he spent yester-  
day. He eats an arboreal vegetable, plays on a lute made from the skull  
of a baby elephant. The others listen. A tame Russian parrot recites:

The sky is clear, the stars are shining.  
Have you heard him? Have you seen him?  
The singer of his love, singer of his sorrow?

The voices of elephants trumpet as they return from the watering hole.

*A Russian hut in the forests near the Nile.*

*(The arrival of the white man, an animal trader. On the log walls hang guns [Chekhov], antlers. A baby elephant with an iron chain on its leg.)*

*Trader* Plumes, tusks: very good, my fren'. An order for an ape: one full-grown male. You understand? No need live one, dead ok, for stuffed one; sew up sides, make wax foam on mouth, little wax figure fainting person in arms. From town to town. Tee-hee! I come here: frisky female, very young, she scurry over rocks with water jar. Knock-knock-knock! Little feet. Real cheap. Another glass wine, my fren'?

*Old One* Listen to me, esteemed master. He will become angry, and may disturb my esteemed master's combed hair, perhaps even rumple his collar.

*Trader* Just say goodbye. Don't get mad. Hee-hee! So tomorrow, we hunt? Get your guns ready, natives for ambush. She comes with jar to get water, he comes out, gets killed. Aim for the forehead and black chest.

*Woman with Water Jar* I feel sorry for you; you will peep out from behind a pine tree and just at that moment a well-aimed shot will bring your death. And from what I heard, you are no ordinary monkey, either, you are Akhenaton. Here he is! I will look at you lovingly, to brighten your dying moments with the autumn of desire. My dear, my terrifying admirer. Smoke! A shot! A terrible cry!

*Amenhotpe the Black Ape* Meh-oo! Manch! Manch! Manch! *(He falls, tries to stop the bleeding wound with dried grass.)*

*Voices* We got him! He's dead! Dance! Prepare a feast for tonight!

*(The woman places her hand on his forehead.)*

*Amenhotpe* Manch! Manch! Manch! *(He dies. The spirits pick up Layla and carry her off.)*

*Ancient Egypt*

*(The priests are plotting revenge.)*

“He has trampled our customs and makes all men equal in the world of the dead; he has shaken our foundations. Death! Death!”

*(The priests hop about with their arms raised to heaven.)*

*Akhenaton* Oh, the fifth evening,  
let loose the mooring line!  
Sail out “the grandeur of love”  
and move the oars  
as if they were eyelashes.  
Hathor weeps wildly, lovingly,  
she laments her lovely Horus.  
The cow face—the calf horns—  
the broad torso.

The massive thrust above the waist.

And the tumbled shadow of Hathor with its cow’s horns, which the moon silvers in the depths of Hapi, was cut by an agile pangolin with its armored saw. It was joined by another; they snarled over the body of the slave.

Face down, beautiful, dead, he floated down upon Hapi.

*Priests (softly)* Poison. Hey, Akhenaton, drink this. The day is hot. He drank it! *(They leap up.)* He is dead!

*Akhenaton (as he falls)* Shurura, where are you? Ay, where are the incantations? Oh, Nafertiti, Nafertiti! *(He falls; foam appears on his lips. He dies, clutching the air with his hand.)*

And that is what happened by the waterfall.

9

All this happened back in the days when people made the first flights over the capital city of the north. I lived high then, and thought about the seven measured feet of time. [. . .] Egypt—Rome, Russia alone—England. I drifted from the dust of Copernicus to the dust of Mende-

leev, constantly aware of the noise of a Sikorsky airplane. I was preoccupied by the wavelengths of good and evil. I dreamed of the convexo-convex lenses of good and evil, because I knew that black burning rays coincided with knowledge of evil, and cold bright rays with knowledge of good. I thought about bits of time melting into the universe, and about death.

To the frozen path between stars  
I shall not fly with a prayer,  
I shall fly there dead, cold,  
With a razor covered with blood.

There are the violins of a tremulous throat, one still youthful, and of a cold razor. There is the luxurious landscape of my darkening blood on the petals of white flowers. One friend of mine—you remember him—died that way; he thought like a lion but died like a lamb. A friend came to see me, a friend with dark eyes, a joyful savagery shone in them—with dark eyes and a girlfriend. They brought me the hay of fame, flowers and wreaths. I looked like the Yenisei in winter. They fed me like the ravens. They were so boldly amorous, they even embraced in my presence, and paid no attention to the hidden lion, the baby mice!

They went off to Didova Khata. On the crumpled dry petal of a lotus I sketched a head of Amenhotpe; a lotus from the mouth of the Volga, or Ra.

Suddenly, in the nighttime window that looked out into Kame-noostrovsy Boulevard, the glass shattered, it fell everywhere, and through that window appeared the head of Layla, lying peacefully stretched out like a box of vegetables. She seemed dead. At that moment the four Ka's came into my room. They brought me the sad tidings: "Akhenaton is dead. We have brought you his testament." He handed me a letter sealed with black resin. A young boa constrictor wound itself in coils about my arm. I put him down and felt Layla's soft arms around my neck.

The boa raised itself in a curve and looked at us coldly, evilly, with unmoving eyes. She tightened her arms joyfully around my neck (perhaps I was the prolongation of her dream) and spoke only one word: "Majnun."

The Ka's moved aside, deeply touched, and wiped their tears in

silence. They wore fieldboots and buckskin trousers. They wept. In the name of his friends my Ka gave me a kiss from Amenhotpe, and the kiss smelled of gunpowder. We were sitting beside a silver samovar and its silver curve (or at least it seemed silver to me) reflected me, Layla, and the four Ka's: mine, and those of Vijaya, Asoka, and Amenhotpe.

[1915: T 524]



## *Notes from the Past*

### I

It's nice to behave as if you were engaged to a rusalka, and to know that people know it, and while you're swimming to feel a rusalka's tender elbow against your chin, pressing her cheek against yours, gently spreading her cold hair through the water and around your shoulders and hers. It's nice to go out and spend a long time watching the sea people, without ever understanding the furnaces of their bodies.

The beach is becoming deserted—I'm on my way to dinner and a rest. I've already forgotten an awful lot of this, but Pozarevsky was still sitting there playing with a dog. What attracted me to him so quickly? Perhaps because this seafaring Russian was a descendant of Polubotok, and my grandfather . . . . Maybe our ancestors simply used us to send greetings to one another, as if we were gloves—you know that gloves experience a vital attraction for one another whenever we shake hands with them still on.

Driven by the sea, I ran from rock to rock and took off my shoes and lowered my eyes as I ran past a shrine formed by two people. Their love was beautiful. They sat silently by the fire of their love, beside a fisherman's boat where the waves splash and watched the flames in silence, like a couple of aborigines by their campfire.

I remember his chin, his broad pale forehead. But she—she had dark wavy eyebrows, a small narrow face. What else? Dark eyes, the savage scornful laugh that twisted her mouth; like a Circassian girl, she moved like a Circassian from the Ukraine.

She was going out with . . . . I sat as if someone had cast a spell on me, I said nothing, and—which is even stupider—I ate, full of hatred and enmity.

Three meetings at the seashore.

I am a seaside suitor, loved by rusalkas from the Black Sea, the

Caspian, and the Baltic, I have felt their mad sweet kisses and closed my eyes and flown in circles, ever narrowing circles. Something wild and tender and beautiful appeared on her lips . . . . .

Her father was a harsh seafarer . . . . .

And that nighttime languor, nighttime trees above silvery streams, scarecrows of the singing heart, walls and picket fences, the artist-fisherman's story—goodbye, goodbye! Luxuriant curling nighttime treetops, the blue, yellow, silver silk of the sky, a cloud near the moon like a baked custard.

In those days I threw away the gold coins of my nights and days. Now the purse has disappeared, and we . . . . . on the date of each encounter, and how the wheel of happiness turns. And swimming where Rachel or Rebecca smiles with almond eyes.

Good moments by the seashore: the lace design of a woman's blouse sunburnt onto her skin, a dark copper-colored mark, the soft gold of a silver fence of shadows around her shoulders, a suspension bridge over her breasts and across her elbow.

It's wonderful to lie side by side and study the golden pattern left warmly dark by lathe-turner sunburn on the soft whiteness of girls' bodies; it's wonderful when a golden strand of hair twists over her ear and an ant crawls across her shoulder and measures the enormous giant breathing of a human being by the frail ray of its own progress. Wonderful to see him, dazzled by his vision, walk off into space without being aware of it . . . . .

It was a varied crowd, two or three corpses from ancient seas sitting motionless on the beach.

2

And that autumn in Kuokkala! Vague conversations about a waterfall where dark-eyed Russian country boys, brought there by their teacher, stood with mouths agape, and the dark sea with the gray stone gazebos of German summer cottages jutting into it—people used to say they were “camouflaged German cannon”—I'll never forget you, the bright yellow flowers of eyes poisoned by hate growing by the extinct cottages, and hopping my way back home in the evening through rocks

and spray and foam and the quiet presence of humans behind the walls of an extinct cottage. Of course it was wartime, the beat of its heart in the quiet back streets.

That insane autumn when the rulers of a great nation fell in the small space in front of the mother fort of their capital city sunk in the tidal shallows. You walk past fisherman's nets made of willow switches, you listen to the heartbeat of someone watching you from over there and then, just like a ball in play during a game between young men (here, the seaside rocks), you jump through the air, sailing from one stony hand to another, rising and falling, changing the path of the ball, soaring in this evening game between competing rocks.

Have you ever seen two heavy copper wires linked by a third? I too have linked with the wire of my aerial path the mouths of the Neva and the Volga. The sea and I, we have joined voices and I sang of Stenka Razin as I moved from rock to rock, and perhaps I was the first to do so on this rocky shore.

And Evreinov! You remember him in Bobyshev's portrait: his smooth medieval haircut and his famous wooden raven, and Kamensky's little stories as told by that heavy Blinovaia, a wild woman with a warm fluffy way of looking at you.

Sand.

But who's he?

Human shrubs, whose flowers are people; scaly branches whose leaves are rubles or kopeks; people instead of leaves on branches of silver—how happily you would run toward one another, how those two flowers would laugh with their human eyes—but no, a branch of silver divides them, keeps them apart, pulls them aside, and they hurl their grief at the heavens, in tight collars of silence. Many many slaves, you know, dangle from that branch of silver!

3

October 19, 1915. Went to see Vera B. again. I sat next to her. What happiness. Also Gernov. "It's lucky, sitting next to someone who's engaged; it means you'll get married soon yourself," Mrs. B. told us. What? Vera is engaged. And I didn't even know. New sorrow.

Tears rose in my throat, I admit it, I felt the scalding tears in my throat. Surrounded by studious, attentive people. But maybe it's good she's still single. Vera is sorrowful and austere. Her black bandeau lay in her lap—a sign of sorrow. For whom? She sat opposite me with her legs crossed, awkward, smoking. She wore a yellow ski sweater, she was totally fragile, sorrowful, weary. She kept smoking and a certain awkwardness in her hands touched me. I kept looking at her too persistently and she awkwardly rearranged the bottom of her skirt.

We talked about the pogroms. "They'll be rioting against us soon," she said as she smoked. Her northern delicacy and her blue eyes, and she was sorrowful and weary, almost doomed, and her direct looks, and her fatigue after tending the wounded—I'd forgotten she was working as a nurse. Vera engaged—I wept inwardly, like a hurt kitten. Vera said, "Maybe I should go to war"; she poured me some wine. "May I?" she asked. "Go ahead and smoke, smoking is very masculine," she remarked. She has a lot of simplicity in her and a touch of austerity. She is somewhat cold and cruel; she told some hunting stories.

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October 26th. Went to visit again. I stared at the northern delicacy of her hair, an upswept cloud above her face, at her enormous blue eyes, like a blue pearl on its austere string about her shoulders, and I listened. Rapture, there was still no gold ring on her hand.

Here's a fragment of a conversation: "I took a shot at the rabbit and hit it, only I got it in the hind legs. And I really don't know how I did it, I grabbed it by the head and started doing, you know, beating it against the gun butt. And of course it kept screaming and screaming, I really don't know—I felt very sorry (she took a drag on her cigarette) for that rabbit." She gave a barely perceptible laugh.

Inna picked up a blue-gray helmet. I put it on and began pretending I was a medieval warrior. "You look just like a warrior!" She doesn't say much, but what she does say is exactly right and appropriate.

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The 28th—my birthday and a first-rate fire at one of the government buildings on Liteiny Avenue. Coincidence. The firemen, red figures in the wavering gray smoke, the wounded, indifferent, in rooms untouched by the fire. Moans, cries, the glow of brass on the galloping

fire engines, horses' hooves raised suddenly into the air in a wild song-like rapture, in a rage of impulse. They were like warriors from centuries past, there's a reason their helmets are made of brass—they call upon humanity to moderate the blaze of the sun and to abandon these boring stupid wars. Beyond us, beyond us somewhere a wild howl, the noise of the fire engines, their path made bright by galloping . . . . oily smoke and the leaping brightness of a horseman, the sharp sound of trumpets. I stood opposite and watched, enjoying the terror of some and the delight of others. That morning I drank some bouillon for breakfast.

I went to see my friend. Shaking with excitement, I told him about everything that had been happening to me. He gave me advice as a friend, a man of experience: "Try to keep seeing her, paying attention to her; remember you've only known each other a few days; call me if anything happens. Keep on seeing her, remember you have to subdue her. My father spent ten years courting a woman."

"We're conspirators!" I exclaimed, giving him a kiss. I solemnly swore to play it through to the end, if that's the way it has to be. I love him, a courageous, uncompromising man with a warm heart. That evening I drank to the realization of my boldest and most passionate hopes. A seven-year-old boy, the son of friends, read my poem "Incantation by Laughter." I talked a lot with him and we felt like a pair of conspirators among those grown-ups.

Surely this won't turn out to be only a dream?

The boy was barely out of his perambulator. He looked at me with delighted eyes, childlike, alive, ardent and bright; he read my poem and afterwards he kept on snitching bites of some kind of pudding, laughing and turning around to watch the grown-ups.

For beyond this Vera, just as beyond Vera Lazarevskaia, there gleams the lance of my first Vera from Kazan, who achieved death, dying among flowers, smiling, surrounded by friends who clutched at her hand as if to awaken her. But the poppy kills like a bullet.

Yet, more and more often these last days I have felt the gleam of the lance of that first Vera, the suicide, who flew to her ancestors on beautiful virginal wings, seventeen years old.

But her pearl-gray eyes, her restrained northern gestures, the stories about wild goats in her homeland—all this during a stormy time of war, whose horses' hooves and heavy gun carriages had passed like

apparitions through my heart two years before the actual real war, and I, who had furled up in my heart the banner of my nation's wild freedom, and she, who spoke the language of my enemies and whose blood was the blood of my enemies, but who was taking care of the wounded on our side and it made her so sad, so thoughtful—who are we? No, we are the first to escape from the storm of war and seek refuge on the dry land of a deeper humanity, and only the two of us understood that.

[1915: IV.319]

## *“I went to Asoka”*

I went to Asoka and asked him to share his thoughts on equality and brotherhood.

Meanwhile, the following events occurred at sea.

There had always been a temple on the hill, but its grove of chalky fir trees had stood for only a few centuries. For a long time its pillars had been yellowing among the debris, and sea spray had deposited new pages on them, although they themselves were cut from that same sea spray. It was here that Layla sailed. Seven strings in her hands, drawn by a seahorse, and the clear wave rose like a banner. But then what? A steamship with four funnels rode the waves. And from a window of the ship's infirmary someone splashed sulfuric acid and burned her beautiful eyes. It was a very small vial, but the blue-sea eyes were eaten away, devoured by the fire of the sulfuric acid, and the soft, cold, disfigured face burned to the bone.

She cried out—and fell backwards into the water.

[1915: NP 317]

## *“We climbed aboard”*

We climbed aboard our  $\sqrt{-1}$  and took our places at the control panel. Our Tracksubplane was a merge of glass, steel, and ideas—it could fly, run on dry land, submerge in water.

Wheels, plane surfaces, propellers. Whatever could be observed from the windows of the subplane-booster was constantly recorded and printed photographically, very rapidly and clearly. We made a careful study of what the lightprints revealed. Here were the faces of our escort. There a flight of swallows. Then sea gulls, foam, water, schools of fish. We were now underwater and could hear the snickering of the enemy on the far side of Planet Earth. I was transmitting revisions in an essay to a distant city, choosing my words very slowly. I paused, full of thought: centuries of warfare passed before me.

[1916: V.145]



## *Dream*

We were at the  $\sqrt{-2}$  exhibit; the conversation turned to the ahankara of an individual and the ahankara of a nation and the coincidences between them. We were standing in front of a painting: Eve was represented by *The Pushpin Journal*, upon which reposed the apple; *The Skiers' Journal* represented Adam, while a third newspaper depicted the tempter-serpent. Our discussion was loud and lively, and we were joined by a guardian of morals who brought to our attention the unacceptability of a certain canvas. The painting in question—and we could only agree with his opinion—portrayed a Turkish lady reclining by the seashore. Only the forehead and a corner of the mouth were hidden by a lace-edged hat; its shadow hid the mouth and chin. Gold and sky-blue splotches alternated upon the surface of the body, entangling it in a web of noonday sunlight. We all agreed immediately. I happened to be holding a copy of that morning's newspaper; I tore off a piece of the headline DARDANELLES and pinned it to the canvas, which gave it an air of decency. The Moslem lady still lay stretched out on the beach upon her half-raised arms, covered with golden shadows, but she was now veiled by a torn piece of paper with the headline DARDANELLES.

The basic characteristic of Greece is an abundance of water, that of Italy an abundance of land. Is it possible to stand between a source of light and a nation, in such a way that the shadow of the "I" corresponds to the boundaries of the nation? I sat down on a couch in the corner of the gallery and stared wearily at hundreds of canvases with a perfectly Hottentot prettiness. "Their African colonies have had a certain influence on the Aryans." I began to doze off.

I imagined I was lying in the ocean in such a way that my knees were underwater and my heels rested on dry land. I was huge. There was that same Moslem lady, struggling and pushing someone away with her hands. Gallipoli was covered with olive trees and looked all silvery. I broke my tiny tender fingers on the cliffs by the shore. She was wear-

ing the same black mask. A bluish haze wrapped the shore and she seemed all hazy as well. Suddenly the *Queen Elizabeth* appeared, cutting the water with the black webs of her rigging, and was soon enveloped in the smoke. Powder magazines exploded, trimming the mask of battle with black lace; through the openings the Turkish lady's blue eyes gleamed steadily. And then the six hundred men on the *Bouvet* went to the bottom; two more explosions. This was a battle! Worn out, I got up, fell on the shore, and lay there for a long time unconscious. In front of me I could see frightened eyes and lips bitten with exertion. Greek women were burying the dead on Tenedos, and their doleful songs and the eyes burning in their dark faces seemed feeble and fleeting after what I had seen, six hundred sailors' arms and shoulders sinking to the bottom of the sea.

I felt sorry for the Turkish lady.

[1915-16: IV.74]

## *“Once again I followed the yellow paths”*

Once again I followed the yellow paths trampled in the snow of the Razumovsky forest. Snowy feather beds, the feathers of a frozen swan, stretched out on either side, one after the other. Larches stood dark and mysterious like ancestral shadows, whispering to the darkness and brushing the walkers’ eyes with gentle needles. “Grandmother or grandfather—who is it,” I wondered, “leaning there, from that branch clustered with transparent needles?”

There was something familiar, familial even, in these trees whispering to the people below.

A dry snapping sound, a rumbling roar, the rapid breathing of a hedgehog rolling like a ball across the sky, the noise and crackle of a steam engine getting up steam, thoughts of our ancestors dirtied with a smear of noise—and again I saw in the sky above me four flat plates piloted by a speck of human dust, and watched as the stern law of plane surfaces slipped by like a dark god above the leafy treetops.

It was man the wingmaker, the noisy roar of his blind flight over this patch of woodland, and as his roar filled the countryside, you clearly felt the approach of martial music and the voices of war.

There were red circles on the lower surfaces of the wings, which looked like the red spots on the wings of brazhnik moths at twilight, and each plate, dark against the sky, seemed as simple as a military command.

Soon he lands and skims the ground on narrow skis; a cloud of snow rushes in pursuit, following his trail like a pack of long-necked wolfhounds.

The rushing sound died away, and the shadow slipped through the trees, tossed against the red western horizon.

I got onto a No. 13 and observed my neighbors, my fellow travelers, casual shadows of Planet Earth. We sat in silence, but our looks cut deeply as Circassian sabers, cut stubbornly and for a long time.

“You can’t pretend anymore you’re still a child,” someone said.

“No. You dead men are hiding out in the burrows of your graves. Come join us in the battle. And if a living white rock, covered with the hoarfrost of its own breath, stares at you calmly and sadly with the smile of a thinker who inhabits this inspired stone among birches and dark fir trees—insult his dream. Destroy his silence. Make him go out into the streets. The living are tired. Let them mingle in common combat, both living and dead. Upon his snowy forehead lay a wreath of filth.”

Swinging wide at the turns, studying and studied in turn by my neighbors, in clouds of squealing, I rode into the city along the great white highway.

In those days I was an empty cartridge clip, I wanted every title and glory and honor Planet Earth affords, as if they were new shells, bullets of the future that I could simply insert into the empty cartridge clip of my soul and my daily life.

And meanwhile you all crept shamefully into your graves, like mosquitos in wintertime hiding in the crevices of a wall. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. And these dead never rose up like obedient doves at my call. I saw humanity’s discarded clothes floating on the waters of death, and I rushed off to spin and weave new ones. I knew that people changed, became other, after swimming in the waters of death. I was a tailor, I walked the streets. The strings of centuries united different sections of the city and their different ages. The wire of the century vibrated with sounds—from the golden onion domes of a church where you could envisage gray-haired boyars riding through an imaginary crowd from bygone days, people strolling in silvery zipuns, ancient spears and poleaxes glittering—to the lancetlike glass commercial buildings, their straight white walls lined with gray vase shapes and gods in little rounded caves, forever departed—the accomplishments of a not too distant past. Imaginary sun-tanned faces contrasted with greenish-gray real ones; there an imaginary human being leaped triumphantly from the crowd, while here a real one stood out. The waves of generations warred against one another like spears, and their accomplishments, their pulsations, differential and additional sounds, stretched from low white gates to the great glass emptiness of a window, whose glass would entice the eyes and then slam the door shut against any possibility for the rest of the body. Here and there the drive belts of previous notions still turned, and the cogwheels of previous existences.

Refugees gave the city an air of anxiety. Occasionally a cabdriver would stop his gentle-eyed old horse and a refugee walking along the street would run up and shake the hand of a woman, also a refugee, with all the warmth that arises from an unexpected meeting, after they had parted back there, where war’s face was glaring upon human affairs.

I stopped to say hello to a flourishing red-faced leg of mutton; twenty years later he would be a respected citizen of this same city.

The strings of centuries wound their various sounds around the city, and golden tin boxes packed with rigid human sardines, circled through the twilight like a necklace. And twilight, the fate to which all colors are condemned, summoned its citizens.

And then I saw him—the young man from Planet Earth: he came out of the water in a great hurry, draping himself in a crimson cloak divided by a darker strip the color of clotted blood. The grass around him was too green, and he fled, this refugee cast into foreign lands by the bow of war.

[?1915–16: IV.70]

## *The Scythian Headdress: A Mysterium*

“Let us go,” Ka said, “where the Scythians hurry from the Sphinx each morning across the gilded sands.”

Lulled by the weary hand of the wind, the sand rolled and stretched into distances, like flour, like snow, like a gilded sea in the quiet hissing gold of its waves. The horned serpent of the steppe raised its head and then with a silent motion hooded his eyes in sand. Touched with gold, it rustled as it slipped from the snake’s forehead. A lark that had only recently migrated from far-off Siberia alighted on the dark knot of the snake’s horn, on that sand-hooded forehead, as if it were a twig, and perished in the watchful jaws. And it had only just dropped from cloud peaks where they had flown side by side like sailors, heard the peal of thunder and filled the fields of silence with their lark song. In the land of eternal frost it had perched to rest on the tusk of a mammoth, streaked with mud and fretted with the traces of centuries, which protruded darkly from a steep bank; it nested for the night in the mammoth’s enormous eye socket. In the morning the twittering flock, intoxicated by their flight, joined their voices in a great assembly of sound that might have been mistaken for distant thunder or an echo of the great singing voices of the gods, after which human ears find the world a narrow place, something suddenly less than it had been. The lark, silver with black horns, began to quiver and suddenly let its head fall. Its large dark eye, where reflections of the rivers of Siberia still flowed, was half-closed. “I am dying,” it said. “I am a lark and I am dying, sinking into the womb of death.” Fatter now, the sandy golden snake grew drowsy, casting its yellow eye in a final stony glance at the lion of stone. The lion had been cut from the surrounding rock as a reminder, to younger waves of humanity, of the crests mankind had already attained; it had been given a sinuous curve of tail around the thigh, tight haunches and half-closed eyes, and a mouth wrinkled by the ages. It stared with human eyes into the distance, its animal paws half hidden in the sand. Often the morning mists hung about its mouth and whis-

pered the mysteries of the centuries. A pair of crumpled gloves and a cloak lay across the lion's paw. And it was a strange sight, the dark cloth against the uncompromising stone.

At that moment the scarlet saber of sunrise slashed across the desert, and the dark patches of night began to disappear. The gorgeous sound of supernatural singing drifted toward the snake from the depths of the unyielding animal stone. What was happening there inside, within the subterranean bowels of the lion body, beyond the curve of the lion tail? An ascetic gray-haired priest was about to move the bead of a new day across the thread of time. He stood with his hand outstretched. Young men wearing garlands gathered below him. A priestess with pale blue-gray eyes stooped to gather branches for the altar fire. Her strong faith shone in her gray eyes as she stared intently at the priest and remained silent. Her hands gathered herbs and pale wildflowers to decorate the garlands. The priestess stared at us in silence, beautiful, severe, but she had faith in us and her clothing fell and lay like a lake at the feet of the Virgin with a black bandeau around her waist. The twigs, garlands, and incense were placed in a heap. The desert grasses lay on the circular stone, round and waxy-green, covered by a stream of silvery hair. A ray of scarlet fell on us through a dark aperture where a stone had been removed from the wall.

And all about us, its body forming the temple walls, its eyes veiled in clouds, lay the half-human lion. The lip of time curved on his face. "My children," said the priest, "behold—the radiant Word has caught fire." We listened to him reverently in that subterranean temple. He continued speaking: "Great suns and small ones revolve within me. Do you hear the sound they make? Their songs and their singing mingle like sea speech with the sea of suns, with the singing of the morning sky. All the glory of me praises the starry glory above us. And if we are heaven-horses with dark black wind streaking our manes, foaming with snowy flecks of tiredness, whipped on with tail lashings and the cruel eyes of our besiegement. Galloping! The galloping of hooves! How many of them have reared up and parade on their hind legs, waving their menacing forelegs? We will fill the abyss with cliff faces, inscribed with books no gray-haired sorcerer of the millennia has yet read. We whip ourselves on with lashing manes, in a frenzy to build a bridge of mountains into the sky. Oh, rumble of revolt! Besiegement. Trees, logs, splinters of laws, mountains, religions—all must fall to fill the moat before the castle of the sky. And the smile of destinies sticks like thistles

in our savage manes. Black, white, golden, snow-white comrades! You are like the eagle's wing as he rips away the sky!"

His impassioned voice was interrupted by a knock.

"What's that?"

"A traveler knocks with his staff at the stones of the temple," we answered. "He bears a dried gourd upon his head."

"Good. The breaking of our bonds is still more certain and secure. Basin of bellies, bursting with bravado of boys!" he concluded passionately as he descended. "And let us remember the eyes of the temple beast, half veiled by time. Let us remember that lip of time, curving out beyond the eyes!" He finished speaking.

From his arm, as if from a tree, hung a beautiful boa constrictor, whose leaden eyes shone with cold intelligence. Ash-gray spots in a complicated pattern of lead and steel decorated its body. It wound itself twice around the priest's arm, and its body swayed—a living, thinking staff.

"You priestly novices, tell us where you have been."

They all sat down on a white stone bench against the wall. And you, pale gray-eyed woman, ghost of the stone bench, listen carefully to the secret of another intelligence. The morning had come to an end, and they all began to tell their tales. The first one began:

I was in a submarine boat, bending over a mirror-top table. The rippling of the water could be heard above us and on both sides as we moved through it. The monotonous waves splashed in a gray pattern against the reflecting surface. But a dark outline cast its shadow on the sea, smoke and smokestacks rose above it, the deck was crowded with people. A bell. The sound of bells. The roar of a torpedo being fired. A pale flame! "Hoch!" we shouted, and submerged. Objects bearing traces of human appearance sank all about us. They swirled the way leaves swirl as they fall from a tree, into the blue twilight at the end of the day, and they tapped with corpselike hands at the portholes of the submarine. On that very same evening, but centuries earlier, in a wilderness of oak-tree trunks, rowing our oars beneath the surface, we Zaporozhian Cossacks sailed underwater to the blue city, rocked there beneath the surface and lay in wait for black and gold sails. We moved our oars beneath the surface. The sun sank into the sea, red as this morning. But the Cossacks breathed through tubes, held fast to the pitch-covered grips of their oars, and rocked silently beneath the surface. Just then a vessel sailed by. It was crowded with women dressed



in white, all of them dark-skinned and elegant. They stood on deck, long golden bracelets on their arms and legs; they seemed no more than children, and their hair fell in black azure waves that reflected the blue waves of the sea. They sailed on. Our leader swam out, and they hauled him up onto the vessel, thinking he was drowning. We had had our fill of piracy and sailed off. Our hollow oak trunks seemed to humpback the sea, and only the gulls lifted their heads when they saw us. The sphere of the sea shone blue. We had come back to our homeland. Slavic women with golden hair met us on the sand at the river mouth:

The ship with the sea heros  
calls to come down to the shore.  
A crowd of cold lovers  
has no need of bronze armor.  
We have cast lots into the blue  
with the garlands of a goddess.  
They have returned! Returned! Returned!  
The familiar poplar trees of our streets.  
My doves, there is no reason for crying.  
There are grain stalks of pleasure, something worth cutting.

We yawned silently, tired by the long story, where different periods of time glimmered through one another. And someone said: "But I'm the same as I ever was! I haven't changed!"

We stood up and dispersed. Smoke from the fire rose above the silvery ashes. Suddenly the sacred flame began to flicker and waver, like a snake charmed by sacred music. We all stood for a moment, alert. Someone entered and whispered something to someone and pointed at the statue of a snake-haired woman standing in the twilight. Someone said: "Think of those condemned to die at dawn. Ah, if only I could weave yet one more equation of kisses from the forest lakes."

[ . . . ]

All day long I lay naked on a sandbar in the company of two cranes, while some sort of wise man from the tribe of crows studied my behavior. He had never seen a naked man before. That's what I think.

Meanwhile the lake, full of muffled cries and murmurs, began its particular nocturnal existence. It was an abundance of life that murmured, a silvery sound tarnished by the croak of the cranes. The Son of the Sun, womanlike, dark-skinned, his hair down to his shoulders—

he would comb his hair gently and lovingly with a large comb, as if he had asked an unknown girl to do it for him—walked out of the sacrificial fire, and the harder he pulled the comb through his long hair, the more loving and darker his soft eyes began to seem.

Lace and a woman's white blouse patterned the Yogi's dark neck. His legs were covered in trousers of a shaggy white material, and sandals were strapped to his feet.

[ . . . ]

I remember bloody gold markings on the apparition's pale bluish head, the golden splotch of his helmet and the black smoke above him, like soot above the flame of a lamp.

[ . . . ]

The desert was still. It was night; we had arisen to watch the webbed feet of a wild goose gleaming far overhead and to refresh ourselves in the miraculous coolness of the night.

The enormous campfires amazed us. The traveler fell asleep with his head bowed, wrapped in his cloak, his form dimly outlined at our feet.

"Tomorrow you will leave the temple," the old man said.

It was almost morning, the dark dawntime of the stars, when we departed. We said goodbye.

Ka took me by the hand. Months of war passed.

We met in the north, by the seaside, on cliffs covered with pine trees.

I remember the old priest's words: "You have three sieges ahead of you: the siege of time, of language, and of number." Yes, a government of all the human beings born in the same year. Yes, frontiers and customs barriers between generations, to ensure each the right to its own creativity.

The truth is we don't need their bodies. After all, individual bodies are only leaves, and the oak tree still remains. Let it howl as we beat it—leaves mean nothing to us, there are lots of them. One falls, another takes its place.

Underwater railroads had long since been laid across the ocean floor. I was traveling on one of them. Among these scarred cliffs, whose feet were washed by the sea, I had come to find Numbergod—the god

of time. One of the dark cliffs resembled a bison, that favorite of the ancients; it stood in the sea and lowered its horns into the sea. I made my way toward it across the human muck that stuck to the soles of my shoes. The muck made a quiet gritty sound. We treated human beings as if they were lifeless natural elements.

A Chinaman with a concealed braid slipped a snake into his nostril; it emerged from his mouth. He smiled at us with tears in his slant eyes and kept saying: "Good snake, live snake." Then he began a great to-do with a menacing harpoon, attracted an audience, carved a small doll for some reason, and asked its help in working his wonders. "He do it now," he said by way of explanation for this transaction with the divine. A white mouse crept out of a cup. "Live," he explained joyfully, demonstrating that the mouse was alive.

"Where is Numbergod?" I asked him.

He took out his snake and said, "The wind know. My god, he not know."

"Stribog, windgod, you power of blue, surely you know where I can find Numbergod?"

"No," he answered. "I must go like a storm and blow a flock of swallows across the sea. Ask Lada—she travels with swans and cupids."

Lada sent me to Podaga.

Podaga was methodically beating a rabbit to death with the butt of her rifle. She wore a white fur coat and stood in a clearing. Her familiar gray-blue eyes astonished me.

"Numbergod?" asked Podaga. "He's gone off somewhere to be King of the Government of Time."

Two hunting dogs interrupted our conversation with their barking. I was astonished at the news. What was he doing? Collecting the signatures of his first subjects? Could Numbergod really become the King of Time? A brief sigh, as Podaga departed forever.

No matter where I am on earth I study the sky, and so even in that sigh I observed a sun and a moon and a planet. And within it smaller sighs revolved like satellite planets around a larger one. But none of that would bring Podaga back. Even the barking of her hunting dogs was growing fainter and fainter. I began to think about the power of numbers on Planet Earth. First an equation for sighs, then an equation for death. And that's all.

In that government no scarlet blood will flow, only the sky-blue

blood of heaven. Even among animals, species are distinguished not only by external specifics but also by behavior. Yes, we are bitter and dangerous enemies and we do not try to hide the fact.

I found myself beside a lake among pine trees. Suddenly Lada appeared. She sailed toward me on a flowing white swan with a proud black bill and said: "You wanted Numbergod? There he is now, floating in the water." I looked in the lake and there I saw a tall man with a dark beard and blue eyes, wearing a white shirt and a wide-brimmed gray hat. "So that's who Numbergod is," I muttered in disappointment. "I thought he'd be somebody else. Well, hello anyway, old friend from the mirror," I said, and reached out my dripping fingers. But the shadow pulled his hand away and said: "I'm not your reflection, you are mine."

I understood what he meant and walked rapidly off into the woods. A sea of phantoms once more surrounded me. They no longer disturbed me. I knew that  $-1$  is no less real than  $1$ ; that wherever you find  $1, 2, 3, 4$ , you also find  $-1, -2, -3$ , as well as  $\sqrt{-1}, \sqrt{-2}$ , and  $\sqrt{-3}$ . Wherever you find one individual and another natural series of numbers of individuals, you also find  $\sqrt{-\text{individual}}$ ,  $\sqrt{-2 \text{ individuals}}$  and  $\sqrt{-3 \text{ individuals}}$  and  $n - \text{individuals} = \sqrt{-m \text{ individuals}}$ . And now, surrounded by these phantoms, I was  $1 = \sqrt{-\text{individual}}$ .

It is time to teach people to find the square roots of themselves and of minus-individuals. May a few sparks of the great arts fall into the minds of our contemporaries! Especially the enchanting arts of fractions, attainable through inner experience!

Croakers, crackers, crocs crouched beside a conduit, a crabbling creekbed.

[ . . . ]

But I will bring a sacrifice—I will burn a twist of Podaga's golden hair on the savage stone. I will tell you what we invented to replace war. Steel robots on a chessboard miles long, destroying each other according to the rules of the game, and the victor in the contest bringing back the victor's due rewards to the nation that sent him.

But here are the ambassadors.

"Welcome, dear friends."

And all the while Podaga stood among her hunting dogs on the side of a hill.

Harness of heights howling hoarse in a dumb fool. Rocks, pebbles, mud, hum, boom.

Green-echoing. Snake ripples—mirror beast—earth echo—sounds of stars. And the sound of summons and yawning. The yawn of dawn shines like the echo of a star summons. Above the mirror of green grasses, the green eyes of earth, the sound-snake of the singing stars.

But the flesh of the unfree—floggers floating on the flames of a full field—in a waste of bubbly bosoms and bellies, in the foaming groove of the cave-mouth of futility—of the springy step of midnight masques and music.

Foam squeaking like striped-and-spotted jaws and bullets of bubbles above the abyss of a burning stove. Fear of festive flood sustains them—one more leap of a swollen heel, the leap of feathered fingers like fire in the springy jaws of foaming caves. Oh tribes of striped-singers!

On a huge rampart near the seashore was written: “The Government of Time will begin in the near future.” Stone robots, standing on a chessboard that embraced both sea and dry land, battled each other to the death. They were controlled by radio waves, adorned with revolving gun turrets that emitted poisonous flames, with razor-sharp spikes above and below ground. These were huge robots, very complicated mechanisms requiring extensive creative expertise; they were taller than church steeples, extremely expensive, with complicated, plantlike heads. Here were warriors whose workings were entirely of steel—brain, guts, everything. Their commanders controlled their movements by invisible pulls on the strings of their own wills. There were thirty-two of these robots. They won the privilege of moving to another square only by using all their power to destroy the robot that occupied it. Thirty-two in all, stone robots taller than church steeples. The only way to defend yourself against them was to hold up Planet Earth as a shield.

[1916: T 537]

## *“Does a story have to start with childhood?”*

Does a story have to start with childhood? Do I have to begin by recalling that my people, my race, once terrified the landdwellers with sails that went “spinning on wheels,” as they said, and who now use that old forgotten device to make fun of any kind of nonsense, and tell the Hiawatha of today he is “spinning his wheels”—while the latter nods his gray whiskers and refuses further comment, simply one more occasion to say to himself: “nobody loves me”—that my people, sly as sturgeons, once sailed up to Constantinople in dugouts furnished with oars, underwater boats, and rocked unseen beneath the waves in full sight of the intricate, tower-crammed streets of the bustling capital; then after daring feats of piracy, maneuvering like magical fishes in the narrow gulf, to dive into the sea with quick strokes of their oars, to sail beneath the proud sails of the Turkish fleet that came in vain pursuit, to reach the mouth of the Dnieper and there breathe easily again, back once more in the Zaporozhian land where sea gulls crowd the sky. My people forgot the sea and rushed vainly off in search of freedom, forgetting that freedom is the daughter of the sea. But the Volga Russian tribes of my homeland knew the charms of the great steppe (restful emptiness, the absence of people), the proximity of the sea, and the mysterious cold of the great river. It was there my childhood took shape, where the great steppe swallowed up some of the foamy splash of the Chinese sea, and these drops of spray became encampments lost in the distant steppes, where they slowly acquired common habits and a common destiny with all the Russian peoples.

For you have lived a length of time, a lifetime, and you sensed this at once, since many truths simply fell away from you, the way long black feathers fall from a crow’s wing in his moulting season and he sits alone in a forest thicket waiting silently for new ones to grow.

Yes, I have lived out a journey of a kind, and now as I view myself it seems to me that the days I have lived through are my feathers, and in one way or another I will fly in those feathers for the rest of my life.

I have found my form. I am a finished individual. But where can I find a lake in which to see myself reflected? Where I can gaze into its depths with eyes that are gold or dark blue and realize "That's me." I swear I have no lake but memory, no other mirror-lake beside which the crow hops awkwardly when all is still and the forest trees grow suddenly silent and his beak turns awkwardly and everything melts together into one sound, the sound of the secret kept by twilight pinewoods. And the crow needs a mirror: the trees greet him as if he were a swan.

But of course memory is a great Min, and you are deep-laid mines. At one time you overran my consciousness like rioters rushing into a public square. You overpowered the guards who were playing dice there, and you begged my pen and my talent for immortality. I refused you. And now, you images of the past, how many of you will come when I call? I feel like a prince who decides to go to war at the wrong time and doesn't know whether his army will be large or small, who gambles in the dark, guessing at the future, and readies his horse for flight. His voice has begun to ring out here, and I thought: Why that's me, only in another aspect, it's another me, that Mongol boy contemplating his people's destiny. And elephants carved in wood look down at me from the gatepost of the hural. My goal then was to be able to touch those Mongolian idols, and I'm ashamed I never attained it.

I remember, when I was very little, a childhood argument: could I climb over the bannister? I managed to do it and earned my older brother's praises. The feeling of my body against the bannister has stayed in my memory to this day. But now another part of the country: an old garden, hundred-year-old sycamores, a heap of stone fragments overgrown with trees—the palace of a Polish nobleman, burned down during an insurrection. During that dawn of life we were wise men, and our only law was to spend the whole day in a warm creek bed. There we caught tench and pike that were as much smaller than a finger as we were smaller than grownups, and the brightest moment of those years was the spring hunt for sturgeon, no bigger than a needle, as they swam toward shore. But our two-man net was no help: they squeezed through like arrows and there they were again, holding their scaly bodies still. Two fishermen, anxious and preoccupied, hold a small frame with mosquito netting in their hands.

That was where I ate beaver tail once, a famous delicacy. They dragged it in covered with dirt and dark dried blood, and there beneath the appletrees then in blossom they cut off the tail, covered with scales

and a few hairs, and roasted it. It wasn't all that good. What I liked was the meat of the gray goats, they were so pretty and sad with their frozen dark eyes. And I remember going hunting: the road through the forest, the sled camp, men on horseback, wolftracks in the field; the grownups disappeared, and the snowy-moustached Polish *pan* hurried to catch up to the others. Once they drove a wagon loaded with the carcasses of young boars right up to our front door. One time they brought back a young dog with a ripped-open stomach. Oh, those four-footed people of the forest, and their cut-off tusks, curving, smoky yellow! The revenge they took on their two-footed brothers for an adroit bullet in the dark winter twilight! One curved tusk lay for a long time on my father's desk . . . . .

Hunting for butterflies in the mysterious temple of evening, flowers turned toward the line of sunsetlike priestesses in the whiteness of transparent robes, the odor of sacrifices, and a brazhnik moth ascending like a prayer, its wings whistling as it flew. Then, as we crept timidly with outstretched hands after a butterfly, then, I can still hear it, the heat lightning shivered overhead. They began closing all the windows. There was a storm coming.

Years as a student on the distant Volga, and my young blood pounding upon the world.

[1916–1918: T 542]



## *“You could swim”*

You could swim in the flood of tears shed by great thinkers over the fact that the destinies of mankind have yet to be measured. The problem of measuring destinies might be described as the problem of neatly snaring the fat leg of Fate in a trap. This is the militant task the Futurian sets himself.

To be unaware of the problem, to plead ignorance, this the Futurian cannot do, has no right to do. When the problem has been solved, he will enjoy the pitiful spectacle of Destiny caught in a mousetrap, staring fearfully at mankind. Destiny will gnaw with its teeth at the trap, obsessed with fantasies of flight. But the Futurian will speak sternly: “Nothing doing!” he’ll say, and will study Destiny attentively, between puffs on his cigarette.

Here we describe the moment when the horseman sets his foot in the stirrup. Fate, saddled and bridled, beware!

The Futurian holds the reins with an iron hand. Your horse mouth strains at the bit! Another slap of wind, and a savage new race forward begins for the horsemen of Fate.

Let the blue Don teach them the intoxication of that race!

[?1916: V.144]

## *“No one will deny”*

No one will deny that I wear your Planet Earth on my little finger.

Since I am a peaceable man, I am determined to turn the pithy phrase “Off with their heads” into the no less pithy “Off with their moustaches,” and I look with skeptical eye at the equation of votes and cannonfire, at an electorate that votes with bullets fired into the sky. It’s hard to miss when you shoot at the sky, and it makes a good ballot box. It’s Cossacks fighting the “bad guys,” the bosses. I remember the terrible breach of the fort, when only two men from the attackers’ side were put out of action, and the sleepy defenders raised their voices in a new battle cry—“Vanka, they’re shooting at us!”—grabbed their guns and successfully beat off a nighttime attack.

Still, one casualty had suffered a face wound and died, and death’s charioteer, an ordinary cabdriver with a bent back and a white flag, carried him off to the city of the dead, the coffin laid crosswise on his carriage—and only a while ago he’d been laughing with us.

“Ptoing!” the bullets sang above your head every time you stuck your head outdoors. Young men with bandaged hands ran by in red-lined jackets, yellow stripes on their trousers; their faces livened the empty streets when you looked beyond the gate. And one doctor sat in the snow for a quarter of an hour, under fire from beyond the fence, after he had been dumb enough to strike a match and shout “Who’s there?” He caught a bad cold. A militant cleric, tall, with brownish hair and the yellow ribbon of victory in his buttonhole, ran through the streets with a firearm in his hands.

It was a game for the men from the trenches, an amusement, a cloud of war they brought back with them from the front. I knew that a single Caucasian mountaineer flying into a rage and rushing from the tavern would leave more corpses behind him than this daytime war. Anyway, two competitors had split a bearskin down the middle; two soldiers dancing over the corpse of a local inhabitant. I knew it wouldn’t be long before they made up. Especially since a third guest

was knocking at the white walls of the city—Plague. For the third time it was shouting "Let me in!" Anyway, you all had enough gopher flesh to keep you from succumbing to it. Tatars, Bolsheviks, and a group of prisoners had holed up in the fortress, and the two cathedrals—Russian and Armenian—sprouted black machine-gun nests on their belltowers. At night they exchanged persistent gunfire that echoed dully in the city's stone mirrors. The city dissolved into the gloom. Railroad tracks turned orange with rust, public dumas met in the circuit courthouse and gargled streams of public speeches.

And yet the city was beautiful at night. Dead quiet, like Moslem villages, deserted streets and streaks of light and darkness in the sky. The filament in my light bulb did a dance of death and died peacefully before my eyes; I was left in darkness. I discovered a new method of illumination: I took Flaubert's *Temptation of Saint Anthony* and read the whole book through, tearing out each page, setting it on fire and reading the next page by its light. A multitude of names and divinities flashed through my consciousness, barely disturbing it, touching certain strings and leaving others in peace, and eventually all those beliefs, values, and wisdoms of Planet Earth turned to susurrant black ashes. When I finished I realized I had been destined to do just that. The acrid white smoke from the sacrifice surrounded me. Names and religions burned like dry twigs. Magicians, priests, prophets, the possessed—a minor catch in a net of about a thousand words (of humanity, its waves and dimensions)—all were a bundle of twigs in the hands of a cruel sacrificial priest.

It astonished me that Diana wanted to wallow in fumes and fantasies.

I rejoiced silently that the Buddha was an expert at calculating atoms.

And all of it—during those days when insane fantasies invaded the city limits, when plowman and horseman fought over the bodies of townspeople, when Pugachev's wild ha-ha echoed from the springtime mouth of the Volga—became the highly instructive blackened ashes of the third black rose. The name of Jesus Christ, the names of Mohammed and Buddha, quivered in the flames like the sheepskin I sacrificed to the year 1918. Like pebbles in a transparent wave, these worn-away names of human fact and fantasy rolled through Flaubert's measured cadences and vanished.

The acrid smoke surrounded me. I breathed easier, more freely.

That was on January 26, 1918.

For a long time I had tried to ignore that book, but its horde of mysterious sounds found a secluded place on my desk, and to my horror stayed there for a long time, hidden by other things. Only after I had reduced it to ashes and experienced a sudden inner freedom did I understand that it had been in some sense my enemy.

I recalled the particular charm some things possess, things we prize, things full of the conversation of someone we are close to, and how eventually the time comes when they suddenly evaporate, die, and become empty.

I became convinced that such things possess a resonance that our reason cannot comprehend. In this way: the mysterious sound they contain summons up a corresponding vibration within ourselves.

And previously, a few days before this happened, I had taken great pride in my own skull, comparing it to the skull of a chimpanzee, with its raised frontal bone and fierce teeth. I had been full of pride in my species. Have you ever felt that?

[?1918: IV.114]

Not far from the line of surf, on the crescent-shaped half-wild island of Kulaly, among the drifting grass-covered dunes where a herd of wild horses once roamed, stood a fisherman's shack. A pile of sails and oars were a sign that this was the camp of hunters on the open sea. Here lived the fisherman Istoma and his father, a tall sunburned giant with a first streak of gray in his beard. In winter they were the scourge of the seal population. At the sight of a seal thrusting his head out of the water and glancing around with curious eyes for all the world like a human being, they hurled spears with detachable heads.

At the moment they were preparing for the spring fishing season. They climbed in and out of the hut set on pilings near an old willow tree; fishing nets hung from its branches, and a bucket of tar stood near the roots. A freshly patched sail, the boat itself, a budarka blackened with fresh tar, the sunshine gleaming on the waves and on the tarred sides of the boat, an enormous sturgeon thrown across the boat, its tailfin touching the ground, whitetailed ospreys perched on a sandbar, another like a black spot on the rise of a sandbank, clouds of whistling ducks from somewhere swooping over the rising and falling sea—these were the things that surrounded them.

Early in the morning they set sail, heading happily for the city that resounded in those days with the fame of Stenka Razin. The canvas sky of the sail billowed above the fishermen's head, and the whole world came down to something near and dear.

From either bank tall grasses bent into the water; they were enough to conceal a camel easily. Here they saw another boat, a hunter who steered with a single oar; his face was so bitten by midges it seemed disfigured by the pox. He could barely see; a wild boar lay in his boat.

Sleepy turtles raised their heads in surprise or dropped into the water, where red-gold grass snakes moved adroitly. Sometimes there were so many of them that the endless grass itself seemed to flow. The

fishermen's boat moved swiftly beneath the sound of its billowing sail. Soon they put into Kutum and threw a grapnel anchor into the sand, in a spot where old willow trees trailed reddish tresses that made them look like people standing on their heads; the transparent branches were draped in heron's nests. The fishermen clambered ashore.

Past the Kremlin, through Whitetown and Graitown, passing first through Voznesensky Gate, then Kabatsky Gate, the fishermen made their way, almost doubled beneath the weight of the sturgeon they carried. They moved past tiers of fishing tackle, to the house of an Old Believer they knew well.

At one point their passage was blocked by a herd of beautiful cattle from the steppe. Herders on horseback were driving them through the narrow streets, and their curved horns were pressed so closely together they resembled rapids in a river.

In the very thick of the herd moved a heavy wagon loaded with the greenish-white bodies of sturgeon. Beyond them a steppe nomad rode his groaning camel; nearby were chemaks on white Ukrainian oxen.

A ship tied up at the shore had sails of silver brocade, and beside it stood picturesque oriental women. Here and there in the streets the free sons of the Don shone resplendent in their silver zipuns, their precious headdresses studded with enormous pearls. The name of Razin [ . . . ]

Dark-eyed Cossack women in embroidered blouses stood beside muddy coils of rope and smiled broad smiles at everyone. Tater women went by in their black veils. Nomad women wrapped in white moved slowly by on camels.

The Old Believer met them at the threshold of his dugout enclosed by a fence of straw and dirt. This sort of dwelling protected the Russians of that day from fire and kept them cool in hot weather. They went down the steps into the interior and for a few moments could make out nothing in the darkness, but then they observed earthen banquettes covered with oriental carpets, and a few massive drinking vessels set out on the table. A heavysset, almost obese woman came out to meet the guests. A network of fine wrinkles covered her face; she wore an expression of pleasant old age. In the front room of the hut sat a foreign visitor, Krishnamurti, an Indian. Something pellucid in his dark eyes and the long black hair that curled over his shoulders marked him as an outlander. He was recounting news brought recently from India,

a land once so gentle that it sacrificed only flowers to heaven. He told how Sivaji, the hope and sustenance of the Brahmans, had risen in revolt against the treacherous Aurangzeb and soon founded a government of mahants, and how, on the other hand, in the midst of the fierce struggle between the adherents of Vishnu and the adherents of Mohammed, a gentle doctrine was spread, taught by the gurus Nanak and Kabir; how the Sikhs who proclaimed the common brotherhood and equality of all men had chosen as their prophet first Govind and then Teg Bahadur, and how they were persecuted by the perfidious Aurangzeb, who did not stop at poison or hired assassins, and how in China the revolt of Chiang Sian-chun had only recently come to an end, and how a spirit of freedom was aflame across the whole world.

He also told them about Galagalayam of the Hindus. He spoke angrily about China, about how a poor man there, in exchange for a fifty-kopek coin awarded to his family, would agree to be executed in another's place and lay down his wrinkled neck and gray head on the block; how it was impossible there to find a piece of land the size of your hand that was not planted with grain; how men there cultivated such high mountain slopes that it seemed they would need wings to reach them, and how men there cultivated the ocean deep by harvesting seaweed.

Many other things the Indian told them. The night was late by the time they went off to bed.

The fisherman Istoma fell asleep, his head still full of images of a prisoner thrown into a pit where toads crawled across his face; of governors who exacted tribute in baskets of human eyes; of governors who stitched shut the mouths of the talkative and sliced open the mouths of the uncommunicative; about the punishment of swallowing sand until you died. In the morning Istoma headed for the market.

He met a procession on his way; a huge banner depicting a wild boar roasting over flames waved at the head of the detachment. Horsemen in black burkas on mean, wiry horses rode behind it. Their black hats with scarlet tops shone in the sun. This was the Zazharsky regiment of streltsy. In the crowd the name of Razin was whispered more and more frequently.

The excited populace came and went through the seven gates of the white city: Mochagovsky, Reshetochny, Voznesensky, Prolomny, Kabatsky, Agaryansky, Staroisadsky.

Here once again he encountered the Indian, Krishnamurti. Krish-

namurti had gone beyond the town early that morning, where green gardens were set along the banks of quiet streams, and he stood there in silent meditation. "Om," he whispered, bending over a stalk of blue flowers.

"What's this? God's world astonishes you? Good! You should be astonished!"—this was the voice of a very old man who had come up behind him. He was wearing bast shoes, blue trousers, and a white shirt, and leaned on his stick, an ancient of days. The swan of time, Kala-Hamza, fluttered above him, over his gray head. He was very old. The two men understood one another. Then Krishnamurti took a young boy with him and went off to feed the homeless wild dogs.

He went to the marketplace near the Kabatsky gate where the river-pirates were strolling among their common tables. He could hear fragments of phrases, exclamations.

"Here, sweetheart! Over here! Flesh wants flesh! A sweetheart needs a sweetheart, the way a nightingale needs a meadow."

"Come on, have some dinner! Eat, drink, be merry!"

Swarthy warriors were feasting in the open air.

"Listen to this one: the toad is watching a blacksmith shoe a horse, so then she sticks out her foot and says 'Shoe me!'"

"Just like you, friend," cried an almost black-skinned man, pounding his swarthy arm on the table. It was covered with thick, ropey veins, the mark of a warrior-strongman.

"Hey! That's enough talk. You want watermelon or muskmelon?"

Laughter drowned his words. At that moment a piercing groan cut through the babble of the crowd. A tall boy in a white shirt and a bright red zipun was making his way through the crowd. He held a wild swan in his arms; its wings were tightly bound with ropes.

"A swan, a live swan!" No one seemed to hear him. The Hindu did not belong to the sect of Digambaras that required its adherents to go around naked, to "wear only sunlight," but his creed did require him to do good deeds to all living creatures without exception—the soul of his father had possibly transmigrated into that swan. He resolved to set the beautiful captive free.

And there on the steep shores of the Volga the Brahman untied the wild bird and they soon saw the last of it, a silver-white speck disappearing in the blue sky. Then as before the Brahman remained standing, motionless, by the dark water. What were his thoughts?

How camels yearly transport the holy water of the Ganges? And



how perhaps, among voices at prayer, a marriage rite between the two rivers was celebrated, when the priest's hand took the heavy long-throated jar and poured the Ganges water into the dark waters of the Volga—the bride of the North!

Istoma came up to him. "It doesn't take much to set a bird free," he said. "Try freeing an entire nation!"

The Hindu remained silent. He was thinking of how his distant guru in India had power over his mind even here. Turning suddenly he said: "You will see my country soon." Then he turned and walked away, his dark green robe iridescent in the sunlight.

Istoma remained deep in thought. He thought about what the man had just said, and thought about the ant just then crawling on his arm: "Who is this ant? A soldier? A leader of men? A great teacher among his people? A wise man?"

And nearby the Volga-bride rippled softly.

The next day the fishermen got their gear and tackle in order, said goodbye to the kind Old Believer, and set out on their journey home. On the way they encountered boats arranged in the form of narrow sledge runners, piled with enormous heaps of kindling; they saw a *burdaka* to which a thick green birch tree had been fastened like a primitive sail. And the wind moved the boat and its green sail. A short distance away pelicans were dragging their haul, and the still-alive fish thrashed in their enormous baggy beaks. They saw a hunter with a cap made from a gourd clutching live ducks by their legs.

When it began to get dark, they pulled up to shore to camp for the evening and lit a campfire. Until long after midnight they sat talking about the dread fishnet plague when suddenly, within twenty-four hours, all the fishnets within a vast area would unravel, stricken by a disease transmitted by water plants; about terrifying dreams when it was no longer a man who roasted a sturgeon, but the sturgeon who lit the fire and roasted the man it has caught. The sky above Swanland shone with its greenish stars; the murmuring Volga carried toward ocean the water of a thousand smaller streams. The wooded ravines slept in silence.

As he was waking the next morning, Istoma was surprised to notice some strange-looking bushes near their boat. Suddenly the bushes began to shiver, and naked men, their skin all greased and shiny, threw aside the branches and rushed at him. The shout of "Yasir!"—prisoner, slave—rang out again and again in their fierce screams. At that same

moment their boat was seized by others, who rowed quickly away from shore with vigorous strokes. Istoma was knocked unconscious by a blow from a strong fist. He remembered a face looming above him, one that seemed to have no nose, flat as a board. When Istoma came to, his hands and feet were tied and he was surrounded by armed horsemen of the steppe, who were holding council.

Amid stony hillocks, ashes, and human bones, an aul—a steppe encampment—had been set up. Ancient green tiles lay in the sand, with the ashes of burned human bones. Thick clumps of grass trembled occasionally, and a solitary lark swept over the sandy waves of the desert with the speed of a race horse. Suddenly it stopped and perched on the blue shard of a pottery vessel. This had once been the capital of the Golden Horde, and only broken remains of a blue-glazed tower and an ancient stone with a Tatar inscription remained as witness.

A snake slipped silently over an inscription, “There is no god but God,” and a dark-haired nomad girl, with copper coins braided into her hair, walked by. The former Khan’s inscription, “I have been here—great is my name,” drowned in the black silk of her braids. Now she lit the campfire and sat upon the ground, thinking to herself about Sumer-Ulu, the central mountain of the world, where the souls of dead ancestors come together to drink mares’ milk.

An old Kalmyk drank boozo, the black vodka of the Kalmyks. Then he performed the ritual libation to the god of the steppe and poured sacrificial water into the sacred cup.

“May Genghis-Bogdokhan have mercy on me,” he said solemnly, with his head bowed. He thought of the great Genghis as the carefree god of war, who had once taken onto his shoulders the garments of mortal destiny. He had been a lover of the steppe songs, and there he is alive to this day, whenever songs in his praise rise into the wind over the steppe.

He splashed out a first cup to the fire, a second to the sky, a third to the threshold. And the god of fire Okyn-Tengri accepted the sacrifice.

A thousand arms surrounded him. Bathed in the firelight he leaped from the flames and, with a sound unbearable to the human ear, his red jaws began to chatter, clacking and crackling one against the other, while his dead white eyes glared horribly at frail man. The glow of a thousand arms surrounded him. Like a black sail on a foaming sea, his savage pupils cut slantwise across the whites of his eyes, which rolled

horribly up under his eyebrows like a lifeless head hung from locks of hair. A sudden gust of wind and he disappeared, and once more there was only the black cauldron in the middle of the fire, in place of the scarlet apparition.

Koku, his daughter, came to where he sat. Her hair, braided with pieces of silk, fell upon her breast. Then she turned her head, and all the delicacy of China was apparent in her dark face; beneath her sun-tanned features coursed the scarlet blood of a child of the steppe. Her lively eyes sparkled with intelligence and joy like two black moons. She wore a small red cap embroidered with gold. She remembered that a girl was supposed to be pure as the scale of a fish and silent as smoke on the steppe, and she sat quietly on the ground in her black harem trousers. Once again her face, like a flaming coal, bent toward the ground.

But the Kalmyk was lost in his dreams.

In thought he sat upon a horse a yard faster than thought and galloped in the great hunt of Genghis Khan. All of the peoples subject to Genghis took part in it, and almost the whole of Central Asia was contained within the great ring of the hunt. Here a herd of wind-footed wild horses wheeled, there the prehistoric wild bull with twisted horns fell to the ground; in another spot a bow the height of a man sent an arrow flying into a curly red calf. Half-naked horsewomen rode over the steppe with wild cries, and their bowstrings twanged everywhere.

The old Kalmyk had drunk another cup of boozo when a horseman carrying an eagle on his arm rode up. He told him news of the arrival of a Kirghiz with a captive, and together they rode out to meet him. Their spirited horses splashed through a small stream.

The aborigines, who had been naked that morning and smeared with seal blubber for battle, were now dressed and arguing loudly about something or other. They had covered Istoma with a flour sack with holes cut out for his head and arms, set him into a saddle and tied his feet, and carried him back to their encampment. There an old Kirghiz came up to him and said shortly, "This yasir mine." Istoma understood all the ferocious meaning of that word. It translated into a fiery whirlwind of whiplashes.

That evening they set out. Akhmet, the Kirghiz, sang "Kudadgu-Bilig" in a singsong. Istoma was forced to run behind him. In a white felt hat and a many-colored robe, Akhmet rocked back and forth in his saddle and waved his whip; he seemed to have forgotten his captive's

existence. The steppe horse, still unbroken, ran at a light trot. Istoma, his arms tied, ran behind. From the constant lashings of the horse's tail with their hellish whistling, his eyes were almost blinded; he could see nothing. The cloth of his shirt was torn into pieces that hung from his neck and his bound arms. Horseflies clustered thickly on his body and covered his shoulders in the green net of their greedy green eyes. A swarm of gadflies buzzed around him. His body was swollen with bites, with sunburn and the heat. Dried blood crusted his feet. Only a torn strip of his trousers remained.

When they reached the camp of the Horde, a flock of dark-skinned children surrounded him, but the Kirghiz raised his whip. Something resembling pity finally appeared on his coppery face. He shook his head and loosened the ropes, gave Istoma some milk, and said for the first time, "Ashai." A kindhearted old woman handed him a bucket of water, and he drank as if it were a gift from heaven. Here Akhmet sold his slave for thirteen rubles.

His new owner was much kinder, and from that moment on, life became easier. They took him off to bathe. They gave him a red calico shirt. "Yakshi Russ," said Akhmet, admiring him. For three days he rested in a dukhan. An old mountaineer talked with him, shared his bit of cheese with him, treated his feet. Whenever he sat on the ground beside the old man in his wide burka, his shaved head showing above the burka like a mountain eagle, Istoma began to feel better. He understood that this man was a captive just like him.

Soon they were met by a great slave caravan carrying Georgians, Swedes, Tatars, Russians, one Englishman. At that time Russian captives were selected to serve as personal bodyguards and crack troops of the Chinese Bogdokhan, as well as of the Turkish Sultan and the Great Mogul of India. Soon the caravan moved on again, the camels clanking their bells.

Their way led across barren sandy steppe, where only larks and lizards rustled in the brush, and occasionally a prairie owl could be seen, its fiery eyes from a distance resembling a wolf's as it dragged off a tiny rabbit clutched in its powerful talons. Istoma walked behind his camel across white salt flats and endless sand. In the caravan he had only Jadwiga for company. She had long golden hair and her blue eyes revealed a constantly laughing and teasing rusalka, the blue rusalka of her eye-lashes.

They had a private tent for her, set between the humps of her

camel, like two sandy hillocks covered with clumps of feather grass. She was covered from head to foot in white veils.

“Like on the sea! Just like on the sea!” she exclaimed sometimes and thrust her little hand from the folds of her tent.

Sometimes she would ask questions about the pasha: “What is he like? Is he gray-haired? Is he mean?” And then she would fall silent, lost in her thoughts. And whenever she put a flower wreath on her head, she suddenly looked like a pretty rusalka who had somehow found herself on the back of a camel. Blue-eyed, golden haired, wrapped in folds of half-transparent fabric. Did she ever think of the rites of Iarilo or the springtime rites of Lalia? But then an enormous butterfly drifting on the wind would graze her cheek, and she imagined it was fluttering at the window of her parents’ house, brushing against her mother’s wrinkled face. “I will fly away home just like this butterfly,” she whispered.

Meanwhile the mountains had come into view, and they stopped for the night in the foothills. From there they proceeded by water buffalo. These were powerful cattle with broad horns swept back along their necks, with very dark blue eyes that smouldered constantly with hatred for humans. The occasional hairs that protruded from their smooth hairless bodies served only to hold more securely to their bodies a coat of black dirt from the steppe; the buffaloes never shook it off, since it kept away the swarms of flies that tormented them. The buffaloes had been wearing this primitive garment of mud long before man wore clothes. They loved water more than anything, and once they caught sight of it they rushed into it so that only their eyes and nostrils were visible above the surface. They could spend days and nights like this.

On the black crest of one of these animals’ backs sat Jadwiga wearing a white Persian jacket and harem trousers. Already carefree, she made wreaths of flowers and played as she tore off petals: “He loves, me, he loves me not.”

Their road led through the mountains. Sometimes a snowy cliff shone down like the eye of God on the deserted peaks, and from such heights the blue sphere of the sea would be visible, its blueness somehow like the sky, where a lonely sail slipped away on its slantwise course.

Mansur spoke to them kindly. He joked a lot and often came by to adjust Jadwiga’s veil. “Allah is great,” he said to Istoma. “His will, I buy

you and I am your master, but maybe again he wills and then I kiss-kiss your hand.”

In Isfahan the caravan split up, and Istoma never saw Jadwiga again.

After almost a year, with long stopovers, Istoma reached India. His overseer Kunby was a Sikh, and it should be no surprise that a day came when Istoma turned to his teacher and said, “I too am a Sikh.” Kunby embraced the new convert joyfully. It should be no surprise that a day came when Istoma and Kunby ran away together.

Kunby taught him how to hide in a reed thicket whenever an elephant rushed by in pursuit, trampling the undergrowth; to sleep in the broad branches of trees, in places a scampering monkey had only recently quitted. Soon they began a wandering life together as two snake-charmers; their sleepy rattlesnake slept in a straw basket in a hollowed-out gourd; tame white mice that had been taught to hide lived in walnut shells.

He began to understand an anthill built of pine needles when he saw the swarming mountains of temples and bronze statues of Buddha many times larger than the size of a man. Once, in a cave in the forest, he saw a naked hermit whose beard reached to his feet. For several years the old man had been holding a piece of dry bread in his hand, and now his long twisting fingernails had grown through the bread. The old man had never shifted his position, his arms could no longer move, and his nails had grown right through the bread, like the twisted white roots of a plant. His aspect was terrifying. Surely the entire population of India must venerate him, Istoma thought. And the shadowy gods fluttered about him on the dark wings of nocturnal butterflies. The sage dreamed of leaving the haunts of human beings, erasing his paths wherever he went so that neither men nor gods could find him. He wanted to vanish, to vanish. Like his teachers, he had to conquer within himself the desire to become a god. And if someone, astounded by his presence, called him a god, the old man exclaimed “Slander!” in a harsh tone. Run away from vain ceremony, you are not a quadruped, you have no hooves. Be yourself, by yourself, by means of yourself, penetrate the depths of yourself, seek enlightenment in the rays of the intellect.

Upon heights even a swift would hesitate to reach he saw temples in the air, hanging like swallows above a terrifying precipice. The blue sea crashed at the foot of the precipice. Just as the eye completes and

glorifies the body, so this work of man quietly crowned the work of nature, rising severe and simple upon an unreachable cliff.

He saw temples that were clusters of underground caves, cut into the depths of nature's primordial stone. Eternal twilight reigned there; in places the monotonous sound of a stream could be heard. Richly dressed idols cut out of the stone crowded the walls, dripping with moisture, and with quiet smiles oblivious of everything they greeted visitors to the underground temple.

He saw dark throngs of elephants carved from the natural stone, their tusks raised in the air, guiding worshipers up an endless staircase leading to the summit of a sheer cliff.

Here and there on the approaches to an edifice perched snow-white peacocks, adored by the people but unsociable birds. Troops of wild monkeys, the inhabitants of abandoned temples, greeted them with screams of displeasure in a thousand different tones and pelted them with nutshells.

The trunks of stone elephants stretched out along the roads. There were temples that hid unobtrusively behind the lace of their walls, temples that raised their creeds to the summits of unsurmountable mountain cliffs, almost to the clouds, temples that resembled, in their striving upward, slender mountain women bearing jugs of water on their shoulders, and temples whose walls were formed by the blue of rivers and the white of clouds, austere flights of stairs into the heights of heaven or the depths of the underworld, and all of them were reminders that [. . .]

Deep in forest caves were hermits with their arms stretched toward heaven who had taken vows never to move. The space between them had long since filled up with spider webs. Mice scampered fearlessly over their feet and birds perched on their matted gray heads. These old men were fed by attendant novices.

And there were also devotees of the dark goddess Kali. In the soundless depths of black groves, beside thick polished shafts, they trapped their victims with silken nooses, and with a silent turn of a tourniquet they broke their necks in honor of the mysterious goddess of death.

And there were also religions that had no temples, because the greatest book is a book of blank pages, the book of nature written in the clouds, and the greatest prayer is the path that leads from birth to

death. He saw a holy man at the gates of a temple: he drank—with repugnance, as if it were a bitter medicine—water from an alms jug and was dressed in garments taken from the body of one who had died of the plague, from a corpse. “We must weep when we are born,” he said, “and laugh when we die.” And he wrapped himself in the sheet he had taken from the dead. Beside the temple he saw those possessed by demons; with unimaginable force they tore off their ropes and tried to run off into the forests.

Every morning at dawn Istoma saw a Brahman at prayer; he stood on one leg with the other placed against his ankle bone; turned toward the east, with his arms stretched wide, he seemed to embrace the sky. His dark body was completely still; his arms stretched out like the branches of a stately tree. He whispered, with lips that barely moved: “*Tat Savitur varenyam bhargo devasya dheemati dhiyo yo nah prachodayat*”—“Let us begin to think about the Sun God, who has appeared to enlighten our minds.” At that moment the cry of an awakening peacock drowned out his silent prayers, and the blue-green stars in the bird’s tail seemed like the dark blue eyes of heaven seen through the leaves of a tree.

Green gardens above the ruins of ancient temples, branches and trees rooting in the white stone of staircases—these were all reminders of the Brahman doctrine: All is vanity, all is deception. Do these things not resemble the distracted hand that sketches pretty little faces on the pages of an old book in an antique binding? And whatever you can see with your eye, whatever you can hear with your ear—all that is universal illusion, *maya*; universal truth cannot be seen by the human eye or heard by the human ear.

That truth is Brahma, the universal soul.

It has heavily veiled its face with a veil of dreams, a silver fabric of deception. And man’s poor intellect can perceive only the veil of truth, not the truth itself. The entire Indian nation seemed to Istoma to be one single striving for the truth, a striving and also a despair, when from the Hindu soul came the groan, “All is *maya*!” He would never forget the time he entered a green grove when suddenly the sound of wings broke the stillness, and a peacock flew up onto the white column of a temple covered in foliage: the wind of those snow-white feathers, that stream of eyes large and small, like a sky full of stars covering the silver body, like a blizzard of frozen gray stars, cold stars, showering



down at an angle, seemed to him the gathered eyes of all the gods, great and small, of that entire land.

Istoma spent five years in India. He went to Java and saw the famous temples, the smiling bronze Buddha that surpassed the proportions of a man as far as a man surpasses an ant, and dark masses of stone elephants beneath a waterfall. When he was drawn finally to return to his native land, he returned with a caravan and went back to visit his island, but found nothing there but a broken oar, an oar he once had steered with.

Istoma stood sadly for a while by the familiar waves and then went away again.

Where? Even he never knew.

[1918–19: T 548]

## *October on the Neva*

Early in the spring of 1917, Petnikov and I took the train to Moscow.

“We alone have rolled up *your* three years of war into a single spiral, a terrifying trumpet, and now we sing and shout, we sing and shout, drunk with the audacity of this truth: the Government of Planet Earth already exists. We are It.

We alone have crowned ourselves with the evergreen wreaths of Presidents of Planet Earth, inexorable in our sunburnt audacity. We are potters who fire the wet clay of humanity into vessels, containers of time, we organize hunting expeditions for the souls of men . . . .

‘What insolence,’ people will say. ‘No,’ others will reply, ‘they are saints!’ But we will merely smile at them and point a hand at the sun: ‘Put a leash around *his* neck, haul him before the bar of your dishwater justice—if you want. Charge him with inspiring these words and causing these angry glances. He is the culprit.”

The Government of Planet Earth  
(signed)

This appeal opened the poetic year. With it in hand, full of the highest hopes, two self-proclaimed Presidents of Planet Earth got on the Kharkov-Moscow train one evening.

Our task in Petrograd had been to add more signatures to the list of Presidents, so we began a kind of signature hunt, and the list soon included the names of two very enthusiastic members of the Chinese embassy, Ting I-Li and Yang Yui-Kai, a young Ethiopian named Ali Serar, the writers Evreinov, Zenkevich, Mayakovsky, Burlinuk, Kuzmin, Kamensky, Aseev, the artists Malevich, Kufin, Brik, Pasternak, Spassky, the aviators Bogorodsky, G. Kuzmin, Mikhailov, Muromtsev, Zigmund, Prokofiev, the Americans Crawford, Wheeler, and Davis, also Siniakova and many more.

At the Arts Festival on May 25th the banner of the Presidents of

Planet Earth, raised for the first time by the hand of man, flew from the lead truck. We outdistanced the whole parade. Thus was our banner first hoisted over the swampy soil of the Neva.

In the single-issue newspaper *Let's Grab Freedom!* the Government of Planet Earth published the poem:

Yesterday I whispered: "Coo! Coo! Coo!"  
And flocks of wars flew down to peck  
the grain from my hands.

It was a crazy summer. First a long confinement in a reserve infantry regiment, protected from the rest of humanity by a barbed-wire fence. Every night we used to gather by the fence and stare across the cemetery—across the lights of the city of the dead—at the far-off lights of Saratov, the city of the living, in the distance. I experienced a real hunger for space on trains as well, trains swarming with people who had rejected War, who glorified Peace, Springtime and her blessings. I made the trip from Kharkov to Kiev and Petrograd and back twice. Why? I don't even know.

I celebrated the arrival of spring near Kharkov, at the top of a flowering locust tree, on the very highest branch. A curtain of flowers hung between two pairs of eyes. Every movement of the branch covered me with flowers. Later I spent a night watching the starry sky from the top of a moving train. After considering the situation for a moment, I fell asleep without a care, wrapped in the gray overcoat of a Saratov infantryman. That time those of us who occupied the top deck were showered with black locust flowers from the locomotive's engine, and when the train for some reason made a halt in an empty field, we all ran down to the river to wash, and instead of towels we dried ourselves with leaves from the trees of the Ukraine.

"Petrograd, hell! Not any more! They should call it the Windy City!" People joked about the weather when we got back to the Neva that autumn. I found a place to stay in the village of Smolensk, where mysterious trains with no lights ran back and forth during the night, where armed gypsies pitched their tents in the swampy field, and lights burned day and night in the insane asylum. My companion Petrovsky was a great connoisseur of the supernatural. He called my attention to one particular tree, a suspicious-looking black birch that grew beyond the fence. Its leaves shook sharply in the slightest breeze. In the golden

light of sunset each black leaf stood out particularly ominously. He dreamed about that tree constantly, in exact detail, every night. Petrovsky began to talk very superstitiously about it. Later he found out that the tree grew beside a morgue where the bodies of those who had been killed were kept until the autopsy.

By this time the events had already started. We were living with a worker named Morev. Like many of the people who lived on the outskirts in those days, he used to collect bits of lead to be melted down into bullets. "You know, just in case."

My birthday. Sinister thunder over Tsarskoe Selo. Every night on my way home I used to walk past the city of the insane, and I always used to think of someone I knew in the army, Private Lysak, he was crazy and kept whispering over and over: "Truth, no truth; truth, no truth."

His quickening whisper would keep getting faster and faster and softer and softer, and then the poor guy would jump into bed and hide under the covers, pull them up until only his eyes were showing, as if he wanted to get away from someone, but he never stopped that inhumanly fast whisper. Then, very slowly, he would sit up in bed and his whisper would get louder and louder and he would squat there absolutely rigid, his eyes round as a hawk's and all yellow, and then all of a sudden he would straighten up and start shaking his bed and yelling "TRUTH," screaming like crazy so that the whole building echoed and the windows rattled.

"Where is truth?" he shouted. "Bring me the truth! Bring it here!"

Then he sat down. He had a long wiry moustache and yellow eyes, and he would sit there trying to catch sparks from the fire with his bare hands, only there wasn't any fire. By that time the attendants would come running from all over. It was like notes from the field of the dead, flickers of heat lightning over the distant field of death, a sign at the dawn of the century. He was a big powerful man, and he looked like a prophet in his hospital bed.

We all got together in Petrograd—me, Petnikov, Petrovsky, Lurie, sometimes Ivnev would be there and some of the other Presidents.

"The point is, friends, we weren't wrong when we said we thought the monster of war had only one eye left, and all we had to do was char the end of a log, sharpen it to a point, and ram it as hard as we could into that eye, blind him with it, and then hide ourselves in the fleece. Am I right when I say that? Am I telling the truth?"

“Absolutely right,” was the answer. So we decided to put out the one eye of war. The Government of Planet Earth published a little list: “Signatures of the Presidents of Planet Earth” on a blank page, nothing else. That was our first step.

“You dead must return and join us in the struggle! The living are worn out,” somebody shouted out loud. “We want to be a single host of warriors, the dead and the living together. Rise up, you dead men! Leave your graves!”

In those days the word *bolshevik* was frequently spoken with a strange pride, and it was soon clear that gunfire was about to blaze through the twilight of “today.”

Petrovsky, with his enormous Astrakhan fur hat, his transparent, emaciated face, would smile mysteriously.

“You hear that?” he used to ask, whenever a drainspout gurgled suddenly as we passed. “Whatever just went on in there, I’ll never make sense of it,” he announced, and began beating on the pipe mysteriously; his look said clearly that things would keep on going wrong.

He was in a sinister mood.

Later on, just before Kerensky’s downfall, I heard an astonished remark: “He’s been in for nine months now, but he’s so entrenched it will take cannons to get him out.” What was he waiting for? Was there anyone left who didn’t think he’s a pathetic laughingstock?

The Provisional Government was meeting in the Mariinsky Palace at that time, and one day we sent them the following letter:

*To the Provisional Government, Mariinsky Palace, City*

To Whom It May Concern:

The Government of Planet Earth at its meeting on October 22 has decided:

1. To consider the Provisional Government provisionally nonexistent, and the Head Improviser Alexander Fyodorovich Kerensky under close arrest.

“Heavy is the grip of the handshake of stone.”

Presidents of Planet Earth: Petnikov, Ivnev, Lurie, Petrovsky. Me-the-statue-of-the-Commendatore.

Another time we sent the following letter:

*To Alexandra Fyodorovna Kerenskaia, Winter Palace, City*

To Whom It May Concern:

Are you really still not aware that the Government of Planet Earth already exists? Yes, you are really still not aware that it already exists.

The Government of Planet Earth (signed)

One time we were all together and champing at the bit, so we decided to telephone the Winter Palace.

“Winter Palace? Operator, please connect us with the Winter Palace.”

“Hello, Winter Palace? This is the Moving-Van Workers’ Cooperative.”

“Yes, what can I do for you?” The voice was cold, polite, humorless.

“The moving-van workers would like to know how soon the occupants of the Winter Palace will be moving out.”

“What? What?”

“Are the residents of the Winter Palace planning to move?”

“Ah! And is that all you want to know?” We could hear a sour smile in the voice.

“That’s all.” We could hear someone laughing at the other end of the line. Petnikov and I began laughing on our end.

A look of dismay on the face of someone in the next room.

Two days later the cannons began firing.

*Don Giovanni* was playing at the Mariinsky that week, and for some reason we identified Kerensky with the Don. I remember how everybody in the opposite row of boxes winced and looked suspicious when one of us nodded his head, agreeing to the Don’s invitation before the Commendatore managed to do so.

A few days later the *Aurora* rode silently at anchor on the Neva across from the Palace, and the long cannon that had been installed on her deck looked like an unblinking eye of iron—a sea monster’s eye.

The story was that Kerensky had escaped wearing a Red Cross nurse’s uniform and that he had been bravely defended by his last line of defense, the Girl Scouts of Petrograd.

Nevsky Prospect was full of people, constantly crowded, and there was no shooting there at all. There were bonfires by all the raised bridges, guarded by sentries in heavy sheepskin coats with their rifles stacked, while densely packed formations of sailors in black moved silently from place to place, inseparable elements of the night itself. All you could make out was the rhythmic movement of pleats in their uni-

forms. By morning we found out that all the military academies had been taken over, one after the other. But the inhabitants of the capital were not involved in the struggle.

The situation in Moscow was entirely different. There the fighting was serious: we were holed up for a week. We spent the nights at Kazan station, sitting at a table with our heads on our arms; during the day we came under fire on Trubnaia and Miasnitskaia streets.

Other parts of the city were completely cordoned off. Still, once I walked around Moscow on the Sadovaia late at night, even though I was stopped and searched a couple of times.

The pitch dark was occasionally broken by passing armored cars; from time to time I heard shots.

And finally there was a truce.

We rushed outside. The cannons were silent. We ran through the hungry streets like kids after the first snowfall, looking at the frosty stars of bullet holes in windows, at the snowy flowers of tiny cracks; we walked through the shards of glass, clear as ice, that covered Tverskoi Boulevard. Pleasant, those first hours, when we picked up bullets that had smashed against walls, all bent and twisted, like the bodies of burnt-up butterflies.

We saw the black wounds of smoking walls.

In one store we saw a big gray cat. She meowed through the plate glass, trying to entice people into letting her out; but she remained in her solitary confinement for a long time.

We wanted to name everything after ourselves. In spite of the angry barrage of iron fired from Sparrow Hills, the city was whole.

I especially loved the south embankment of the Moscow River, with its three factory chimneys that looked like candles lit there by some determined hand, its cast-iron bridge and the crows that gathered on the ice. But over it all like golden onion domes towered the candelabrum of the three factory chimneys, held there by some enormous hand. An iron staircase led to their summits, and sometimes a man would climb to the top, a candle-priest burning before a face made of gray factory soot.

Whose face was it? Friend or foe? A forehead outlined by smoke, hanging over the city, wound with a beard of clouds? Or was it perhaps a new Qurrat al-Ain, dark-eyed, consecrating her wonderful silken hair to the flames that consume her, prophesying equality and equal rights? As yet we did not know. We could only look.

But these new candles now burn for an unknown hierarch, and they dominate the old sanctuary.

It was here too that I first looked into the Book of the Dead, when I saw the line of relatives by Lomonosov Park, a long line that filled the entire street by the entrance to the morgue.

The initial letter of a new age of freedom is often written with the ink of death.

[1918: T 544]



# *The Hunt*

Rabbit ran out into the clearing, where he saw the same old familiar bushes, but in the midst of them was an unfamiliar white snowdrift, and out of the middle of the snowdrift a most unusual black stick pointed straight at him. Rabbit raised his paw and bent his ear forward. Suddenly a pair of eyes shone from the snowdrift. They didn't look like rabbits' eyes, rising out of the snow like great stars shining with horror. Whose eyes were they? Were they the eyes of Man? Or had they come from the land of the Great Rabbit, a place where rabbits hunt men, where timid Man pokes his nose out of his burrow only at night, when he scurries to the vegetable gardens to gulp down a few sprigs or a leaf of cabbage, and instantly calls down the fire of merciless riflemen.

Of course, Rabbit thought, that's who it is, it's the Great Rabbit, he's come to deliver his little cousins from the awful scourge of Man. So I suppose I ought to perform the sacred rites of our land.

Rabbit hopped far out into the snowy clearing. He turned elegant somersaults in the air, leaping with outstretched paws. Just then the long black stick began to move. The snowdrift shifted, took a step forward. A pair of horrible blue eyes stared at him across the snow.

Ah, Rabbit realized, it isn't our great liberator. It's Man.

His body was fettered by fear. He stayed where he was, his entire body trembling, until the shot, with a splash of blood, hurled his body into the air.

[1919: NP 296]

## *The Scarlet Saber*

Several waves had washed across the entire country.

One wave had passed already—that was when they made railroad workers and timid schoolteachers learn the lullaby “Kote moi siri . . .” by heart, and the teachers didn’t know what to do, and tears of raucous laughter ran down their gray whiskers. And the time had passed too when the retreating Germans fired one last sinister cannon shot into the mirror of water, and a tree of water bearing a whole harvest of dead fish suddenly erupted like a whale blowing to the surface, defishing all the rivers at once, and dead men lay uncollected beside the roads with arms raised helplessly, and no one knew who shot them or when.

Then it was time for the Soviet wave.

Storekeepers stood forlorn beside their bread baskets. Young clerks looked soulfully into your eyes seeking a responsive chord, and sometimes as they slipped you something they said swiftly: “Looks like this will be the last time, you know. What I hear is, official regulations start tomorrow.”

The wind blew out of Moscow.

The uncompromising horseman of the starving North seemed to have entered the conquered land with a certain reluctance, as though at the very beginning he had met a woman with a pail or seen a rabbit cross the road with a strange boldness. The sail of the river Oka was raised high above the Ukraine, with the slogan “I am to be feared” blazoned across it.

The people who fled from Moscow as if it were the city of plague, people who had gotten seats on a train through some unholy alliance of God and the Devil, who kept hearing oldtimers on the journey remark sadly, “Say hello to white bread for me, will you,” as though anyone old and gray had no hope of ever seeing it again—these same people were horrified to see the specter of Moscow chasing after them, the yellowing teeth of an old horse leaning down over them, ripping

up the flowers. Paradise—paradise with a machine gun at the entrance to keep the inhabitants from running screaming into the night—that’s what the North was like. The Civil War was a horse that bent down its yellow teeth and chomped and ate the grass of human beings.

The Bolshevik wave had subsided. Nothing had helped. The bright boastful posters at streetcorners hadn’t helped—the taking of Odessa with shells exploding like silly red carnations in puffballs of white smoke, and Prince Bova from the fairytales conquering the city by the sea. The diagram of Soviet-controlled territories hadn’t helped, with the outline left unfinished, like the hand of a clock that had stopped.

Everyone in the city knew the workers were against it. They whispered that news on streetcorners, talked about it at the family dinner table. Everything had changed. People had stopped being people. Their skin covered their bodies the way the face of a watch conceals a complicated arrangement of screws and wheels; people’s bodies were missiles in human form, set to explode; they were ruthless puppets ready to blow up or fire back at you, ruthless dolls. And if, in some backstreet, you did happen to encounter a human glance, you avoided it as carefully as if it were the tripwire on a land mine. And sometimes beneath the swarms of faces, the swarms of eyes, you seemed to see the intricate plans and structures of fate, full of scientific secrets; and words and deeds were only some sort of obscure dawn, a covered face, a mask that concealed the polygon, the mainspring, of fate.

Whether in a field in the open, in a park, or at a party, two people meeting were like two wind-up dolls with terror painted on their faces, dolls with deadly clockworks inside them, uncertain whether they would explode at the touch of another hand, at the words “How do you do?” or “Have you got the time?” Death had wired their circuits. Where was the expansive good humor of former days? And as the ground slipped slowly from beneath your feet there arose a great wave of voiceless disorder, followed by the sound of shots being fired. Every day those shots were printed out in heavy type. Until at last one day you screamed, “Where can I hide that I may not behold thy face?” and you began to run; and you ran out of the city and into a quiet garden, into a lush green orchard where the cherry trees and the apple trees were blossoming and the only sounds were the murmur of doves and the mewing of orioles.

But even in that secluded world of turtledoves and orioles, an occasional shot was heard. Into that faraway garden a stone fell, and for two days the waters were troubled. P. arrived. He pushed open the gate, walked up to the steps of the house, and fired twice, once into the air and once into the ground, and then went up onto the darkening veranda. We used to be friends.

His white-blond hair, which I remember in soft curls, was now a bowl cut brushed smooth, Cossack-style. His pale blue eyes were good-humored and insolent. He had a long face and a mouth that expressed resolute good-humor, and there was something wolflike or doglike about his strong teeth. His face was as pale as it had always been, almost like linen, only a bit yellowed.

The railings of the deadwood fence that surrounded the porch were wound about with an old vine in thick sea knots that squeezed the deadwood like a snake turning in circular patterns. A throng of wheels and vines rose from the dead loop and fell in broad leaves and millennial halfhitches around the tormented trees. Two swallows rested in a nest made of mud and straw, twittering ceaselessly, flying out and back, and perching like two little boats drawn up on the seashore.

He sat down at the table and turned back the sleeves of his reddish-yellow zipun; it hurt your eyes to look at.

"Well, *pani*, here I am!" He puffed out his words as he said them. He paused for a moment. "Well, *khloptsi*, what have you got to say for yourselves? Oh, here they are," he said, referring to the high-pitched voices of the women, who were chattering noisily and joyfully behind the door, and he laughed and showed his wolf's teeth.

"Is it really you?" "I can't believe it!" "It can't be!" The sisters spoke their lines in one voice, almost as if they had learned them by heart, and they sang and giggled and bounced (it was their braids that bounced).

"A match, who has a match? Many, give me the mirror and the lamp." Hasty whispers could be heard from time to time.

The oldest sister came out wearing a shabby red shawl and a restrained smile. She was barefoot and walked with a deceptive cat-walk; her dress was made of white duck; ample, she was almost overweight, her face was beautiful, perfectly regular in the Russian style. Only with a constant playfulness in her loving, blue-gray eyes.

"Eh, hey! What a witchy wonder you are," he said suggestively by

way of greeting. She sat down across from him, leaning in close, and sparks showered from the black pupils of her dark-gold eyes.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked. Her lips quivered with a sly, barely noticeable quiver, a sign of interior laughter, the way a cat with a bird beneath its paw quivers all over and lashes its tail.

“Thinking about! Not thinking about a damn thing. Or here’s what I think: a man like me, I have respect for everything around me, I was born that way. Take a pig, for instance. I see a pig go by, I respect him; big fat healthy thing, gets whatever he wants, goes by singing his song. I go out in the woods or the fields, I respect the woods, all those trees, all that grass. I go for a swim, it’s because I respect the river. I do, I really do. I respect everything. And I expect a little respect in return. I really do! Hey, boys, how you all doing? Things sort of so-so? I see an old buzzard must have ate up all your pigeons over the winter. That’s ok, you’ll get a fine bunch yet, just fine. You bend any horse-shoes? No long pants yet? Or just a coat over a bare belly?”

“Things aren’t too good, but no matter, we’re ok!” One of the “boys” opened his shirt and showed a bare belly.

“My girlfriend died, you know that, don’t you.” He lowered his eyes as if he were at a prayer meeting and looked somber.

“What kind of girl you got?” asked one of the boys innocently. “A wood one or a tin one? Or you got a gingerbread girl?”

“Hey, you trying to make a fool out of me? Here I come all this way to visit you and you try to make a fool of me. Complete fool. When I say girlfriend, I mean girlfriend.”

And then the second sister came running in. Her dark eyes were alive and intelligent, black as coal, a profusion of dark hair, not too long, falling onto her shoulders (I’d seen the same hair before a copper-gold color—peroxidized.) She wore a dark-blue Moldavian blouse, her body naked under the blue denim. Her face, the ever-changing shape of her lips, made a painting full of life and movement, which changed as rapidly as courses in a good restaurant. She skipped up, clapping her hands, and hugged and kissed him.

“Petya, darling! You sweet darling! Lord, am I glad to see you!”

Her exclamations fluttered like birds at mating season.

“Oh, honey, it does me real good to see you too, I feel just like a nightingale got caught by the cat!” He sighed this out, but bit his lip to swallow back a self-satisfied laugh.

“Well now, Petya, tell us all about it. How come you’re here?”

“What do you mean, how come! I just wanted to see the world before I die, and let the world see me.”

“Oh, you’re not getting ready to die, are you? That must mean you’re getting married! I’m right, aren’t I? And you’ve been out scrounging flour for your girlfriend, she must be getting hungry.”

“This sure is turning out to be a ladies’ evening, now isn’t it, girls, all these pretty ladies and one really good-looking man.”

“Why, honey, I believe you’re starting to talk a little wild!”

“Oh now you just torment me to death. Drive me right out of my mind. Why, you’re so goddam pretty I can’t even look at you any more!”

“What a darling!” the two sisters cried, “Isn’t he gorgeous!”

“Come on out into the garden, honey, I want to show you the flowers, planted them myself.”

“Don’t want to see any gardens, don’t want any flowers. I just want to sit here forever, right where I am and smoke my pipe. Hey, boys, give me a light, one of you, will you?”

There were three of the boys. The youngest had the body of a champion wrestler and the gentleness of a child. On the table lay a skull, a big old thing—made of clay, evidently—that looked like a cross between a bowl and a butterfly, with a tired worn-out expression and eyes raised to heaven, frozen in an attitude of prayer and petition to an unknown god; the teeth were ancient, acorn-colored; the skull lay there on its side as if to say that art flourished here, that this place was a sanctuary of art.

And the moment you looked at the oldest sister and the luxuriant, mud-dark hair that fell to her waist, you realized that today she was the Magdalene, praying to a skull in some forest hermitage, that there was some bond between them. At least you understood that this was the scenario for today’s performance. The dress of white duck, the luxuriant dark hair that fell in waves with wild primitive abandon, a smooth wave falling upon her breast; her tender eyes, the abashed blue eyes fixed so lovingly on the guest, the juicy red lips of a young woman pressed amorously together.

Do you know what it means to have a match, in a quiet backwoods farmhouse in the middle of an orchard? It is the emperor and divinity of country evenings. Thousands of faces from the pages of books took up their stations like the change of seasons, one after the other, on the

face of one of the sisters. The sisters worked and helped each other like busy bees. A loud laugh, spurts of giggling, running feet trying to escape the laughter, interrupted their work from time to time. A thousand sweet eyes, each different from the others, like flowers or butterflies that live for only a single day, appeared and disappeared on their faces. One face became a meadow full of faces, fertile soil where one crop of flowers replaced another and one swarm of souls replaced another. How many times does a burnt-out match save us from madness in the monotony of rural life! Just as a seat in a train is occupied first by one, then by another human being, just so a living human head becomes a stopping place for voyaging human faces.

The quiet contented laughter of the group was interrupted by the oldest sister's voice: "All right now, you come on over here. Come on, come on, darling, don't be stuck-up, lay your head down here. Just relax, don't make faces. That's right, just like that, just lie down right over here!"

She laid his head in her lap and held it with one hand, while with the other she stroked and caressed it, just the way you'd stroke and caress a lazy fat cat, all the while moving her triumphant red lips. Then suddenly, in a wild burst of energy, like a bird of prey, like an owl suddenly awake in the night, she seized the skull and set it over his head.

"Ha-ha-ha!" the visitor laughed. "Ha-ha-ha!" he laughed again, holding his stomach, and then he leapt up and lowered his head inside the high collar of the yellow-red rainbow zhupan; he began to dance wildly around the veranda, making himself enormously tall, throwing his knees wildly about. It was terrifying. It looked to me like dark-eyed death itself, with great dark eyes, dancing around the veranda in blind leaps; he almost seemed astonished at what was happening, taking giant steps, swooped wildly like a bat in daylight. Then he dropped heavily onto a bench.

"Ha-ha-ha! This kid's all worn out!"

His silver saber lay on the table beside him; the handsome martial steel was engraved with the gold inscription of an unknown flyer and his own name. Tell me, silver streak, who was your first master, how did he die? Bathed in clouds, falling through aerial potholes, following silvery paths through the clouds, from the farthest depths of the cloudy deep, of the blind burrow, heaven splashing drops of blue fire—whom on the distant earth did you think of then, as you flew like a winged

bird? And did she have dark eyes, a pair of black flowers on them, or were they blue with divine silky lashes, like light-bearing fire, full of tenderness? Did they burn deep with love and look proudly at you, sovereign of the blue heavens, and did a blue virgin flame, like a bright light opening springtime's windows, burn in her eyes?

"It was a present from the Colonel," said the visitor, touching the saber. "And I cut down the scum with it myself!" he added boastfully. "I've been through a lot."

The three boys clustered around the weapon, took it, and moved away from the grown-ups. The youngest was a big boy indeed, not a boy to pass through every doorway.

"Now I'm headed for the Carpathians, Galician mountaineers, you know, and maybe the fresh air will help me break the habit, you know, that scummy Russian coke, god it's hard. Back in Moscow all the cab-drivers, when it gets late and they start nodding out, they snort a nose-ful and start feeling good and get sky-high, and then they forget all about feeding their horses or getting back to the stables. 'I wanna feel good, feel good, wanna get sky-high.' And they got witch girls in those mountains. I just want to find a good woman, like you, honey, or you, a pretty little bluebird with big eyes, and settle down somewhere. It's about time, I've done enough running around. Plenty of it. Time to stop. There, now I've told you everything."

The oldest sister set the dark, knowing skull on the black silk of her hair. The two heads were held in some kind of mirror reflection, one on top of the other, somewhere beyond time.

"Well, hello there, Miss Death!"

She stood there barefooted with her hair hanging loose and that terrifying second skull; her golden blue eyes shrank to black points, gleaming with luxurious light. Her white dress seemed ceremonial; her luxurious golden hair shone strangely with a thousand fires. An invisible light surrounded her shapely, somewhat heavy body. The dark, knowing skull stared ceremoniously out of big eyes. Something secret breathed in the air, something winged hovered in the air over the seven of them.

"Anyway, my girlfriend isn't dead," the visitor said, lighting his pipe and shifting the position of his legs.

"Sweetheart, you mean she's alive?"

"Alive, and married to somebody else."



The dark skull sat on the beautiful girl's dark hair as if on a sacrificial altar; both skull and hair were the same color. The girl smiled silently, compressing her lips, as if ready to break out into a laugh. If the mystery of art is possible on canvas, on wood, gesso, and other dead objects, it is certainly possible on living faces: at the moment her eyebrows seemed divine above her blue eyes with their eternal changes like the shifting colors of sky in the constant play of the weather, like the luxurious dark scarlet of her full ripe mouth.

"A butt!" One of the brothers dashed up and snatched the extinguished cigarette end and inhaled luxuriously, with much noisy puffing of air.

"Why, didn't you expect to see me? How come I'm here? Well, well, the fact is I was a kind of esaul in the cavalry detachment. I wiped out a bunch of Petliura's men. I had all kinds of guys with me: Chinamen, Old Believers, Spartacists, Hungarians. They were good fighters, all of them. We'd come roaring into town, singing our songs, all of us dressed any old way: black burkas, sermiagas, red zhupans, real rifferaff, but we all wore red ribbons tied around our hats. We were wild men. And those Old Believers, were they ever great guys!"

"Really? You're not lying?" the oldest sister laughed. "That means you're a real fighting man, a hero on horseback." Her cat's eyes laughed, and her cheeks shook.

"We rode and rode, and we'd whistle, and the red ribbons on our straw hats would flap red on our shoulders, like some kind of bird you'd never seen before flapping and hopping in a field. And we all wore these red flannel shirts. We'd strike up a song, a real holler, I can tell you. Anyway, I sent those scum off to a better world and I didn't even shake when I did it. What's the matter, you think it's all a joke? When you're in a battle your heart pounds, believe you me! Starts to fly like a big old bird. You cut those scum right down, just like chopping firewood, and then after it's all over you get stinking drunk and stagger around, you're drunk on war, you stand there in a blackout with your head spinning. And later on you can't remember a thing."

"Not a thing? Not one teeny-weeny thing?"

"You walk tall, you're looking good. They say people get drunk on God—well, we get drunk on war. Cavalry's going every which way, trying to get away from the main infantry attack. The whole push of the battle is going in one direction. You spur up your horse, your zhu-

pan looks like blood on fire, you got your saber out, they fire at the enemy, dust, ooooh, aaah! the roar starts, the boys in red ride off in the dust. They cut down everything they meet, slaughter them. Jeez, it's terrible to talk about. But it's great. No, I'm not the same person I used to be, I've seen a lot, I've gotten back at the scum. I swear to God, I never felt sorry for them."

"My, so you're a real Russian fighting man now! The orphans' protector!"

That was a letdown. He sat there crestfallen.

"Oh, darling, we know you! You probably sat around back in the quartermaster camp or sold hay behind the lines, and then you come here and show off and stick your nose in the air!"

The boys had raised their voices, arguing and quarreling about something.

"You don't want to believe me, you don't have to. And I met a lot of Serbs, they're really very honest and all of them have dark eyes. And the Huzuls, they're ok too—they wear peacock feathers stuck in their straw hats and they'll fight to the last man."

The boys had been examining the saber closely and suddenly burst out laughing with delight.

"What's the matter, you guys? What's the fuss about?"

"Ha-ha-ha! The saber! Look at this saber! It's even got blood on it, real pretty blood, just like little girl's blood! It's brand new blood! He goes around cutting peoples' heads off, then he goes and scrunches up like a grasshopper by a window and paints his saber with red paint. He gets his blood in a hardware store, or maybe he gets it from his girlfriends!"

"What do you mean, you call me a liar? Try and prove it!"

"Real blood gets dark, but this is all red spots, brand new red spots, it's still fresh."

"What a sweetheart, what a sweetheart! He even paints his saber!"  
The sisters spoke the phrases fast.

"I never would have thought it! He paints his saber, what a wonderful idea! That's too much! Come here and let me hug you!" She stood up, the oldest sister, the experienced one, tall, fat, passionate, and stretched out her arms.

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"Once, just once, sweetheart, come on, just once!"

"Just blow me a kiss from there, ok?" He gave a little laugh and

crossed his arms, ducked under the table to get away from her still outstretched arms.

“Oh, sweetheart, just once, just one little one!”

“No, come on now, for godssakes, just blow me a kiss!” He jumped back.

“Well, if you don’t want to you don’t have to, you’re still a sweetheart anyway. Sweetheart sweetheart sweetheart!” She took out her needle and thread.

“So if you have to execute somebody, this is what you do, you just go up to him and bang! Shoot him right in the forehead, and down he goes! Only it’s weird when you shoot somebody in the head and they’re still standing there like a fencepost, only their face is a mess, blood splashes in your eyes. So what you have to do is, you shoot them again, right in the middle of the mess.”

“What a liar! What a fibber! My god, what a liar!” The sisters were flushed with excitement. “Let me see your eyes, you sinner, your sexy man’s eyes, you magnificent gorgeous hunk, you murderer you!”

“Ha-ha-ha! So that’s how you got blood on your saber! You’d put makeup on your conscience! Rouge and powder on your soul! What a great warrior you are! ‘There’s this little girl, I shake my saber at her, she starts to scream, and all of a sudden, bam, blood!’ And I thought it was really blood, I even got scared, then I took a good look at the blade and it’s red paint, you can tell it was smeared on by somebody, there’s even two fingerprints. What a sweetie! Went to all this trouble all scrunched up by the window and then brought it over to show us.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Such a sweetie, paints up his saber and tells everybody it’s blood, he wants to scare us all.”

Sister number three: “Grasshopper, you’re adorable, I just adore you! Can you believe it, he painted his saber!” She was in seventh heaven.

Number two: “My dear, I don’t know what’s happened to you. A while ago you were a brave soldier, and now all of a sudden you’re a clown!”

One of the boys: “He’s an artist with the saber too! We met your brother, and you’re both alike, you’re both a pair of fakers!”

“So what? I studied art, what do you want me to paint, my face? I’m a man, not a woman!”

“Your face is always dirt-pale, now it looks like it’s on fire.”

“Look, we kiss with sabers. Clang clang. Bright, angry, frozen kisses. You’re right, it’s paint, not blood, I don’t deny it.”

“Then what about the executions, my dear? Is that art too, painting on the sword edge of silence?” She leaned toward him and took his head between her hands. She began to laugh: “So who are you really? You work like an artist, you paint heads on the blade of your saber. What a sweetheart you are, what a sweetheart! A man after my own heart.”

“Can’t you see it? A very dark night, and ‘Two horsemen exchange their sabers’ kiss?’ ‘Still is the night.’”

“What a sweetheart! What a sweetheart!”

“‘And the grass about them taller than a man’s height.’ Don’t believe me if you don’t want to! That’s just the way things are: you women paint your faces, I paint my saber, what’s so unnatural about that? Let’s forget the whole thing!”

He tied a kerchief tight around his head and put on the skull, holding it with his hand. Leaping wildly like a blind man he scattered his audience and made them cower in a corner. Terrifying blind man’s bluff! A tall wild shadow waving his arms and wearing a pale skull, he whirled around the veranda and suddenly broke out into an unexpected hopak that made the floorboards shake. He tore off his zhupan and threw it on the ground, and looked all the more terrifying in a blue silk shirt, savagely kicking out his legs and waving his bony arms.

The brothers, a sturdy bunch, took advantage of the moment; they grabbed the warrior by the arms and legs and rushed him into the garden. Waves of masculine laughter rolled behind them. “Oh-ho-ho!” One of them gasped for breath. “Oh-ho-ho!” Another was worn out laughing. They all disappeared into the twilight. “Grasshopper,” you could hear them saying. “A real grasshopper!”

“Come on, come on, that’s enough! Come on! I’m on my way to Galicia! That’s where the Navs live: from the front they’re women with white breasts, just like ordinary mortals, but in back there’s no skin and you can see all their guts, just bloody meat. Like the insides of a clock. And terrible rusalkas and their eyes are all painted too. The goblins won’t even go near her. They catch one, they throw her right into the fire.”

They dragged the worn-out “grasshopper” by his arms and legs up onto the veranda.

“Come and have something to eat. There’s pastry and milk and lots else. You know, when a rough fighting man starts eating, he really looks a lot like a grasshopper, especially his mouth, it’s so hard and thin, and his big greedy eyes. Oh, exactly like a real grasshopper, and I’d catch him and stick him on a pin! Ha-ha-ha! Right on a pin!”

“Ok, if I’m a grasshopper, then I’m a grasshopper. These vareniki are terrific, just the way I like them! You got any with cherry filling, little lady? Artists have sharp eyes, just like hungry people. The vareniki are great, nice and juicy, white and full of butter, just like little piggies! I already ate ten of them, right down the hatch!”

“You ought to stuff that little piggy in his mouth and shut him up with it. He talks bullshit and doesn’t even know it.”

His sister flared up. “What an ignoramus, what a lout, you leave the table right now!”

“Oh phooey, forget it. You leave yourself, if that’s the way you feel.”

“No, I mean it, what an ignoramus! Don’t ever let me hear you talk that way in front of a guest. You puppy, how dare you? How rude! You spoiled brat, you leave this table right now!”

“Right, is that any way to treat a guest? You go off to war to get rid of the scum, you wave your saber, you command a battalion, you ride a fine white horse, and then when you come for a visit a bunch of boys grab your arms and legs and drag you out into the garden, and call you a hungry grasshopper. How about a little respect? I deserve better treatment than this! And big strong boys too. You come back with me, you can join up in my outfit.”

“Well? Are you feeling better now?” the oldest sister asked slyly and mysteriously.

First sister: “Sweetie! Darling!”

Second sister: “He’s divine, I adore him!”

First sister: “How I love him!”

Second sister: “How I love him! Who wants some tea?”

“Well, sisters and brothers, what can I tell you? You give me vareniki, I’ll tell you stories. Barter system. So anyway we captured this town. There were a lot of them there. Wait a minute, time for a song while the tea’s brewing.”

And they all sang a song.

“So we captured this town. Started shooting the scum. I gave no quarter.”

“Oh-ho-ho. So you really went along chopping off heads, did you?”

“What do you think, I was afraid to? Just goes to show, you ladies don’t know me well at all. Where do you think I got this silver weapon?”

Oldest brother: “I bet I know! He probably went down by the river, and whenever he saw a snake he cut off its head, that’s why he says it was scum. He sees a little frog, he kills that too, with his scarlet saber. He killed so many the river started to complain. He kept on thinking they were people.”

Oldest sister: “Is that what happened, was that the kind of scum you killed or not? Answer up! God, you’re slow!”

“Oh, now look, I got all the ladies against me again. This is what happens when the ladies get in charge.”

Third sister: “He flew right into the flame, just like a moth.”

Oldest sister: “A real friend you are!”

“Your horse just rambles along, all around the boys are singing: ‘Oh I wish the girls were apples, up on an apple tree,’ and it sounds so sad you just want to cry. The flags are flying in the breeze. And there’s girls all around with pretty dark eyes, just like fairytales in dresses, and they’re saying: ‘Look at that one in the red zhupan! Isn’t he dreamy! Oh, mama, isn’t he cute!’ So I was a success. Only they missed their chance. All you do is just keep riding and whistling.”

“Oh, how he hurt me!” From the garden came the voices of the farmgirls; they peeked in as they went by with their spades on their shoulders. “Oh, how he hurt me! I loved him and he hurt me.”

“And I got this Cherkas weapon. When there’s a war you can get whatever you want.”

“So is it true, did you kill ninety of those scum?”

“Maybe it was ninety, maybe it wasn’t, but I swear I got at least thirty for sure.”

“Don’t you feel sorry for them?”

“Did they feel sorry for me when I was in Chernigov? We just sat there in that stockade and waited to die. My brother flew in with the partisans, smashed into town on an armored car, broke down the stockade to rescue me. And we got away. Look, I’ve seen it all. You’d be the same. You’d find the guts for it. You’re grown men, even if inside you’re just kids.” What do you want me to do, feel sorry for them like I was a woman? You women can shed all the tears you want—we’re men, we

shed blood. To each his own. Two guys grab each other by the throat, who wins? If you don't get him, he'll get you, that's the way it is. There's not enough uniforms, you have to protect your clothes, so you take them off and go around in your underwear. Guys come in all covered with sawdust, with hay, from wherever they captured someone: a hayfield, a barn, a cellar. What happened one time, they brought in these five hostages, stood them up barefoot in their underwear and shot them, but one got away. We counted, they were all lying there, except one was missing. We saw bloody tracks leading into the woods. Well, there was a lot of blood, he'd probably die in the woods, so we said the hell with him, serves him right. And two days later he shows up at our post barefoot, in his underwear, dripping blood, and he laughs and says: 'Ok, I ran away. So shoot me. Only do it now.' Well, I didn't force him, right?

"Ok, tell me straight: did that really happen or not? Otherwise you'll really get it . . . ."

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What was P. like? Was this really the same man who used to go around Moscow in a big black Astrakhan fur hat, white as death, snorting cocaine in cafés all night long? Three times he tried to hang himself, once he swallowed poison. A homeless, rootless wanderer, an angel with wolf's teeth. There was a period when Moscow's women painters loved to paint his physique. And now look—a fighting man in a zhupan the color of blood, a hotshot with a silver belt and a Cherkes dagger. Everybody recognized him; they were probably afraid of him. A dangerous man! They called him grasshopper because of his hungry protruding eyes, his fast talk, and his squashed nose.

In a bedroll stitched out of a burka, in a big black Astrakhan fur hat [. . .] He was a suspicious character in the big city, and no friend of the law. Sometimes he went around imitating the prophets (there's a thought—a prophet sweeps into the big city like a snowstorm—what would he do?). Thin, white as a candle, he lived on black bread and golden honey and English tobacco, a real eccentric, a seeker of truth constantly at odds with society. Women painters painted him naked many times, when he was still good-looking. A lame friend of his called Devil cut him down from the rafters three times. It got to be a kind of divine law: P. hangs himself, D. cuts him down.

Everyone knew he had run three times around Our Saviour's Ca-

thedral with its cloud of spirits carved in stone, leaping wildly over the steps with the police on his heels because he'd stolen some rare prints from the Rumianstev Museum.

He loved anything strange and mysterious. And he lied like a trooper at the drop of a hat.

[1921: T 557]



## *Before the War*

“In two months I’ll be dead! To the Prussian front! Hoorah! Hoorah!” shouted the lieutenant, waving his saber.

“Hoorah!” the rest repeated, rising from their places and looking warmly and feelingly into his eyes.

“Death for sure! Hoorah for my death!” he shouted feverishly. He trembled and seemed about to choke with happiness. The rosy hue of a wine-induced dawn colored his cheeks, rosy cheeks, and in two months he was sure he’d be dead!

He stood there and kept talking. His naked saber—citizen of the coming war—swam above his head, cutting the air into slices, sectioning the dim light.

The saber danced like a shameless stripper, letting her last garments fall, reflected in all eyes present, reflected in the mirrors of the club room packed with young men in uniform, in the silvery surfaces of the walls and ceilings of the cellar room; the room was like a mirror-lined box. “God save the Tsar,” sang the brazen throats of bagpipes that suddenly remembered their duty.

They came out into the freezing cold. They got into sleighs and drove off into various sections of Moscow, beyond the snow-covered gates of the city. They still clutched bottles of wine. Men dressed in the fresh graves of flowers and animals, muffled head to foot in graves. Wasn’t that once a sheep, the pretty white fleece that now warms that lieutenant’s neck with the breath of death? Wasn’t that a mass grave of flax flowers from the fields of Pskov, there where the white linen of a shirt cuff outlines a hand holding a wine bottle? Wasn’t it all one huge mass graveyard, covered with snow? Wasn’t that some dark animal from the other side of the globe, from the deep forests of America, clinging there to the skull of that artist, casting a living breathing shadow over the harsh furrows of his forehead, over the artist’s burning eyes? Once it chased sleepy birds in the leafy woods; now, like a black grave, it keeps a man from the cold with the warm night of its glimmering

downy fur, with the dark shining of its thick rays, a warrior posthumously protecting a man from spearpoints of cold. It was life lived in the dwelling of another's death, these men wrapped in freshly dug graves, readying themselves to leap into death in order to return the favor, to become soil for plants to grow again and thus to fuel herbivorous furnaces.

"We will do our duty": they all kept repeating those words.

What cow, what white or spotted cow, would cram her dragging udder with the soul of that lieutenant? What field of flowers—forget-me-nots, perhaps, or yellow buttercups—would become the second soul of this lieutenant, this handful of earth, this reasoning timepiece, this wave falling backwards into the dark earth, into earth suddenly whispering into his ear: "My son! Come back! I have something to tell you!" They drove on, some frowning, some smiling, all silent. The lieutenant stood up from time to time, and his naked saber traced a pattern in the air, something like a figure eight.

The vehicle circled through the outskirts of Moscow, blowing a horn of powdery snow behind it, moaning like a wounded animal. A group of those who had sworn to die in the coming war sat in the glass-enclosed cage like demanding divinities of speed. The monster flew on, raising on high a glassy Jaroslavna in a dead faint, carrying her glass form in its powerful black arms like some maddened Negro unknown to Pushkin's poems, ravishing his prey.

R-r-r! the monster roared wildly, stabbing the darkness with its cold white tusks. Others like it responded with the moan of wild geese and vanished into the embraces of the cold. I began to wonder about war. What did it mean to people? Was it all a great booo? At one that morning, on our way home, the panting monster crashed into a road barrier by the Triumphal Arch and knocked it from its supports. We beat upon the neck of the dying animal, which had sunk quivering to its knees. The policemen who had ambushed us took all our names; they seemed rather upset that we were all still in one piece and able to walk. We climbed out of the wrecked monster into the snow, utterly unimpressed that the snow-covered pole beneath our chins had not sliced our heads from our bodies. The monster shook in its death throes, breathed its last beside us; its eyes were broken, those magic brilliant eyes that pierced the black haystack of night like a pitchfork and tossed it over its shoulders.

Now I understood what war would be like: we would all pile out

of our comfortable seats in a confused scramble, we would land on the ground, but we would have smashed a barrier! We looked at our confederate lying shamefully in the snowdrift, we felt our heads, and we saw they were all still firmly attached to our shoulders.

This little note from the future, cleverly delivered by circumstance and unnoticed by the bystanders, had suddenly revealed the essence of war to me. The great blueprint for the war's enormous edifice had yet to be revealed, and yet here it was, a couple of words in all, hinting at the meaning of the great labor ahead.

I am able to perceive the angle of great events that time spaces out over several years, in the smallest traces of the present moment. In this accident I saw tracers that lit up the future.

Yes, we were close to the very point of the angle, and the little line of our accident became the gigantic line of the war, cutting the edge of the blueprint at the same angle as its prototype. Yes, a barrier would be smashed! And we, of course, would all be thrown to the ground.

I watched a friend of mine affectionately as he recited: "I shall split you open, you stinking corpse, from here to Alaska." His powerful voice crushed in its terrifying embrace the whole childish structure of ideas that were still unwilling to die.

The faces of those who had witnessed the accident all expressed the same attitude: "It's none of my business."

The iron figures of the Triumphal Arch, their trumpets at their lips, looked down at us . . . . The sound of war's power was growing like the whistle of an approaching train; war laid down ace after ace of its best regiments, opened deck after deck of fresh human cards. To ward off a headache, the losing gambler tied a cloud around his head. This red calico kerchief gave him an oriental appearance.

The sound of war had reached the upper limits of human hearing, where the sensation of sound becomes a sensation of pain, and in the streets hurtling madly toward chaos you could occasionally see a street-car, No. 6 or No. 13, stockstill, full of wounded.

"We're all going to die": I heard this muffled pronouncement from the ranks of a handsome regiment, marching off businesslike to the western front. Younger and younger generations were tossed into the furnace. Occasionally from the illuminated darkness of a building came the powerful sound of mournful prayers; a thousand throats sang hymns before they marched away. "Of course on the other side the enemy is praying to Him too," I thought. And suddenly before me

there appeared the image of a poor little Chinaman, his pigtail pulled by a dozen hands. What could he do in this crowd? I began to feel sorry for whatever being they prayed to. A wave of the future was rushing along a street that still smelled of yesterday's words and concepts. Only the very highest attics were safe from the flood of a different era. The cellars were all flooded.

I whispered curses at the cold triangles and arcs that feasted on human beings, raising goblets brimming with drink, wetting their gray whiskers in mead like princes of life, and I saw the fists of cripples raised against their shadows with the same muffled threat. I could see very precisely the cold "Tatar yoke" of hordes of triangles and storms of circles as it closed down upon us human beings the way evening closed down on day, like an army of shadows approaching the hour, like war's witching hour; I remember distinctly how the lentils that filled the infantry mess kits suddenly became lenses of rays of vengeance, focusing them all on one spot and setting them afire like kindling.

I remember how at first one catch phrase ran through the ranks of the entire army: "That's just the way things are." It was spoken with a laugh and an ironic grin of mutual understanding, out of earshot of officers, by bearded oldtimers. Then there was another: "Don't be too sure," spoken gloomily by a harsh old fighting man like the first gleam of a bloody dawn. These were two chinks in the world of those days.

And I couldn't help wondering whether that curiously harsh "Don't be too sure" wasn't a reference to "a war to the finish." Perhaps number, perhaps a triangle, kept herding these waves toward the west. Perhaps that was what set in place the enormous bars of the steel mousetrap?

With all the pride and self-respect I possessed, I shoved against the hand of fate, in an attempt to move from a position inside the mousetrap to a position as its builder. "When you play a game of solitaire," I asked myself, "who beats whom?"

I remember one day there was a rumor that the Tsar was going to drive by, and a crowd collected at the corner of Tverskoi Boulevard. An official courier, enormously tall, towering at least two feet over the kerchiefs and derby hats around him, pushed through the crowd. The police rushed to keep order. Suddenly a vulture appeared, flying back and forth above the crowd, searching keenly for something like a detective; it couldn't find what it wanted and flew away, disappearing beyond the rooftops. And only after the carriage with its pair of black horses ap-

peared and the Tsar's face could be seen, only then did the vulture reappear. It dove straight over the Tsar's head—just as if it were obeying a command—and then flew up and disappeared. It was as if a finger had suddenly been pointed and a voice said: "He's the one."

"A vulture," people said, one after another, disappointed. The holiday was spoiled, interrupted by the sudden appearance of that new and uninvited player in the scene.

[1922: T 570]

## *“Whose idea was it anyway?”*

“Whose idea was it anyway?” exclaimed Bezzie, throwing up her hands. “What a dumb thing to do! My god, what a dumb thing to do!”

It was already accomplished fact: in the West, the northern slopes of Mont Blanc had been torn from the great plateau in a dark stream of rock, and the section above, rising perpendicular like a wall midst the more severe beauty of the ancient pines, had been sculpted into a realistic representation of a human head.

Flyers buzzed like insects in the sky above it, while severe shadows gathered darkly over the frowning forehead of the prophet. His dark eyes, hidden beneath deep brows, were like pools of dark water. It was the head of Hiawatha, cut into the northern face of Mont Blanc, carved by the knife of a giant artist.

As a sign of unity of the whole human race, the New World had erected this monument on the cliffs of the old continent, and in return, as a gift of the Old World, one of the perpendicular slopes of the Andes had been decorated with the head of Zarathustra.

The head of the divine teacher had been carved in such a way that great icicles formed his hair and beard, and caught the drifting snow.

“That stone portrait represents sails of reciprocity stretched between both continents,” remarked Smurd.

“And a multitude of human hearts in those sails as well.”

“Don’t you admire the way those layers of glittering coal have been shaped into the prophet’s dark eyes? Someone told me that at night shepherds come and light their blue campfires with that coal, and then his eyes seem to glow with an angry fire. And see how those ancient pines rise from various points on the face.”

“Well, I think it’s a dumb idea,” said Bezzie. “Why spoil Nature?”

“If mountains can echo the voice of thunder, why shouldn’t they form the outline of a face?”

“You know what let’s do, all of us? Let’s spend the night up there,

on the surface of Hiawatha's stern eyes. There's a hidden path leading up there."

"I'm game! Hurrah, everybody line up and follow me!" It was Bezzie's voice. But they had only gone a few steps when the girl sat down and remarked: "These rocks are pretty darn steep. I don't see how we'll ever make it, unless we turn into goats. What do you want to do now?"

"No, no, let's go! We could spend the whole night up there, just like gods in the darkness! We can pretend to make crowns out of mountain thorn, to crown our fair locks, and our gray locks as well."

"Well, I say a good dinner down below is worth a lot of imaginary gods and imaginary locks."

"Mmm. And there's fresh cream for supper."

"A whole pitcher of fresh cream."

"And tea, wonderful golden tea, a very aromatic old blend. So what should we do?"

"Forget all that! Onward and upward!"

"When the sun rises, we'll wake the mountains with our prehistoric cries and offer the divinity a cigarette. Light up, sunshine!"

"Aren't you young gods overdoing it? You'll spend the night shivering and freezing. And it's real cream for supper too."

"Why don't you just shut up?"

[1922: IV.303]

## *Razin: Two Trinities*

Upon the proud vessel of minus-one to sail across Razin's soul, across wide waves as if across a wide river, to guide my craft past willow trees and elms and the cormorants perched there, past floating pelicans, to cut through the waves, through the current, to choose as my Volga *his* destiny, which ended on the scaffold as an eagle ends in a cruel beak, but giving my life a direction running counter to his, to steer by the stars above me, cutting through time and across it, from the Kalmyk steppe to the Zhiguli gates, sailing over the pounding current of his *I*. And like a miser to count the translucent coin of the waves, the sound they make, as the dreamship of minus-one sails tranquilly down the Razin-river against the natural flow, against the very nature of time, his *I* in the black Zhiguli waves, from its final reaches, a mere head beside the executioner's broadsword lying in its own thought before a barrage of eyes, the crowd grown suddenly silent, to the headwaters of his life as a young Don Cossack at Solovki, come from the ends of Russia, crossing the whole Russian plain to hear the sound of Northern speech, to stare at Northern eyes, to search for the Northern god, the god of the North, to the path of the young Don Cossack on the Dnieper where he stood above the rapids, his laughing eyes impetuous pagans calling up rusalkas from the blue wave, in their watery hair entangling all the sonorous names that adorn the ancient chronicles.

There is a reason the hills echo his shout, "All hands on deck, stand by to attack!" and the axes of the roots that square the rusalkas' imaginary minus-one yearn toward the plus-one of human beings.

There is a reason the Volga each night ties around its head the pirate kerchief of the wild Razin-songs, watching in blue beauty as dawn strikes its red flannel morning match, setting the dark of the forest afire.

To sail from final extinction into first existence: see how the head leaps from the cow-tongue slab of the executioner's broadsword, reset-



gles on its shoulders and conjures up again its uncropped heroic curls—a hand to its heroic mouth and “Hey,” it shouts, “hold alongside!”

To people my sail, my boat, with this sailorman—this minus-Razin—in his pointed helmet, in his red flannel shirt open to the waist, his great-devising chest like a bed with the covers flung wide, staring down into the river’s deep, the world of murk and muck, watching the scuttling shadow of a frightened crab; to be a boat for the dead man multiplied by minus-one.

“Hey! Razin-Double, climb aboard the boat of Me, made from the timbers of my nights and days: sit down on the bench of my life!”

Blue negative Razin-Double, ashes of incantations rain down upon you from my hands.

Be a fallow black field to the plow of my flashing will, submit to my will as to a bridle studded with plates of brass, placed on the head of an unbroken stallion. Submit to my will!

From the bloody platform and the white-hot irons of the torturers before your death, from the great sea of death where the Volga of this life emptied out, like a Volga bird in a cage, to shake loose your wild hair, to sail toward the earliest pleasures of your own young *I*, when you were a wild young hero of southern Russia, greedy for the sky, looking for truth’s foundations in the sound of waves that beat on the Arctic’s rocky shore, beneath the powerful palaver of thousands upon thousands of bird-nations erecting a harmonious temple with the stones of their beating wings, the stones of their crying voices.

No one would have recognized, in the young hero by the nighttime sea who listened to the crying of cranes on the wing, an avalanche of victory in their voices, who studied the aerial book—the nighttime pages of nighttime clouds—no one would have recognized in him the proud uncompromising rebel of the future, whose derisive letters to neighboring monarchs began with the words “Dear Brother.”

The prophetic eyes of someone still a boy, with the down still on his lip, were lifted like broad forest lakes stretching toward the prophetic voices of the birds, who may well have been calling down to him, calling “Brother, brother, here you are!”

He was there seeking out the structural axes of the human world, the central pilings of his own belief, which he later drove like powerful pilings deep into the ancestral homeland, into the ancestral way of things.

He was not yet the greatest firebrand of several centuries, inheritor of his ancestral lands. He was only a young hermit, a boy recluse with quiet thoughtful eyes, a pilgrim from his own sea to the sea of Lomonsov. A great sweep of drifting ice in the sky, gray flocks of birds, the sky inundated with the black lace of bird flocks. Harmonious flocking nations, trumpeting monotonous cries in the air. A headlong flood of dark moving Milky Ways. Ghosts of flying horsemen of the air, patterns of points and warlike cries of an aerial host responding to the assault of spring, chorusing squadrons hurled into the battle for springtime with the trumpeting voices of cranes cutting the world across with their echoing cries, a war party of songs launching an attack against winter's castle, the springtime sky of the northland reflected forever in Razin's enormous deserted eyes, his youngman's recluse eyes, his Arctic wanderer eyes.

We talk here of two Trinity Sundays: one green, the forest Trinity of 1905 on the snow-white Ural mountaintops, a place where silent prophetic eyes, the dark eyes of clouds, stared from an icon frame of snowy brocade, stared at the whole wide world, and the air from those places blew down full of terror, while the eyes of gods shone from above, silver vision in rays of silver lashes. And Trinity Sunday of 1921, in Khalkhal (northern Persia), the land of Razin's first daring adventures. The first Trinity spent at the northernmost point of the Volga's branches, beyond Perm, where the Volga breaks with the north-flowing rivers of Siberia; the second Trinity in the crisis year 1921 spent by the stone mirror of mountains, where the mountain streams flow in the opposite direction, flow down from the north side into the sea the Volga loves.

"They're off to pray to some god of their own, we can tell," concluded the people of the North in their Permian taiga, as we moved off just before Trinity Sunday in our black brodni and porshi, rifles on our shoulders, with kroszni on straps slung across our backs, to spend a month in the forest near the high peaks, looking for happiness in the wilds, dreaming of sables and martens on the Konzhakovsk rock, as the mysterious mountain range beckoned to us.

The Serebrianka river sped on its course, tangling the slippery black rocks in its snowy hair, folding them in foam as if they were the dearest things on earth, lavishing mountain kisses on them, and if you stooped and listened very closely to the thread of rushing river water in its instantaneous abyss, you could hear the sound of girls talking, girls

with northern accents, and vital human laughter and the old songs of the Russian villages.

Did the river borrow its sounding strings and human voices from the village, or the village from the river? How it jostles and hastens, a messenger bearing a letter concealed in his clothes—so in its blue waves the river guards a letter for the Volga, a letter written by the North.

Someone laughed there in the water's deep, shouted a wild woodland halloo to the stranger who bent his face above it, a pilgrim from the world of men; and when the river retreated from the stone crevasses of its channel, in the soggy damp of the half-dried channel you could see a random scatter of great claw marks, bear tracks, printed by the river in a deluxe edition with wide margins and a beautiful pine-tree colophon, between covers of sandy banks and distant snowy mountains with one dark pine tree high on top.

These inspired songs in an ancient mode, brief snatches full of life's breath, from which you can always tell the songmaker's age, where he was heading, how he felt that day, if he was angry or thoughtful, how he saw the universe—as a dark and damned place or a peal of bells full of the pulse of silver words, a drunkard's saber waved above his head or a hand extended thoughtfully at night; these songs were printed by the publishing house of the forest on pages of peatmoss.

Not only bears, but even hunters can read these little verses in marshland editions that date from the earliest days of the world.

Where is a Laura to read the poems of a forest Petrarch?

And all the while we push upstream, higher and higher, toward the harsh craggy mountains [. . .]

[1921–22: T 567]

# *The Willow Twig*

*Willow Sunday [Palm Sunday]*

*Tools of the Writer's Trade*

I am writing at this very moment with a twig cut from a dried branch of pussywillow; little puffs of silvery down still cling to it, like puffy rabbits who have come out to contemplate the springtime. They cover the dry black twig on every side.

For the last piece I wrote I used the harsh quill of a forest porcupine, and I've already lost it.

After that I used a pen made from a blackthorn spine I got at Zheleznovodsk. What is the significance of it all?

This "pussywillow piece" is intended as a different glance at the infinite, at the "nameless," a different way of seeing things.

I don't know whether these three penpoints, considered as a group, give us any kind of resonance.

An entire river of events has flowed by us during that period.

The news I hear from the land of the porcupine is horrifying.

I hear that Kuchuk-khan, routed by his opponent, fled to the mountains, there to behold death in the form of snow, and that during a blizzard in the Iranian mountains he and the remnants of his troops froze to death.

Soldiers went into the mountains and in a sacrificial gesture cut the handsome head from the corpse, stuck it on a spear, carried it back to the lowlands, and got the thousand tumans the Shah had promised as a reward.

When people's lives overflow the banks that contain them, how often the forces of nature signal the ultimate moment! A man who torched a palace in order to destroy his opponent as he slept, to cause his death, his execution, by fire, perished himself from the extreme absence of fire, the icy breath of the snowstorm. His life came to a snowy full stop. His head provided a shelter for his homeland made from tumans and good soldiers. He managed to accomplish in death what he never accomplished in life—good soldiers got good money for his

head. When I was in that country in 1921, I remember hearing people say: "The Russians have arrived and bring ice and snow with them."

And Kuchuk-khan was counting on support from India and the south.

But in the heaven of that period's events, the most powerful star was Miturich's Easter sculpture made of cheesecake, "Faith in Four Dimensions."

[1922: T 573]



## Introduction

Khlebnikov's plays are the most careful, the most consistently crafted, of all his works. With the natural exception of the drafts and fragments, they convey a sense of artifice that is often missing or muted in the prose and the poetry. Whereas other works may strike the reader as uncontrolled or self-generating experiments, the plays seem rigorously structured, with marked beginnings and endings and a clear, if sometimes unexpected, dramatic direction.

Equally critical to the impression of artifice is the fact that the plays are so deliberately fantastic, not only in their representation of figures out of folklore, myth, and fancy but in their radical juxtaposition of the mundane and the unreal. The demigods that populate *Snowwhite* speak alternately in the dreamy language of fairy tales and the coarse dialect of guttersnipes; the "real" world of forest sprites and goblins is invaded by the "unreal" world of urban dwellers spouting socialist platitudes. In *The Little Devil* and *The Marquise des. S.* paintings and statues come to life in the salons and streets of Petersburg and enter merrily into the action of the play without causing anything more than momentary discomfiture. Time reverses its course in *Backworlds*, and abstract senses speak in *Mrs. Laneen*. In "A street of the future" middle-aged men discuss the bureaucratic procedures attending the practical migration of souls.

The assertion of stagecraft is also enhanced by Khlebnikov's evocation of literary models. In almost all of these plays and dramatic fragments he calls attention to the masters he seeks to emulate or parody. They include not only Russia's native tradition—Chekhov, Griboedov, Pushkin, Ostrovsky, Blok—but also Maeterlinck and Shakespeare. If Khlebnikov were simply imitating these playwrights, one would not necessarily speak of artifice; his evocations, however, seem explicitly designed to show how a particular set of dramatic conventions might operate on other realities, restructuring them in their own formal image. It is not surprising, therefore, that in several of the plays characters

step out of their roles in the last scene and address the audience or fellow players in their capacity as actors. The ultimate impact of such devices is to suspend the suspension of disbelief. These are plays within plays, only the outer play is missing.

All this is not to say that the plays are hermetic exercises in playcraft. On the contrary, they possess a strong didactic and philosophical impulse. The earliest plays—those written between 1907 and 1912—are concerned with many of the same topical issues as the prose pieces. *Snowwhite* and *The Girl-God*, in their fairy-tale finery, both embody and propagandize the spirit of Slavic ethnicity that Khlebnikov found so alluring during these years. *The Marquise des S.* and *The Little Devil*, the one an elegant satire and the other an irreverent vaudeville, are barbs aimed at the overly refined world of the symbolists.

Eventually this kind of topicality gives way to broader programs. *Asparuh* represents an extension of the Slavic theme into ancient history. *Backworlds*, which runs like a film in reverse, is a whimsical prologue to Khlebnikov's lifelong rebellion against the tyranny of time. *Miss Death Makes a Mistake*, which can easily be misread as a heavy-handed satire on symbolist drama, is also an act of insurrection, directed against time's most loyal servant, Miss Death. By reducing her to an actress in a play (and her role is both Death and an actress playing Death), the playwright renders her powerless.

The question of what language is, and what language can do, is also a central concern in the plays. It is already reflected in *The Marquise des S.* and *The Little Devil*, where the dialogue is frequently generated by word games of extraordinary variety. It finds fuller expression in *Mrs. Laneen*, where Khlebnikov explores the language of the senses and their dialogue with each other. Later, in *The Gods*, he experiments with the language of those natural phenomena that mankind has traditionally represented in its gods and goddesses. In this, his last experiment in playwriting, he strips the genre of all that is superfluous, including denotation itself. What is left is Voice responding to Voice, seeking its meaning in the pure act of dialogue.



# *Snowhite*

## *A Christmas Story*

### DOON ONE

*(A forest in winter, hung with silver brocade.)*

*Snowleens* Now we lower out of sight our light of love, our light of love, and we scatter flower petals, white forget-me-nevers, white forget-me-nevers.

*(Snowflakes whirl and circle over the motionless body of the Phantom Snowboy.)*

*Laffones* We are your little sisters, we want to try and help you, please let us help you. We come from sweeter slopes, we scatter laughter over lips—we sift out silver.

*Dumbettes* And we will unmask you, take off your dumbfold.

*Blindettes* And we will unmask you, take off your blindfold. We are your little sisters, we want to try and help you, please let us help you.

*Snowleens* Oh look, oh look, his mouth is opening, he's starting to laugh, his eyes are beginning to open—he was only pretending! Why, girl, this boy's as warm as he ever was!

*(They all run away laughing. The game continues: the Phantom Snowboy chases them, and whenever he touches a girl she stays motionless.)*

*Birchpeace* Oh, I remember all the games I used to play, all those games *(begins to nod off)* all those games . . . . .

*Trickytale* *(sings and accompanies himself by strumming the branches of birch trees)*

Dark wet fleece  
quivers like music,  
and sufferance  
turns to soundance,  
like (*laughs*) I dunno what.  
I'm drunk out of my mind.

*(The birch trees make music like whiteflower harps. The airy spirit makes his music, invisible. From all directions, rippling their sides and their stingers, come the hear-snakes. They hiss threateningly and rise up twisting themselves into a column.)*

*Trickytale* Ouch!

*(He falls, letting go of the strings, done to death by a circle of blind-eyed hear-snakes. The deed done, the snakes uncircle themselves and wriggle away.)*

*Silent Sisters* I feel weepy, sisters. He's gone to mess up the dresses of younger girls than us. Let's weep a little, sisters. Let's wash our faces and our hushabye hair, let's go to the lake of woe, where the woe-willows grow and the woe-waters flow. Oh, woe, woe, woe, sad sisters, let's mourn.

*Birchpeace* The harps have lost their harper. The harps are still. The hear-snakes are gone.

*Woodnurse* Quiet! Quiet, there are people coming! Quiet, children!

*(She flies into the air and circles through the treetops, signaling with her hand full of fireflies, then vanishes. The Dumbettes hastily gather up their dumbfolds.)*

*Birchpeace (with an empty howl)* Oh, I'm old! And I'm only a tree—but I'm not afraid of anybody. *(Spirits fly in with blindfolds and dumbfolds and carefully tie up the peoples' eyes and mouths.)*

*Spirits* Let them see nothing! Let them hear nothing!

*(People enter, talking to one another.)*

*Young Worker (animated, delighted with his own ideas)* You see? Of course there's no such thing as goblins in the woods. All that nonsense is just a way to keep uneducated people in the dark.

*(The Phantom Snowboy flies down and shoves snow down his fur collar, into his face and mouth. The Snowleens fly in and dump piles of snow onto the people's heads.)*

*Second Individual (calmly)* It's true, nothing exists except the means of production. *(The Phantom Snowboy throws snow in his mouth.)* It's getting a little cold, don't you think? Let's go back. So therefore, of course, nothing really exists. *(He leaves. Those who had been playing reappear and resume their games.)*

*Voice* Those who deny are themselves denied!

*(All of them—the Snowleens, Birchpeace, and the Phantom Snowboy—begin to shiver and listen to the voice with horror.)*

*Voice (with renewed force, like a clap of thunder)* Denied are those who deny!

*Prophesizing Lady (shakes her snowy old head)* He means them. Them that just left, he means them . . . . *(Her head droops until it touches the ground.)*

*Birchpeace* Oh, I'm old! *(The Snowleens and their loverboy go back to playing the old Rusalia games with a new burst of energy.)* He means them, the strangers, the intruders . . . .

*Old Lady Lecturer* There are no intruders here. You see? They've left the woods. They've gone across the field.

*Devil* Who takes care of the cow? The devil takes care of the cow. Who watches out for the cow? The devil watches out for the cow. And what about you, what do you do? Did you set out traps? Put up nets? Did you catch any snowbirds? Any little titwillows?

*Diavolino (almost in tears)* There was something wrong with the little bell, the shepherd couldn't find her, and the wolf ate her up.

*Devil* Then this is for you, dear—because the wolf ate her up. *(He spans him with a birch switch.)*

*Birchpeace* I don't mind sacrificing my branches in a good cause.

*Diavolino (crying)* I won't do it again, grandfather! Ow, I promise I won't! Please, grandfather!

*Birchpeace* (*watching*) Well, I suppose it won't do him any harm. He's still just a youngster.

*(The Phantom Snowboy and the Snowleens decide to rest, leaning back against the tree trunks.)*

A LINDEN LEGEND (AH, THE SWEET DELIGHT OF WHITE BODIES!)

*(Enter running, a rabbit, that cunning little lump of winter. The Snowleens gather round and play with him.)*

*Snowleens* Oh, you little thief! You stole that fur coat! Who did you steal it from? From Winter, that's who!

*(The rabbit stands up on his hind legs and prances about clapping his paws.)*

*Universirunes* (*playing the game*)

She wafted away on a univerwing,  
melted away into stillness.  
She strewed the earth with univertears,  
and her soul disappeared in the beautiful.

*(The Blindettes, as part of the game, blindfold the rabbit's eyes. A wolf appears, leaving bloody tracks in the snow.)*

*Everyone* Wolf, wolfie, wolfie, darling—you poor little thing you, you must be hurting oh so bad!

*Wise Old Man of the Woods* You can't go around bleeding like that. You need some taking care of.

*(The wolf sits down and licks himself feverishly with his tongue. Everyone bustles around trying to fix up his wounds. Hounds rush by with wild howls. Birchpeace whips them with branches. The Snowleens jump onto their necks and drive them off.)*

*(A tired White Hunter appears, rifle in hand. He wears a white caftan and a black belt.)*

*Snowbilly* Time to get to work, my little white friends! (*He parts a bunch of wiry branches, and they spring back loudly against the overheated red face and pop eyes of the gray-eyed, moustached White Hunter.*)

*Treeman* Ha-ha-ha! (*He claps his gnarled white hands in delight.*)

*Snowbella* You like my little twiglet? (*She trips him up with her branch. Panting, wild-eyed, the White Hunter falls into a snowdrift; as he falls, his gun goes off.*)

*Lyndenboy* Ow, I'm hurt, I'm hurt! (*He begins to shake and keeps rocking slowly back and forth.*)

(*The White Hunter moves back. His hat and belt are gone; he is wild and bareheaded.*)

*Treeman and Snowloons* Ha-ha-ha! These good people are lots of fun!

*White Peasant* What's happening? This must be Winter's palace guard. The clatter of snowshovels and battleaxes. They're after me! They're trying to get me! Their heralds have begun to howl. The White Hunter has left. He's combing his hair.

*White Hunter* Good people! She's gone! Vanished into thin air. Like snow in springtime. She's gone. She melted away.

*Everyone* Who? Who?

*Snowmamas* He means Snowwhite! Snowwhite! Snowwhite's gone!

*White Hunter* (*hangs his head*) Snowwhite . . . . .

*Everyone* Where did she go?

*Snowmamas* To town, to town! She's gone to town!

*Everyone* To town.

*Birchpeace* To town. Snowwhite, she's gone to town (*bows his head, in deep gloom*). One of the forest folk, gone to town.

*Everyone* To town.

(*All are silent. Deep distress.*)

*Snowmen* She's gone.

*Birchpeace (sadly)* She's gone.

*Rabbit* I hopped up to Snow Killer Gulch just now, and I saw great big man tracks alongside hers.

*Snowgun* You hopped up there? Man tracks?

*Everyone* Oh! Oh! Oh!

*(The boyar ladies all faint. Tears form in the wide eyes of Snowgun, that mournful, majestic old man, and he raises his white eyes to heaven with a prayer for help.)*

*Crow* Somebody take this dumbfold off me. *(The Dumbettes take it off.) (To the Rabbit)* You cheap liar, you country cutpurse, you stole the fur coats from all the lyndenboys!

*Palace Guard* Get to the point!

*Rabbit* You're a liar yourself! What a dumb-ears!

*Crow* Shut up, Rabbit!

*Rabbit* And who was it pecked my sweet little bunny baby to death? You, that's who!

*Snowmamas* What are they hitting on each other for? Troublemakers!

*Crow* Those big tracks didn't belong to some human—they were made by a pair of bast shoes, and they've been hanging out in front of "Bunny Bright's Bush" ever since.

*Palace Guard* Get to the point!

*Crow* She stole them and she made those footprints on purpose, so's to throw us off the track.

*Snowgun (weeping)* Oh, my poor baby!

*Snowmamas* Life's a moaning matter! A moaner's meant to mourn forever! Oh, our poor little baby!

*(Snowgun motions them away, and everybody begins to leave.)*

*Crow (flapping his wings)* Where she went was, she went to see Hooder *(flies away)*.

## DOON TWO

*Hooder* Nowadays they look us up in books. What ever happened to the oldtime jobmen? They used to whistle with two fingers, and suddenly out of nowhere there was a magic horse, panting and breathing fire.

*First Interlocutor* Good point, old man. Really well said. You ever read Kautsky?

*Hooder* I told you, we don't go in for book learning. We live in the woods, we're all backwoodsmen, and we join the Blackshirt vigilantes. The only visitors we ever get are criminals or crows.

*First Interlocutor* And here's the old reactionary now!

*Hooder* Boy, you leave that crow alone. Crow's a proud bird. You don't, you see this here? (*gestures to his whackstick*).

*First Interlocutor* Oh, Lord, Thou beholdest the soul of Thy servant depart—the dark bragger, old Crow, delivered up unto the forest's chief truth-teller!

*Hooder* Watch the jokes, boy. This ain't no time for smart remarks.

*Second Interlocutor* Now, don't get mad, pappy, you just listen to me and calm down. He did you a pretty good turn. When autumn comes you get the good golden fruit to eat. You hear me? There. How's that? You still grambling?

*Hooder* I'm grambling at you, fat boy, that's who. Old Crow ain't saying nothing. (*He tosses the raven a batch of papers; the old croak tears at them; he keeps one eye on Hooder and uses his claw as well as his beak.*)

*Second Interlocutor* (*jumps up indignantly*) What did I tell you, huh? He's great! Oh, you're a real smarty, pappy. But that's your business, isn't it?

*Hooder* (*squints evilly at him*) You forget this here whackstick, boy? You keep your badmouthing to yourself.

(*Three measured knocks at the door, and a voice shouts "Open up!"*)

*Hooder* Come on in, if you can.

*Snowwhite* I'm in, oldie. Hello, hello.

*Hooder* You talk like the snowfolk, honey.

*Showwhite* I talk like the humans do, oldie. Well, hello, Crow!

*First Interlocutor (suspiciously)* What's this supposed to be anyway, a scene out of a Rimsky-Korsakov opera? Are we all asleep and dreaming, boys, or what? (*Crow flies down and pecks at the Interlocutor's eyes, the blue-black smartass.*) Ow, son of a bitch, he almost pecked my eyes out! Now tell me, good buddy, what's your estimation of the situation here, hm? Are we all *dramatis personae*? I mean, as one friend to another, are we interacting or not?

*Second Interlocutor (with a thick lisp)* We're right on the money with this one, honey! (*They whisper together and head off into another room.*)

*Snowwhite* Who're those two, oldie?

*Hooder* Oh, a couple of crooks ripe for the picking. They're supposed to sit around and keep their mouths shut, but no. They have to make smart remarks. Did those old black buzzards insult you, Crow?

(*Crow ruffles his feathers and spreads his wings, flies off his perch and sits on Hooder's shoulder, where he throws back his head and croaks plaintively.*)

*Hooder* What's the matter, wiseold? You smell trouble coming?

(*The Second Interlocutor suddenly bursts through the door carrying a paper and a gun in his hand. He has a fiery red beard and cold bluish-green eyes. He holds the paper at arm's length and reads in an unnaturally loud voice.*)

*Second Interlocutor* "Considering the dramatic image called forth by the actions of the character known as Hooder, we are forced to take immediate measures, to seek out adequate means of self-defense, and considering that several of the factors we're dealing with here ought to be clear even to someone unfamiliar with Rimsky-Korsakov's famous opera *The Snow Maiden*, forcing us finally to recognize the existence of the crime of plagiarism, in view



of which . . . .” Oh shit, here he comes with the whackstick! Take that! (*He fires several shots, and Hooder falls with bullet holes in his head. Sound of someone running away.*)

*Snowbite* Is this what life is like in town? Or is all this just a little foretaste of spring? Bye-bye, oldie, I sure am sad for you. (*She kisses him on his remaining eye, which still glitters with life.*) Well, here I am, in the real world at last. Come on, Crow, sit on my shoulder, let's you and me go together. (*She sets off down the road.*)

*Glorysinger* Ice people are nice people.

They laugh whenever they can.

Welcome to the city! It ain't very pretty

But a lot of us call it home.

(*pause*)

But what do I see? Do I rake the fallow fields of madness?

No! It's a vision with a crow on her shoulder!

What to do? When you meet a sweet woman, say hello.

Her eyes shine like the dawn-o!

*Woman Carrying Pails* My gawd, that's the whitest girl I ever saw!  
(*She stops and stares.*)

*Drunk* So listen, do I get a drink or don't I?

*Voice of Winter* Remember, daughter mine, you must abide by the white law of winterland.

(*They follow the road to town. They meet more and more passersby.*)

*Snowsuckers* Oh, don't go!

*Glorysinger* Here you are. Welcome to town.

“And the smokey leaves of the chimney forest shade the frame of the sunset hut.”

*Passerby* Well, for example, we've completely forgotten words like *hay-damak* and *basurman*—they're expressions from Zaporozhian Cossack life.

*Beggar* I want something to eat, I'm hungry, I want to eat, give me a little something to get a bite to eat.

*Snowwhite* Is that a baby woodgoblin? And what's that? It's an elk with a branch in her teeth, dragging a log with a bunch of people on it? We used to have fun doing that back in the forest.

*Boys in the Street* Snowwhite! It's Snowwhite! Remember, we saw her at the opera.

*(A crowd surrounds Snowwhite. We hear an approving murmur of "Snowwhite, Snowwhite, yes, I remember." Several people take off their hats. People stop and stare. Old graybeards lean on their canes.)*

*Scientist* This means we'll have to revise all our theories.

*Voice* Oh, what blackshirt eyes she has!

*Policeman (pushing through the crowd)* Ok, lady, break it up. Hey! Listen, lady, you're obstructing traffic!

*Snowwhite (stops)* Who are you?

*Glorysinger* Oh, officer, please, officer. Arrest me instead. Here's my papers, my residence permit. Take me wherever you want, but leave her alone! Don't disturb this vision, I beg of you! *(He falls to his knees.)*

*Old Lady* Yes dear, have a heart, you can tell she's from out of town.

*(The Policeman looks very disapproving and blows his whistle.)*

*Another Policeman* What's going on here? Disturbing the peace?

*Snowwhite* Who's he? A big man like that all got up like a Christmas tree!

*Second Policeman (sharply)* Look, I've had just about enough of this and I mean it! Take 'em all to the lock-up!

*(Everybody heads toward the lock-up.)*

*Someone Pushed Aside* Ow! So listen, do I get a drink or don't I?

*Children (shouting)* Snowwhite! Snowwhite! We saw her! We remember her!

*(Mother brings up their children and ask her to bless them.)*

*Someone in the Crowd* How awful! Where have I seen her before? In a dream somewhere? In a delirium? It's her! It's her! It's her! (*He runs up and kisses her hand.*)

## INTROON TO DOON THREE

(*Snowman and Snowwoman sit weeping.*)

*Snowman* Snowwhite's gone, she's gone, she's gone.

(*The Rivulettes enter with frozen ice cups and collect their tears, and then pour them into the rivers.*)

*Sad Woodwilly* (*playing a woodwhistle*)

Woe  
in the snow.  
Where has she gone?  
In a crossbill caftan,  
in a snowbird dress,  
our secret has flown.

*Snowman* (*wipes away tears and sings*) You fluffy little finches, you field flutter, you vine veerers—please, go round up the thickwhistle snowbirds and tell them come here. Tell them it's me, tell them Snowman wants to see them.

(*The finches flutter about, then fly away whistling.*)

*Snowbirds* Here we are, Snowman.

*Snowman* Go fly to the birdcatchers, to their tricky little traps, and peck at the golden grain they scatter. You'll get caught in their traps and taken to town, and there you'll see Snowwhite. Tell her not to forget me, ever.

*Snowbirds* We will, Snowman, we will. (*They flutter off among the branches and disappear.*)

(*Snowman and Snowwoman keep on weeping. The Icelettes collect their tears in frozen cups.*)

*Woodwilly (plays his woodwhistle, mimicking someone)*

Dawn's all gone.  
Where is the Snowbird?  
Why is there Nobird?  
I mean to moan.

*(He bursts out laughing, throws down his woodwhistle, and runs away. Birchpeace catches him and spansks him.)*

*Woodwitch (shaking her hooked nose)* I'll give you a good switching too,  
a good switching.

### DOON THREE

*(Song)*

I offer up my virgin body  
to the city's streets.  
I yield my sinless body  
to the next death it meets.  
I am violence's victim,  
I am the slave of crucifixion.  
My words of fire will burn your ear  
with flaming curses as I disappear.

*Old Man* The universal strings have sounded, and they prophesy: beneath the smiling Slavic sky they will worship other gods, their own gods will abandon them, while other gods laugh. *(He marches down the street, surrounded by a winding procession of Slavic bodyguards.)*

*(Banners wave aloft with the slogans: "Slavic Springtime," "Power and Greatness to the Slavs," "Slavdo," "Happiness is for Kids." Costumes of the Russian peoples can be seen everywhere. Thick braids of golden hair shine in the sun. Young men's eyes are shining.)*

*Director of the Holiday Parade (from the reviewing stand)* Today is the Festival of Purification. A day for cleaning house! Do we all solemnly swear always to wear Slavic styles in clothing?

*Everyone* We do! We swear by the future of all the Slavs!

*Director* Do we swear not to use foreign words?

*Everyone* We do!

*Director* Do we all solemnly swear to carry on and strengthen our Russian traditions?

*Everyone* We do!

*Director* Do we all swear to give back to the old Slavic gods their birthright: the believing souls of the Slavs?

*Everyone* We do!

*(Many of the participants put on native Slavic costumes. A group meets to begin replacing foreign words with native Russian ones.)*

*One of the Crowd* You have come very late. Kingdoms fall here, new ones arise there. You are young. You surpass our oppressors in numbers. You surpass them in beauty of soul and the expanse of land you occupy. Go boldly forward, Slavs!

*The crowd roars its enthusiastic approval. Competitions begin between Russians in running, wrestling, versing and praising. The Russians run, dance, leap about. They play woodwhistles. They sing.)*

*Voice* But where is Snowwhite? Where's Snowwhite?

*Clamor of Voices* Where's Snowwhite? Where's Snowwhite?

*(General confusion.)*

*Games Director (from the reviewing stand)* Snowwhite has left us. She vanished very gently, but the place where she was standing is now covered with spring flowers. Go pick them, carry them from house to house like eternal candles, signs of a mysterious miracle, and maybe—

*Chorus of Voices* A miracle! A miracle! Snowwhite has melted into flowers!

*Voices (as they move away)* We will always remember what she left us . . . . .

*(Upstanding old people, beautiful young people, and children move in a procession. They bend to pick long, fragrant blue flowers that burn like candles.)*

*First Chorus (as they exit)*

We have forgotten that from all time past  
the horses of knowledge have snorted and neighed.  
Bless or blister with venom  
but you will remain one,  
behest of ocean's depths,  
Russia.

*Second Chorus* The tribes of ocean all recede  
and leave an everlasting law,  
but passing time erases it  
as newer ages dawn.  
Yet we remember what we were  
And will bring back our former pride.  
Now May replaces January,  
battle struggle comes again.

[1908: T381]

# *The Girl-God*

For T.

## ACT ONE

[*The Palace of Vladimir, the Shining Sun Prince.*]

*Molva, the Sun Prince's Daughter* Mamasha! The sweet cows are carrying on such a holler, the poor darlings are thirsty, thirsty, thirsty, they're all calling out for a drink. So will you let me, darling, will you let me, darling, let me go down to the well after water? The dear little darlings are wanting their drink. Where's the harm in it? There's none in it, really, only this once. A princess goes down to the water—well, what do you think, I won't stop being the Sun's own daughter, the glorious sun prince! And don't be afraid, darling, if you think my soft shoulders won't bear with the weight of the water. Who's left to do it if I don't? The girls are all gone from the house, good for nothing at all.

*Princess Gordiata, her Lady Mother* Go if you want, my darling, go do it. But what put the thought of it into your head? Spending your lovely time looking after the cows! What will surely turn out is, your pearls will spill into the water, and each one the price of a cow, or your fine satin petticoats trail in the ashes, and they're worth more than we paid for your pearls; and all for what? For a silly-girl notion to play with the cows! But go if you want to, fetch up the water and give them a drink. Only what have you done, darling? You're wearing your bonnet all covered with pearls! Watch now a water witch doesn't rise right out of the water and grab you, and where will you be? You'll end up in a demon's arms! . . . . Or sure you'll get hooked on a horn, horrible sharp they are, all of them!

*Molva* Oh, mama, mama! I'll be walking past the Sleepers and it wouldn't do well, now, would it, if they saw me with hair hanging

down, all free and swinging every which way. It's better I put on my little pearl bonnet, even to water the cows.

*Gordiana* Go on with you, darling, go on my bright beauty! (*She brushes away her daughter's tangled curls and kisses her forehead; Molva goes out, all blushes of desperate delight.*) But why don't they moo? I don't hear the sound of a single cow! Or have I gone deaf as a stone in my age? (*She begins to sort out things in a storage chest. In runs the old housekeeper, wringing her hands.*)

*Old Housekeeper* Oh royal mother of us all, will you listen what's happened! Listen and hear what misery's upon us! Not a falcon at all, diving at ducklings, not an eagle at all, on the innocent pigeons, the lovely doves, the sweet little darlings—no, it's the Girl-God, come down upon us like a bolt from the blue. It's him, he's come, it's the Girl-God!

*Gordiana (horrified)* The Girl-God! The Girl-God!

*Old Housekeeper* Just like that, with no reason or leave or who calls me, it's the fiend, it's the foe, it's the hawk's wild eye. He'll make us all mad, he'll make all our giddy green girls into madwomen. It's misfortune in mountain-high heapfuls, that's what it is! They'll all of them go running behind him, rolling their mad wide eyes, giddy with happiness and all of them whispering, "Him, it's him," and the rest of them—darling, they're all of them off in different directions, all with their heads in the clouds.

*Gordiana* Oh, what a rain of misfortune! What a black cloud over our joy, our golden joy, untouched, unspoiled, unsaddened. And wasn't I telling Belina this morning: go find out, I said, there's some girl-madness loose in the city, lock the gates, says I, the carved gates, and give me the key, or throw it away. And let loose the dogs in the courtyard, the mean ones, I said, so no little letters get through, not the slimmest of notes! Give the poor cows a drink, would she! And had to go off in her pearls, did she! And all of the serving girls gone. Ah, my sweet cheat, my non-pareil! And she'd tear out her beautiful braids, wouldn't she, if she don't love her father and mother more than the rest of her days, tear out the gold of her braid, gold to her ankles! And the only one she loves



as much is Snovid, him and his blue-black curls, and he's off. Off on the ice-cold sea somewhere, after glory for the Russian cause.

*(Other women enter, wringing their hands.)*

*Women* The princess-daughter has gone, there's some of them saying, gone off dressed like a peasant girl, a field hand, they say, and can't take her mad eyes off the girl-boy either.

And he's beautiful, they say, more than pictures, or dreams, or fairy tale princes. His beauty is all his own.

And there's even some creaky old grayheads, they're saying, can't take their gaze from off his blue eyes. All he has to do is look at someone. He moves and he smiles at someone. And no one knows who. He takes a flute from his belt and he plays it, and smiles. And no one knows why he plays it, and no one knows who he plays it for, and where he comes from, and how long he'll stay. No one knows. Who can tell where he's going? And where are we going, we none of us know. You'd think it was the end of the world. Oh, it was a different story in my time, we knew what shame was, the girls didn't dare carry on this way, they obeyed when their parents told them. But nowadays—who knows where everything's headed. It's the end of the world, that's what it is.

Ah, my poor gray hairs!

*Dobroslava, an Old Woman* Well now, princess, your silver mirror, will you sell it for a pretty price? Give it here, give me a look, perhaps I'll have it, and pay without quibble at that. The work is Greek. From Thermakopeia, is it?

*Gordiata* No, it came from Babilu. I bought it from a Jewy man.

*Dobroslava* From Babilu, is it? Ah, I must have a wrinkle for every one of my years. And my eyes aren't what they used to be; they don't quite shine the way they once did. Alas, our young years, when we were girls. The sun, now, the sweet sun sets easy, he knows come dawn he'll always rise again. But we never turn young again once we turn old. Of course we don't. And old friends disappear, no rhyme or reason, some of them once so light on their feet! And so bright in the eye! But there's time still surely for me to go gallivanting! Why shouldn't I?

*Gordiata* Shame on you, dear! We're too old for that now!

*Dobroslava* But to get a good look, only this once. Just to see what he looks like.

*Gordiata* No, I wouldn't leave the place wide open to all comers.

*Dobroslava* All you have to do is unchain the hounds. And a bit of a beating all round, to rile them up a little. Will you look at me now, my hair's all a tangle, you'd think I was still mourning my late husband.

*Gordiata* I suppose I might as well do myself up a bit. *(She opens a chest and pulls out a dress embroidered with jewels.)*

*Dobroslava* Just let me put on something of yours, dear. I've no time now to run home for my own things. *(She begins to dress up.)* What's that, the bell? There must be a council meeting called. Then the children were telling the truth; the young men, they said, were of two minds: some of them wanted to go make war on this Girl-God, while others were all for protecting him.

*Gordiata* Such hot-heads, all of them! *(Both of them stand dressing themselves.)*

*Dobroslava* What's that, now, that noise? They'll be coming this way, most likely. Listen to them, will you, singing, singing. Ah, what a terrible thing to have happen!

*(They throw on their kerchiefs and hurry out into the green meadow beyond the Sun Prince's walls. In the distance all the girls go hand in hand, turning toward the Girl-God, scattering flowers, and singing.)*

*Girls* They told us you were mortal,  
But we don't believe them, don't believe them!  
They told us you were a god,  
But we don't believe them, don't believe them!  
They deny you are Lel,  
But we don't believe them, don't believe them!

*Voices in the Crowd of Onlookers* Look, look, see how the girls go on ahead, in their crowns of water meadow grasses, their arms, waists, foreheads covered with rays of green. Each one of them shines like a sun.

*(They come forward dancing, looking first down at the earth, then up at their master. And they sing: "They told us you were a god." The one with blue eyes sings first, then the one with dark eyes sings the refrain: "But we don't believe it." Then the whole dancing throng answers softly: "Listen, listen," clapping their hands and sharing the joy in their eyes.*

*From out of a narrow street in the distance, hemmed in by rough, unworked beams—its ugliness softened by the inclines of roofs, bird-houses, and old white willow trees—the crowd pours like a spring freshet, filling the meadow in front of the Prince's palace. The Girl-God advances with a smile (bow, bow, all bow!); he holds in his hand a reed flute (dance, dance, all dance!), and he plays when they sing: "But we don't believe it, don't believe it!" and remains silent when they sing: "They told us that you were . . . ."*

*Two noble ladies appear at the gate of the reknowned Sun Prince ("Where has he gone?"). A great glitter of embroidered headdresses, garlands of green meadow grass, beautiful faces, bright eyes, and the joy of the ecstatic young crowd. A rich man with a long beard on horseback emerges from a narrow street and tries to move forward. The most beautiful of the girls rush toward him, take hold of his stirrups, and drag his horse backwards. He sits motionless on horseback, staring at their joy like a dark poplar above a springtime brook.)*

*Molva (her voice full of joy)* Mother! Mother! You've come to join us! And Dobroslava too! Have you seen our god? Oh, I'm so happy you're one of us too! You see? There he is! Watch, he's about to laugh. I've been watching him, and everytime we sing "that you were not a god" he laughs. See? He's laughing now.

*(The crowd sings: "They told us that you were not a god" and "But we don't believe it" and "See, see, see." The Girl-God smiles a broad open smile.)*

*Molva* Mother, mother, the Tsar's daughter went up to him and raised her veil and took it off so he could kiss her. But he only looked at her and smiled as if—oh, I don't know, as if he were a child. And all that happened was, she began to dance wild, then more wild, and clapped a wild rhythm with her hands. Isn't it lovely, mother, to be out watering the cows? See all the pails, they're there by the cow house, and the yoke there beside them. And all our hay maids

are here. There's Bystrava, and Zorka, and Tikha, they're all here. Oh, mother, mother! Isn't he beautiful, our god?

*Gordiata* Well, I should hope so, all this fuss! Beautiful, Beautiful. . . . yes, he is beautiful, very beautiful. You're right, he *is* laughing. I do have to admit, he *is* something of a miracle, a maiden's miracle! And is it true you were telling me, the Tsar's daughter is here too? Really? And she lifted her veil so he could kiss her? And he didn't? The brazen hussy! Now come here a minute, darling, let me fix your braids, your smooth gold braids!

*Molva* And there's a battle going on right now, on the plain of Perun. Our brothers are protecting him, and all our sweethearts have sworn to kill him. Gomon is there, and Tishina, and Krik. And Smekh is there. Smekh, he's on our side. And Oseter and Veper, Vecher and Veter are all opposed, they raised the sword against him. They're all there. Some are on our side, some are against us. Only Nebo stayed behind, he's in the temple praying. But there's no way they can kill him, because they'd have to kill us first, and then him. And none of them wants to kill his own betrothed. And some of them are saying there's no way to kill him, because he's a god. And also, there's this. Look! *(She pulls back her sleeve, and beneath it a suit of armor flashes in the sun.)* See? *(laughs)* And this! *(She raises her hand, and hidden in the flowers she holds is a short sword.)*

*Gordiata* My god, my god, has it come to this? Girls in suits of armor! Our own girls, and they're wearing swords and armor!

*Dobroslava* Oh, mother of mercy!

*Gordiata* I swear no sword will ever strike sparks from your armor, and no sword will ever pierce your flesh! It will have to pierce this withered breast of mine, cut down me and all our faithful serving maids, before it touches you. I'll protect you, my child, my own, my nonpareil. Go now, go off with your god, watch him, watch him all you want, don't ever be afraid. Your old mother is with you, I'm here and here I'll stay. Here, you hay maids, stay with her, all of you. And don't be afraid for your god. Not a one of those boys will dare lift a wicked finger. Go on, go feast your eyes with gazing. I'll never surrender my little chickens. And all our serving

men are here, they've been with us for years, they're trusty men, all of them. Sing, darling, sing.

*Crowd of Singing Strangers* See them dancing, the girls from all our noblest families, see the crowns of flowering grass they wear, hear them singing: "Our eyes told us you were no mere mortal. And we believe them! We believe them!" What a rush of joy! What dancing eyes, what happy faces. But what's that noise? A sound of voices in the nearby square! See where a rider goes galloping, beyond the sharp palings of the palisade, with spear and golden helmet, and look, he falls back! He falls from his horse, he lets fall his long quivering spear. Ah, it is Ruchei who has fallen. Listen, we can hear the clash of swords. The sound of songs is swallowed up—neither man nor immortal could hear them now. Nothing is heard but a general howl of joy. How it swirls and swirls around us! What could swirl faster than this? And he simply stands there, holding his flute in his hands.

Everywhere eyes, on fire with a strange brilliance. Some stand, back, fire flashing in their two-edged swords. The helmets they wear burn on their heads like icons of mystery—how beautiful, the sight of crested bronze above gleaming waves of hair! See how bravely the helmets rise, how helpless the shower of arrows clatters against them!

*Molva* Mama! Mama!

*Crowd* Brighter and brighter the battle burns, wilder and wilder it whirls. Groans rise up on every side. And now from a nearby street the attackers come, ready to kill the god. And a horde of maids with swords and helmets rushes to meet them.

*Molva* Mama, mama, look—it's the Sacred Band!

*Crowd* And he only stands, holding his flute, bright-eyed and smiling, watching the killers come on. The girls form a circle around him, some of them raise their arms and clap, staring and shouting: A god! He is a god! We believe! We believe! We are mortal, earthly, and still we believe! He holds his flute and his eyes smile, and he watches for danger.

The killers come running like wild men, and stop, staring, suddenly wide awake, stare as their betrothed turn upon them with

sword and steel, protectors in helmets, and the cutting edges of their own swords touch the ranks of their suitors.

Each takes a few steps back—the rank of suitors in armor whose breastplates shine with stars and suns, with crested helmets in the gold of their hair, the young men a rank of swords, their attack a sudden standstill. What will happen? What will become of them? But look! Gordiata! See where she runs from the crowd with her gray hair streaming, runs toward her house with her arms stretched out in horror; now she comes again at the head of her house servants, they fill up the space between the young men and the women. And from the other direction comes Perun's high priest, followed by graybeards, he forces the faithful to their knees, their heads to the ground. Everyone bows, even the maids in armor, everyone bows to the ground. See how swiftly he moves between them, never stopping, straight to the one at the heart of all the commotion, who stands there as if he expected him. He bows, and speaks to him some sacred words.

The young man gives him his flute, he bows and follows the old man. They disappear fast in the distance.

He passes between two ranks of eyes—young men, full of hatred and enmity, young women in helmets, reverent and respectful, still on their knees. Murderers and their brides, both groups rise with fire in their eyes, and move off in different directions.

*Girls (sing)*

You walked among us,  
we gave you our prayers!  
Now you have left us,  
we will never forget you!

Look, you gray-haired servants, look!

*Crowd* They rise from their knees and take the tear-stained, fainting Gordiata by the arms, her head bends low, they take her away across the deserted meadow to the Prince's great palace. They carry off the dying Ruchi, his arms trail helplessly, his head hangs down. The brothers meet the suitors in the middle of the square, their eyes glare ominously. But what is this? Here comes a cohort to investigate the hostilities. Heralds summon both groups, broth-

ers and suitors, to the place of justice, to bring the Girl-God to trial.

Listen to what they say: "This is a strange and no small matter, no one yet can say who is the more to blame, the young men here assembled, or the maidens and their god. So come great and small to the place of justice, to our great lord, our bright, all-knowing sovereign, who like a god will take the matter on himself and render judgment."

Oh sweet voice of authority! It speaks in accents greater than our understanding. Even horror heeds it. See how the people run toward the trial yard! Come, let us follow them.

## ACT TWO

*(Two noble youths with light brown hair carry a sword out of the dark temple onto the steps before the idol of Perun.)*

*High Priest (stands on the steps, almost at the top)* Two of you carry this sword?

*Rud and Rokh* Yes, two of us, because the sword cannot be lifted by one man alone.

*High Priest* And if a hair falls upon the blade, will that hair be cut in two?

*Rud and Rokh* Yes, that hair will be cut in two.

*High Priest* O Perun, pass judgment now by this sword of miracles, that punishes all tellers of untruth!

*Crowd* Look, here they come bringing the slave.

*High Priest* You are accused of killing your master in the night. Did you kill him?

*Slave* No, he . . . . *(The sword falls and cuts the slave to pieces. The crowd falls to its knees and gasps in horror. They bring the Girl-God out onto the platform.)*

*High Priest* Who is this man?

*One of the Crowd* No one knows who he is. He is a troublemaker! He made the girls take swords and helmets and attack their sweethearts, who barely avoided coming to blows with this host of girls. He has showered whole families in blood, by stirring up the sweethearts to attack the girls' brothers, and brothers have drenched each other's armor in blood. He interferes with trade, and several streets of the city are completely impassable. Our houses were in danger of looting, once people had left them. He has ruined many families because he makes the girls go mad, and they scatter their pearls on the ground and drop their silver ornaments in the water.

*Another* He causes trouble in the homes, he breaks up families, and he says he's a god.

*Others* We aren't sure he said he was a god, but he makes people believe he's a god, and he's made everyone go mad.

*One of the Crowd* His father's a fisherman and his mother's a witch!

*Others* He's been seen with a woman who flew away on a magpie.

*New Voices* He's the son of a condemned slave who was given a few days reprieve.

*Others* No one can find out who he is. Maybe he is a god, but he still deserves to be executed.

*Voices* He's only a man, he's only a man!

*High Priest* Who are you, Girl-God?

*Girl-God* (*His smile never changes.*) You stand here and want me to say that I'm human. Very well then, I do: I'm human.

*(The sword falls, without harming the Girl-God, and lies at his feet.)*

*High Priest* (*He bends down and kisses the sword lying at the Girl-God's feet, then stands.*) You princes, Strakh and Uzhas, take up the sword and place it in the hands of Perun. (*To the young man*) Will you say that you're a god?

*Girl-God* (*He bows his head, still smiling, and speaks barely audibly.*) Yes. I am a god. (*All the priests, princes, and the crowd raise their eyes to the sword. They glance higher and higher, following the sword.*)



*High Priest* The sword does not fall!

*Crowd* Oh! Oh! Oh!

*Voice* Listen! In the crowd a weak woman's voice calls out: "He is a god!" And all about her a sudden surge of faith compels others to shout "He is a god!" and now a storm of voices arises, rising, falling, joining into one single cry: "He is a god!"

*Girl-God (with a smile)* No, I'm only human.

*Voice in the Crowd* The sword does not fall.

*(The High Priest falls to his knees and kisses the hem of the Girl-God's garment)*

*Voice from the Crowd* How can anyone be a god and a man at the same time? He is an atheist, a blasphemer who defiles our holy sanctuary.

*Molodye Ochi* He's not the blasphemer, it's the sword! The sword is no longer a sacred thing.

*High Priest* Who spoke? Who accuses the sword of deceit?

*Molodye Ochi* I do. *(A movement in the crowd.)* Whoever you are, whatever name you claim, let me stand beneath the sword of judgment.

*(A young man, one of the suitors, steps out of the crowd; he has a light brown beard and flashing dark eyes.)*

*Molodye Ochi* Watch me now: here I stand, in a place I claim is no longer sacred—

*Voices in the Crowd (shouting)* The sword is beginning to move, watch out, the sword is beginning to move!

*High Priest* Do not attempt some vain experiment, young man.

*Molodye Ochi* Old man, the unsheathed sword has lied! *(He stands beneath the sword.)* Ask me the required questions. *(The High Priest stands silent, smiling sadly.)* Never mind then, I will ask them myself. *(He raises his eyes to heaven.)* Here I stand. Who am I? I am a god.

*(The sword falls from the hand of the gilded idol, with its bared teeth and angry eyes; it cuts the young man to pieces. The crowd is silent.)*

**High Priest** Oh you—whoever you may be. We are mortals, we are not gods. You have come among us and you stir up trouble, and you make it impossible for us to live as our gods have commanded us. Depart from us. *(The Girl-God sinks to his knees and kisses the hem of the High Priest's garment.)*

**Old Man in the Crowd** Holy father, it's true that the gods . . . . It's true that the sword descended in the hand of the god, and punished Molodye Ochi for his blasphemy. But this one has brought evil upon us: he has turned our sweethearts away from us and he deserves to be executed for it.

**Hesitant Voices** He's right!

**Girl-God (laughs)** He's right.

**High Priest** Very well, then you will receive the judgment of human law. For the trouble you have brought us, for our troubles, our unrest and discord, you have deserved to die the death, and you will accept it, if such is your will. You men of honor! This one you see standing before you has condemned himself to death, according to our laws. May his will be done.

*(They tie the Girl-God's hands and take him to the place of execution. The great crowd of people sways like waves of the sea. Many of them are praying. They recite prayers out loud. Dark, doom-faced criminals light the pyre beneath the Girl-God as he stands at the stake. A new group of people struggle in from a side street.)*

**Newcomers** What are you doing? What are you doing? You are burning an unknown person at the stake, while the real one commits outrages at the other side of town. He collects a crowd of deluded girls and sings and tells them stories of the stars, waving his arms and dancing. So do they share in the madness. And once again fights have broken out between their brothers and their sweethearts, like the glittering sea before a storm.

**Executioners** We are carrying out this execution in accordance with his will and without contravention of any human law.

*Newcomers* You are a pretender, unknown one! You are not the Girl-God!

*Girl-God* You are right, I am not the Girl-God. (*He slips from their hands and ascends like a cloud into heaven.*)

### ACT THREE

(*The Sun Prince's Palace.*)

*Gordiata (to Molva)* Have you no shame? The sun has long since set, the twilight faded long ago, and only now do you come home. Heartsick, all of us, waiting and waiting for you.

*Molva* Oh, mama, just think what happened! All the while they were trying to burn the unknown one, the one who took the Girl-God's shape, there we were, happy along with him, laughing away the afternoon on the hills beyond town. He had a sunflower he'd found and sat on the hilltop and held it in his hand and picked off the petals and tried to guess how old we were. And then we sang, and we danced in a ring all around him and the great bonfire we'd made, and when we left, then all the beggars came and gathered up the pearls, we'd dropped so many, we tore them off and filled his hands, and he threw them away, one after the other, and laughed when the pearl fell in a beautiful curve and the pale pearls scattered all over the ground. And it felt so wonderful to give away the pearls, but not so wonderful when we saw all those repulsive poor people picking them up and putting them around their necks, with that awful skin, they look just like camels' knees.

*Gordiata* Where are your pearls? You did it too? You gave away your pearls?

*Molva* Of course I did! You didn't think I was going to sit there like some silly goose girl while everybody else was going up pouring pearls in his palm?

*Gordiata* But they belonged to your great-grandmother.

*Molva* So what? (*laughs*) Anyway, I'm her great-granddaughter, and they're mine now.

*Sun Prince* Now, now, my dear, really!

*Molva* We all thought he was only a man, just that, we couldn't understand why they put him on trial. And since all the young men had gotten together and decided to kill him secretly, while he was asleep, we decided to set up a guard around him, women armed in bronze, and he's sleeping with his sunflower, surrounded by armor and helmets, all of them watchful, glistening in the moonlight. They'll never find him, he's hidden in a regiment of girls in the Sacred Grove on Devil's Hills. And the place is thick with trees on every side.

*Prince Shum* I'm going to tell on you.

*Molva* You do and you'll be sorry, you little sneak! What a cheap thing to do! (*She goes on with her story.*) When he was going to sleep, he told us to blindfold his eyes, I don't know why. And somebody said that he'd wake up at midnight, and go out holding his sunflower, with the blindfold still on his eyes, and follow the path of the moon, I still don't know why.

*Gordiata* What kind of clothes was he wearing?

*Molva* Well, first of all, he wouldn't even let go of his pipe, the one he made out of a piece of reed, the one he prays to. And he has on a white shirt and white trousers, and white leggings and bast shoes. And tucked into his belt are his flute and a comb and a little knife he uses to cut branches for bows, and he taught us how to shoot with them. He really doesn't look like a god at all; he's just a very sweet adorable young man.

*Old Prince* Young whippersnapper!

*Gordiata* Eat something, my dear, this dish of baked pears, you must be starving. You've done nothing all day but run round and round in circles.

*Molva* No, I don't feel like eating anything at all anymore. Besides, I think someone is calling me.

*Gordiata* You mustn't go out again. Don't go out with him to the Sacred Mountain.

*Molva (as she leaves)* That would be too strange . . . . .

*Serving Woman* Would you believe it, the Princess has gone out again! She told me to fetch her a pot of cherry preserves and an evening wrap, and she was off, she says, to bring some cherry preserves to her god. And she took her sewing basket, so she wouldn't get bored if she had to stand guard.

*Gordiata (getting up)* What did I tell you! What did I tell you!

*Prince Shum* I just don't know what she's doing. (*He begins to pace up and down.*) Staying out all night! No morals, that's what it is. I don't know where all this will lead. I'm going to go kill him!

*Sun Prince* Now, now, not so fast. Still, something must be done about all this. (*He dresses and goes out.*)

(*The scene changes to a large upper room, crowded with beardless young men, all of them armed.*)

*Young Man (His lip curls with scorn, as he raises his eyes above those of his listeners.)* I tell you, we must put an end to all this! You all know what's happened: a wanderer, a boy, with nothing remarkable about him, nothing special, has captured the hearts of all the good-looking girls in the city. He's stolen them from us. Now I know it's a fact, there's been nothing—nothing bad going on, all they do is get together and spend all their time with him, just playing, as if they were all suddenly children. But think what might happen eventually! Think of their honor, and their families' honor! So we have to kill him, it's our duty. We didn't decide his fate, we're only the instruments of destiny. There's no call to dishonor him—and no call to spare him either. He deserves to die. But they say the girls are there, all armed. What should we do about them? I have no doubt they'll stand up and defend their precious. I propose we go against them sword in hand. And let anyone who will not kill him die by his own hand and sword. That's all I have to say. Anyone who disagrees with my plan, raise your hand. One, two . . . . Seven for, two against, and one abstainer. Then it's the will of the assembly.

*Others* We are with you!

*Prince Shum* It's me, I'm on your side. I know where he is. He's in the Sacred Grove. My sister told me.

*Presiding Officer* I commend you for the patriotic spirit that has moved you to join us, and I move that the meeting return to the order of business.

*One Who Has Just Entered* What is the business of this meeting?

*Presiding Officer* We decided to transmigrate into the souls of our ancestors. To do that we have migrated eleven centuries into the past. But *he* has appeared and disturbed our tranquillity. We are discussing methods of restoring peace—by using our swords.

## ACT FOUR

*(A tall grove of sacred oaks. On some of the benches hang idols, images of the gods. The Girl-God sleeps on the hilltop; he is surrounded by maids in armor keeping watch.)*

*Molva* It's me. I brought you some cherry preserves, and I wrapped myself up in a warm shawl. Do you want some?

*One of the Maids* We all thank you.

*Molva* When our master wakes up, I'll give him some cherry preserves.

*One of the Maids (raises her head to look)* He's still asleep. Look how beautifully they shine on the mountaintop, our pearls, the ones we wore once—it's like a hillside covered with fireflies. Oh, be quiet. *(She puts her finger to her lips.)* He has raised his head. A blindfold covers his eyes. He's coming down toward us, down from the hill, his sunflower is still in his hand. No, he's going toward the forest, see?—a streak of light falls from heaven and leads him on. Hurry, hurry, let's follow him.

*(They move up the hill in a group, to follow him; their armor glitters in the moonlight.)*

*First Maid in Armor* He walks, but he seems fast asleep.

*Second Maid in Armor* He walks, with his hand outstretched—it's as if some enormous hand were guiding him.

*Third Maid in Armor* He moves among Leuna's sacred trees.

*Second Maid in Armor* We must hurry, some harm may come to him.

*First Maid in Armor* Who is this woman with us? She was suddenly *here*, in the very place you see her now, where did she come from? Look, look, I can walk right through her, and there she is still, directly behind me. She has a spear in her hand, and a soft cloak covers her body.

*Second Maid in Armor* It happened to me, too. I walked right through her spear, and she closed ranks behind me.

*Third Maid in Armor* And I too can pass easily through her—and look, isn't that a leash she holds, with two hounds, two swift hunting dogs?

*All* It's true.

*Third Maid in Armor* And look—on his head, see how two antlers begin to grow, and now he's running, a deer pursued by the hunter.

*All* Yes, it's true, he's running, as if someone pursued him, he has grown antlers, he is a deer in flight from the hunter! We see it all. No. It's only our imagination, because there he is again, just as before, holding his golden flower, just as before. He's the same as before.

*Girl-God* You girls, you have gathered beside me, like flowers by a stream that makes them rustle, but the stream is cold. Now it is my turn to go toward another, one for whom I am a flower. To her I bow my head, to my Leuna of the night.

*Some of the Maids in Armor* Listen to his song! Yes, he was cold to us, and now he must encounter one who will be cold to him. Oh, soulless Will! Oh, Destiny that feasts on human souls! We scattered our pearls, and covered the nighttime hillside with the glitter of the starry sky. We drowned our souls in worship of him, but he was cold to us, and now he goes to meet one who will be cold to him, and before her he will scatter his words and feelings as if they were pearls torn from his neck.

Oh, wicked! Oh, unjust, evil Destiny. Woe to us all. Should we desert him? Should we return to our families, our brothers and sisters, where they sit by their fires in the evening, lamenting our loss? No. Even our sorrow is the sweetest honey, there was a time

when we drank it, and it would be an injustice to leave him alone here in the dark grove with his flower in his hand, where even now his killers may lie in wait. Let us follow him through the dark grove, over one hill, over another, and let the images of the gods that hang from these branches bear witness to the loyalty of his maids in armor. We were true to our incomparable, our Beautiful Beloved.

See, girls, the river bank. What invisible presence has left a ship here where no ship has ever been, with a place in it for each one of us?

And who comes silently to take his place, there by the rudder? And who guides the ship across the waves, makes it move without oars? It is Fate. He has made himself our helmsman, to help us obey his commands.

Ah, girls, be still, what fear and terror here in the terrifying presence of Fate! Silent and transparent he sits in the prow of the vessel, portending something terrible. A moment of terror. And where he is taking us, across these waves, we cannot know.

Ripple behind us, you waves, and carry our sad tidings to our families, that we sail a course set by Fate.

But the river rolls on to a place where there was once a street. And already we stand on dry land. But what's here? Do the stalking killers glimmer behind us? Sisters, sisters, it's time to prove that we carry our swords for a reason, that these plates of armor do not hide timid hearts. Ah, how bright the torches burn! This then our fate: each of us here must meet her offended betrothed.

But we will not break humanity's laws; let each one of us choose another's lover.

The torches burn with a terrifying light!

But see—our brothers are here too, they have all joined forces! Woe to us all! No, wait—they all sheath their swords and move off in the distance. Happiness! Happiness! For the moment a war about to enflame sibling against sibling has flickered and expired! For how long? And still he moves divinely forward, and again he seems the image of a deer, and again among us the moonlight huntress stalks with her pair of hounds. Let us sing thanks to Destiny, and our escape from the transgression of all human law. And still he moves onward, but don't you think now he trembles and seems to stop—



Yes, he has stopped. But look there—in that street full of antlers, trophies of the hunt that make the street appear a stretch of forest—see where the gleam of a torch appears.

Are there more of these murderers still on his trail? No, it's a girl! Does she come with some treasonous intention? Or is it only someone dressed in women's clothes? It can't be, her face is too lovely, her face and her form are too beautiful. See how he trembles.

Look, the divine huntress and her hounds have caught up with him. See how he holds out his flower toward her—but why? Her touch accidentally burns his flower to ashes. She pays no attention to him and moves away, beyond him; blinded by the light of her own torch, she does not notice him and rushes through a gateway. Oh, the hounds are upon him and he falls and cries a terrifying cry. A piercing cry, a haunting cry. And he lies there, torn to pieces by the moonlight hunt.

I pity him. What is happening to his face? It is all twisted by convulsions; we can no longer recognize his face in *that*. He is suffering. Let us carry him tenderly into a nearby dwelling. And with our tender care let us try to reverse the irreversible blow of terrifying fate.

Where is the divine huntress? She has vanished. Vanished with her hounds. The hunt has ended.

We hate you, proud huntress, and nourish unyielding revenge against you. But we cannot read the heart of our Beloved, and only that keeps us from leaping upon you with our swords, and howling after your bloody figure into the wood.

*Night Watch* Who are you, at this late hour, all in armor, bearing swords? And who is this on the ground, clutching a scorched flower, his face contorted with grief? Is this the Girl-God? It is indeed! Does he know that he's been sentenced to death for causing these clashes between our families? But since we don't know who he is, whether he's divine or not, the decision is his. He can decide to accept the sentence or not.

*Girl-God (His voice is very weak.)* I do not accept the sentence.

*Leader of the Watch (He bows his head; the others do the same.)* You maids in armor, you are ordered to desist from these nighttime

gatherings and return to your families. Be more tolerant of the young men of this earth, more accepting of their solicitations. Now you may carry him into a private house and care for him. Do all that your compassion bids you do, your natural sympathy for one upon whom fate hangs heavy. Go now, you princesses, you royal maidens, go to your own homes.

*Members of the Watch* Oh wonderful! What a sight to behold! The most beautiful girls of our noblest families, all in armor, with swords and helmets, lit by the flicking torchlight! We thought such a sight was possible only in fairy tales, or in divine revelations! And now the impossible has come to pass. And this unfortunate young man! This poor, unhappy man! Only yesterday he was the happiest of mortals, today he is the unhappiest, stretched upon the ground with his face to the sky, his hair all matted with the mud of the gutter. Learn the bitterness of life on earth, you people, even when it wears a mask! But let us find a stretcher, and carry him into this house nearby.

## ACT FIVE

*(An outlying tower.)*

*Liubava (reading a letter)* “Yesterday I encountered a madman who offered me his flower. A torch flared accidentally and frightened me; I scorched his flower; it was clumsy of me and I must have frightened him, for he groaned as people do in dreams. It may have been the Girl-God. At any rate he was surrounded by a crowd of maids in armor carrying torches, all so beautiful and noble that only with my eyes cast down could I pass through their midst. They looked at me with hatred and contempt. If he was indeed the boy we have heard so much about, I’m sure I deserved those looks.

“‘It is a terrifying thing to wander alone upon the pathways of destiny,’ as my master used to say.

“Yesterday I met another young man (this was before all that) and I am to see him again today. A rush of tenderness beats at my heart. And yet I am now at those heights, upon that path, from which a fall means certain death.

“All the best, Zoreliuba. Give my best wishes to your brother

Snovid, ask him to come be witness to my happiness or my misery.”

And nothing more. She didn't mention the old woman, Vennie Glazki, but that can wait until later.

I've put on a new dress—is that enough? And arranged my hair—is that enough? And what does all this mean? Because the young man, his eyes bound, was on his way to see me, paying no heed to so many dangers in the dark grove, where murderers lay in ambush beneath the idols of the gods. And yet some power led him on, not his own desire. And will my heart beat faster in someone else's powerful hands? But my heart trusts too easily, it beats no faster than usual.

What will happen today? Should I wear a different dress? No. One thing I learned as a child was how to behave properly, and the dress I'm wearing is a perfect example of my exacting and refined sense of taste. I'll go dressed just as I am. (*She locks the door behind her and sets off.*) I must pass by the city on the hill and follow the path through the pines and oaks of the grove, the grove that surrounds the Temple of Black Death.

What a terrifying name! But why do I realize that only now? I speak that name, and immediately everything goes gloomy, all colors suddenly darken. I really mustn't be so nervous and upset. This is the beginning of the climb. But who is this, leading a crowd of old men and children, whose eyes upon me are so beautiful and terrifying, no, not terrifying—horrible! Why is his black look fixed on me? Why does his manner tell me to run, why is he so angry? Why are his eyes so full of the same hatred that flamed yesterday in the eyes of the maids in armor? Should I run away? Should I be afraid of his eyes? Should I run from his glances with arms stretched out before me, run down the green slope of the hill? Should I run away? But it's him! It's him! Why has his look changed to terribly? No, I must control my feelings with bitter resolve, and I must go to meet his pitiless eyes and greet him with a kiss, just as my heart has commanded since I awoke. You bright shiner from afar! I come to greet you! But that same crowd of girls, there they are again! And there he is again, the same as yesterday, with his terrifying eyes, and now he falls to his knees and lets his hair touch the ground and now he rises, he stands again and covers his face with his hands, and begins to cry, and still stares

with terrifying eyes! And why does someone gesture helplessly with despair—the same figure, there in the distance?

And why does some grotesque crippled old woman come running from the fields, running toward me with evil in her eyes? She wants to head me off, she shouts at me to stop, she tries to overtake me—No! I won't let her! Oh how beautiful the Girl-God seems, he stands among his guard of women, his eyes no longer hidden! What sadness there is in his face!

Why did I refuse his entreaties last night? So I could reject him today, when I was true to him yesterday as I am now?

And why does he seem more and more beautiful? But why do the sorrow and panic keep growing in his sad and lonely eyes? Why are they distorted with suffering? He slows his step, he means to let the old woman intercept me, the hunchback, the monster! But now I begin to run, I run to meet him, I move faster and faster, only he could cause this race. I come closer and closer, but now I see his eyes burning with such passionate forgiveness and such love, they could forgive even the most terrible deed.

Oh, now I understand—these are the rites of Plaguemouth, and still I go proudly to confront them. Only why is the Girl-God crying, why does he cover his eyes with his hand, why do the maids in armor stand with tears in their eyes? Get away from me, old woman, go away, keep your bony hands away from me. Watch me push you away, hear me laugh as I throw you to the ground! You keep on! You hang onto me, you clutch my clothes! But you cannot stop me!

*Chorus of Bystanders* It is accomplished! But why could it not have been an old man, a sick man, a criminal?

Why must it be the most beautiful of all our girls, one who rejected the fate-compelled advances of the Girl-God, he who was indifferent to all mortal women, who paid no heed to the pearls they scattered in his path, why must it be she who comes to meet him here on this path, bearing her “yes” to one who must reject her with silence? Her hour is at hand! In vain the eyes of all who behold her cry out “Run away!” In vain. There is no help in the eyes of her beholders; there is no help in the faces of others, in their sorrow and terror. There is no help in that figure in the distance, whose arm points out the path of life, the last of all her

possibilities. There is no help in the old woman bent beneath the weight of life, as she attempts to distract her!

She has met her doom!

Weep, young men, you have lost a bride.

Weep, young girls, you have lost a sister.

Now she is in the priests' hands, poisoned by the kiss of Plaguemouth, eternally young, a kiss passed from the mouth of one young man to another, and at last to her. They will give her an antidote, and she will be alive and smiling for half an hour. But the young man is already dead. He lies dead at her feet. His brief reprieve from death is over. This is the end of the game two mortals play.

*Girl-God* All of you, I played your hearts with disregard. You witnessed with me the horrors of the night, you protected me from those who came to kill me in the night.

I shall lead you upon the high mountains, upon the cresting waves of the sea, into the deep gorges of the underworld. I will wake you at the first rays of dawn, and lull you to sleep as evening descends. The waves of the sea will mirror the stars no more brightly than I shall mirror your souls' desires.

All you must do is come follow me. I am your leader.

All you must do is help me avenge the death of my beloved.

*Detachment of Maids in Armor* Hear, oh hear, the sounds of his reed flute call us to battle. Some other self possesses him, he is no longer what he once was. See how he runs from the cursing priests; they follow him up the steep path to the mountain. See how he shines in his armor! See the great spear in his hand. No, all that is only illusion. It is only the sun glinting on his hair.

See, oh see, how a deer runs upon the crests of the mountains, and again a huntress stalks him, with a pair of dogs leashed in. What terrible hunt is being reenacted in our presence? And what shall we do about those who try to oppose the bronze of swords with mouths poisoned by plague?

Hurry now, you, Otvaga, you, Ulybka, you, Sila, strain your sinews, hurry behind him, do whatever your hearts command, prove you found a purpose in trading a distaff for armor. We will try to oppose the killers, although we think we see among them the gathered kings of our country.

Is not this the fulfillment of the old prophecy: "Plague will poison the slopes of the mountains, when kisses rise to oppose swords?"

Woe! Then a dark fate is in store for us pilgrims faithful to our leader, even in exile. And long ago we heard our fate described, in tales we heard as children. How long ago, how far away and wonderful it seems!

But see, they are running to the square before the holy temple. We must follow them.

*(An open space where the statue of Plague God stands beneath a canopy studded with black stones. The idol grasps an iron rod. Its black lips glisten, dripping with fresh blood. The priests enter in single file, in white garments, and surround their god.)*

*Priests* Back, you mob of madmen!

*High Priest* Back, mortal!

*Girl-God* There is no mortal here.

*Priests* Alas, what we were expecting has happened. This is the hour of our astonishment. No one knows the future any better than we do, but even we must be faithful to fate, and our final kiss is saved for Plaguemouth our god, and not for you mortal women. We will fulfill the promise proclaimed of old. Do not seem surprised at us, since we too borrow our strength from a source beyond mortal men. We wish to remain worthy of our gods.

*(The priests in their white garments run swiftly to the idol of their god; they kiss his mouth and fall down dead upon the steps.)*

*Girl-God* Carry out your final mortal duty, so we who watch will stand astounded, and will tell your story in our songs. We who do not die stand watching you, who do. Remember that.

*Maidens* Ah, see where she comes again, the warrior woman moves among us. She holds her hounds in check, waiting for the inevitable moment. See, we are in the presence of terror.

*Girl-God* Yes, we are in the presence of the majestic, we are upon the threshold of terror.

*High Priest* You warriors of Plaguemouth, you who yet live, summon your final strength, rush with your poisoned mouths upon these newcomers! It does not matter who they are!

*Maids* What can we do? We cannot raise our swords against old men who come against us with kisses. What grotesque fate has made us participants in a war of swords and kisses! No, let us let our weapons fall, and hide our faces in our hands, and surrender to the inevitable. (*They do.*)

*Bystanders* The high priest has fallen silent, the girls have spoken and now they hide their faces in their hands, and the priests still continue their terrifying rush to kiss their idol and now the last of them, with a white beard, his eyes all red, sinks to the ground and topples on the temple steps. And all is still. Some people hide their faces in their cloaks, or turn their eyes away in horror; another, his hand stretched boldly before him, struggles to reach the idol, and then falls into the abyss in convulsions, and a bearded Jew holding a sack of serpents stands rooted to the spot in panic. And someone cuts off his head with an easy movement, and the head lies there, its eyelids trembling, and the hissing serpents wriggle off in different directions.

Meanwhile the kings and warriors advance from below.

Meanwhile the high priest stares at the stranger with sorrowful mad eyes, and advances toward him, lowering his beard. The stranger watches with open curiosity, and the priest bends his head to whisper a secret in his ear. Then suddenly with a scream of laughter, he kisses him on the mouth. But the stranger laughs. The priest falls, staggers into the arms of his servants and dies. No, not yet. That hasn't happened yet. That's only our imagination. So far the priest has only moved away from the idol, and now walks past the row of girls, who stand motionless, their heads covered with their cloaks. He moves toward the motionless Girl-God. And what will happen? What will happen next? He carries death with downcast eyes and the pale smiling figure will accept his kiss and fall a victim, or else he will run. But he might have run before this. And he has no weapons!

Oh yes, we see it now, the moment of execution draws near, and your companion leads on her hounds! The priest moves slowly, as if some force held him back.

But now the kings approach, and now the killers run.

And where can he run, as the priest approaches with his plague-stained mouth, and behind him drawn bows strain tense, and the heads of a hostile crowd follow his every move? His only refuge is to hide his head in his cloak.

But look now—the priest falls to the ground, the death-dealer falls, and the boy still stands, and he does not tremble. Did the archers choose a different target on purpose, or is this the work of an unseen power that deflected the bows? We are too ignorant to tell, but the boy stands unharmed, and now the kings surround him and protect him with their shields.

And someone who lacked the strength to experience all this has thrown himself into the abyss.

*Kings* It is accomplished. The fated actors have fulfilled their assigned roles, the living look on in wonder and learn from what they have seen. Put up your swords, you mad young men, lay down your spears. Punishment and pardon are not yours to give. Your ardent anger was directed against the boy—let him go into exile. The waves that beat at the feet of our mountains will carry him to warmer waters, and there he and his women companions will find the gleaming glory the old tales have predicted for him. Uncover your heads and your faces. Ask him if he will accept our judgment.

*Girl-God (nods his head)* I will.

*Kings* Then go. There are ships by the shore, with everything you may need. Take them and sail away.

*(The Girl-God and his maids in armor start down the hill. The Kings stand watching them go.)*

[1908–09: IV.164]



# *The Little Devil*

*A Petersburg Vaudeville on the Birth of Apollo  
(Dialogues)*

*Old Man* Oh, give me a horn

*Others* On this buffalo morn

*Old Man* And measure the prairies

*Bystanders* of death

*Old Man* Fulfill the rites of love

*Voice* I stand and stare and shove

*Old Man* Death strides among us

*Bystanders* He gallops among us

*Old Man* Oh, treacherous name! (*He drops the horn and disappears into the mists.*)

*Bystanders* What a terrible shame . . . . .

*(Enter a Scientist. He has a long, clean-shaven face and long hair. He runs in shouting and tearing his hair.)*

*Scientist* My God! I took a piece of plant fiber, it was from the most ordinary kind of plant, and I examined it with an extended eye and all of a sudden it changed its shape with malice aforethought and turned into Volynsky Street with people coming and going and the shades half drawn in the windows and you could see people reading or just sitting there worn out looking at one another, and now I don't know which way to go, toward that piece of plant under the microscope or to Volynsky Street, which is where I live. I mean, would it be the same me, under the microscope in a piece of plant, or outside my house in the evening? And the universe provides no answer!

*Bushes (begin to laugh just like people)* Ha-ha-ha-ha.

*(Enter at a gallop a horde of naked Witches with hair flying; they saddle the Scientist and ride him out of sight.)*

*Witches* Ride the gray prof to the watering trough.  
Pretend his eyeglasses are bridles.  
Ride a gray horse, make him jump.  
Are we riding our race through the rough?  
A funny professor with long gray hair!  
Come on, horsey, show us your stuff!

*Old Lady of the Swamps* He has stayed in the same hotel as the gods  
where the service is simply divine.  
He's a wise man, a simple man,  
And he'll pay for his stay with his mind.  
Now he has witches hard on his tail!  
Barking, uproar overhead!  
They raise their wild old heads and wail:  
We'll ride him home instead!

*(Collar turned up, his eyes bright with daring, a young lover lingers in the shadows by a building entrance, near a young doorman with a diabolical appearance.)*

*Young Man* This is where Olga passes on her way home. Help me  
now, Devil! Sweet Satan, help me now!

*Devil* Here I am, young man. What can I do for you?

*Young Man* A couple of things, actually. You see that streetcorner over  
there? You see that crowd of girls? They come from all over Russia,  
did you know that? And they uproot their rights to be our god-  
desses, and they get involved with these intellectual types who'd  
make a horde of witches turn and run. And look what happens!  
Why, our girls go to class wearing sables and come out wearing  
dyed dog and cat!

*(Song of the Playboys)*

When I sing my music rises  
like a dream of brief surprises,  
like an antidote to living.  
Life is short and unforgiving.

But life's veil turns to ashes  
in the passion of my eyes:  
Death will sing her fatal music  
though we call it truth or lies.

*She* Kant Cant Kent Comte Can't . . . . .

*Young Man* It's her!

*(He rushes toward her with outstretched arms.)*

*Devil* Now where exactly was it you wanted to go?

*Young Man* To a planet whose face is washed in bloody basins.

*Devil* Oh very good! You'll soar like a couple of animals, freed from  
excess baggage. You'll pass out in frenzied cries of Oh, Ah, Oh.  
What's the matter? Don't you people need the Devil anymore?

*Everyone (faint with horror)* She disappeared.

*Devil* Really?

*One of the Girls* What a pair!  
They flew right up into the air!  
And she seems to have dyed her hair,  
which I hardly consider quite fair—  
Have they really no shame?  
Is this all just a game?

*(All the girls cover their faces with their hands and sit down in the  
snow, weeping into their handkerchiefs.)*

*Devil* What lovely books she's left behind. A whole heap of them.  
Nothing but Comte and Kant. Also Knut somebody. Hey, cabby!  
You need a knout?

*Coachman* Hell no. I already got knots in my knout.

*Devil* Attaboy. Now really, did she need this huge stack of books for  
something so simple and uncomplicated as flying through the  
starry winter sky? Or is this the usual launching platform for nov-  
ice sky-fliers? I'm sure it won't be long now before they offer  
courses for highschool girls that teach them how to get dragged  
by a horse, face down in the dirt and tied feet first to the horse's

tail, even though everyone admits that in the old days, when they used to do that, it was a very bumpy ride. Well, anyone who wants to do herself in will always find a way.

*Old Lady* It so happens that in this city even the stones go to school to learn to be stones, and they go through three teaching levels: senior, junior, and lower. And the pavement goes to school to learn to be a pavement, and there you are! Everyone walks around with their noses already out of joint, just to be on the safe side, and the horses are all three-legged from too much education. Because all the stones go going around studying cant. I mean Kant.

*Devil* True, too true, the world is great and full of wondrous works, believe it or not, and why not? And there are black masses and everything. Get it? Get it? It's all the devil's work! You know, so many people wanted to be saints, that even the wickedest devil is still a slightly better person than the best human being.

*Young Man* One, two, a witch and a goblin. Her or me, but to fly, fly through the evening sky, past rows of chimneys where the city eats the apple and the people chew the core, trying to become organic, something a lichen managed to be long ago on a birch branch. Let's fly, damn it, fly, Devil, fly!

*Devil* I hear and obey, my very dear sir, and, I am sure, gracious sir, and young man to boot, whose hot blood rages as Divinity once raged throughout the universe. Only nowadays He's calmed down considerably.

*Young Man* Think over our adventure step by step. We will drink away the night and this minor snowstorm, drink to our adventure and use very personal pronouns.

*Devil* I prefer to follow my own inspiration. As far as personal pronouns are concerned, the formal one is a dam across a millstream, and the intimate one is a miller, and it's always the miller who opens the floodgates. However, it's getting rather hot here, don't you think? Even for those of us who are used to life in a furnace. You know who that is? In the pointy hat of gopher fur, the weatherbeaten zipun with the green belt, pretending to be drunk? That's Perun.

*Perun* I don't give a good goddam, you cut down the forests, you plant them in the plain, you turn them into gallows for traitors, ok. You wanna cut down all the forests, you go right ahead. You take your happiness now, and your good life—they're nothing but decoy ducks to attract their wild cousins to their downfall. That's why decoys never get shot, they just call the shots for the rest of us. They've done it from time immemorial. But I don't give a good goddam. I came here to save you. And none of you wanna be saved, that's obvious.

*Old Man* Everybody knows you can't be saved if you don't want to.

*Little Boy (to Perun)* Grandpa, grandpa, catch me a sparrow!

*Perun* Beat it, sonny. I don't give a good goddam. Hey you, cop! Listen, officer, you a good man? Huh?

*Policeman* Sorry, buddy, I can't talk now.

*Someone* Ooh! Will you look at that!

*(He stops in amazement and then runs on.)*

*Young Man* What do you think, Devil, will it be long now?

*Devil* Judging by your face, I think just long enough. By the time your enchantress finally appears, her beauty might be slightly boring.

*Young Man* That, my friend, is a danger you always run.

*Devil* Danger? But I wanted anger! Look, here he comes, in an okhamben and a murmolka covered with pearls, see, it's "the last Russian." It's true, isn't it—his eyes are tight with anger, an unwholesome smile snakes across his lips. Believe me, he can foresee the prophecy made by Perun in his weathered zipun, but who pays any attention? People just look at him and laugh and point their fingers. He knows a few things about these forests that Herodotus never heard of. Now what? A flower fight? Swords made of flowers? Look, they're beginning a battle. They come out with tired faces and their arms full of books, then they start making snowballs, and they start throwing too! Brave behavior in a flower fight! I wouldn't mind dying in a fight like that. Some of them aren't bad-looking, even for witches. And of course some of them are even educated.

*(The girls sit down in a snowbank, bury their faces in their handkerchiefs and cry.)*

*Devil* Goodbye, little sisters. Perhaps we'll meet again in a swamp somewhere, if you ever decide that gathering herbs is a pleasurable pastime. Don't forget, by the way, you must always call me loudly by name. My name is "Devil." Just say the word. It sounds rather strange, I admit, but that doesn't mean I'm not a very polite young man. I'll even listen to Protestant preachers. Of course, I do have certain preferences where church services are concerned, I adore high mass on the anniversary of Tchaikovsky's death. You see how casually I let you in on my social situation, without making any demands in return. I do hope for the same openness from you; that way our relationship will develop very nicely, no obligations on either side—more fantasy than fact, in fact, but still a respectable bag of weapons against boredom, the blues, and similar visitors who linger at the doorstep like creditors, wondering whether they should believe the butler when he says Madam is not at home, or swears she died a year ago. So goodbye again. *(He bows and raises his hat.)*

*One of the Girls (gets up)* Your face isn't quite like other people's. Your eyes are a little brighter than other people's eyes. You know, I have nothing waiting for me at home but a boring supper of tea and German wurst and a textbook on urban life under the Capetians, so it might be fun to go off with you to your swamp, and gather herbs and listen to your stories. I somehow suspect it will do more for my education than my usual evening homework.

*Devil (bows)* My reputation for good manners compels me to do everything in my power to express my gratitude for your agreeable company. Your proposition, if I may put it that way, far surpasses your modest intentions.

*Other Girls* Me too! Me too! *(A few of them put away their handkerchiefs and exit proudly, without looking back.)*

*Devil* Oh, you beautiful girls! I swear to you, by this natural appendage to normal human form that perverse popular opinion has endowed me with, you will find in my swamp more of what Kant and his kind were searching for, because their researches more

often than not recall a piece of green sausage beside a flower on a window sill.

*One of the Girls* Solovyov—he's one of the country's leading intellectuals—said that . . . .

*Devil* Oh, Solo, Solo, yes, all you intellectuals want to sing a solo. You know, I met recently with a delegation from the city's cats, they were complaining that vast numbers of their sisters are perishing because of a prejudice against their singing, their spring hymn howled to the rising sun. It seems people prefer to listen to the solo songs of nightingales, their tasteful rivals in breaking the night's quiet. And the law does not protect them from flying inkwells; they all begged me to get rid of this prejudice. I was forced to point out to them the limitations of their world view, and make clear that the essential principle of cats called to replace something mewling or merely even grunting (and in these matters, nobility imposes its distinctions) is a universal principle and extends to the stars and even beyond, beyond the confines of the solar system, since the world itself—and this I must state quite clearly and distinctly—is merely the long drawn out “meow” roasted and served up to us in the place of the noble “moo.” You see how constantly I shake things to their very foundations.

*One of the Girls* You do go on from time to time, you little Devil, you. Do you mind if we call you little Devil?

*Devil* Oh, please, do! With great pleasure, in fact!

*Another Girl* If you were doing all this talking about cats simply because you mentioned the word Kant earlier, it merely goes to show your sense of rhyme isn't very good, which probably means your poems aren't much good either.

*Devil* What is this, a joke? A change of hands in the folk dance of double-talk?

*One of the Girls* A joke? Oh god, I hope he's not going to start talking about yokes.

*Devil* I'm mortified, I'm vanquished, I retreat before your powers of observation, the brilliant rigor of your deductive powers. But alas,

jokes, yokes, why should I deny and disavow, it was indeed yokes that I was about to mention.

*One of the Girls (Looks at her watch)* I'm afraid I have to be going now. You know, little Devil, whenever you get excited, these two little horns pop out on your forehead. (*With a deep voice, a masculine gesture, she shakes hands.*) Gotta go. Goodbye, little Devil.

*Devil* What? No, don't go yet! You can't! Where are we? Ah, in front of Princess Dashkova's house. My dear Hercules, you must excuse me for plastering your image all over those oatmeal boxes. Yes, I confess it was all my doing, just a wicked little joke. But I hoped I might be doing you a favor, and make you famous by making you a household word, like a laxative. What? What's the matter? Don't you like the comparison? Here, take my raincoat! There are two sphinxes here—or there ought to be—oh, here they are! (*He addresses the Sphinxes.*) Oh, noble and beautiful creatures, who smile motionless at the course of centuries! You have landed in a society that will be no less sensitive to your pointed remarks than to the big talk of a man from the rostrum who knows the size of a man's nose and the exact year in which the universe heard his "waah!" when he dragged you from the shining sands out into the light of day without asking your permission and is brilliantly silent on the subject of your origins. Your lips quiver with a familiar curl of scorn for everything earthly, but that will make this little traverse all the more pleasant, since, I assure you, it consists of nothing but contradictions of all earthly laws. See how they smile in agreement? But in order to bring their plans to completion, they need to hear the holy word "Ka." Are there any detectives present?

*Ravens* Kaw! Kaw!

*Devil* Just look at those sphinxes! They look like seals, don't they, flinging themselves merrily into the water, swimming and diving. We'll meet them later on our way.

*Person* What's going on here?

*Devil* Nothing. Just snow, falling in the water. About those sphinxes, they've gone off to pad the voter-registration rolls. Also, they've been declared off-limits as possible disease carriers and removed by a medical evacuation team.



*Person (looking around suspiciously)* Are you putting me on?

*Another Person* Shut up, dummy, it's the Devil! I recognized him right away.

*Devil* They were only shadows. Besides we have to find Hera. Hercules, who's that with you? (*Hercules bends down and whispers something in his ear.*) Oh, introduce you! Sorry! This is the famous muscle man, used to be a right-wing thug a long, long time ago. Now he intends to go forth and do battle with monsters once again.

(*Hercules goes up to them all individually and shakes hands.*)

*Everybody* Ow, ow, ouch! What is this, penance for the pleasure of our company? That's no way to show your gratitude!

*Hercules (sheepishly)* Excuse me. I've been standing at the door of the palace so long, I've forgotten how to shake hands. It's been so long! Just a natural inclination to overdo things, I suppose. (*sincerely*) Please forgive me.

*Devil* Oh, go on, forgive him. See, he's ready to cry.

*Everybody* Oh, we do, we do, we want to be gracious! And once the pain goes away, it's really rather amusing, isn't it? What's the matter, you seem a bit far sighted.

*Hercules* Oh, I am, I've spent years up against this wall, staring out into the distance. You won't believe this, but the only things that helped me pass the time were clouds, and the help of God in counting up the ravens. I never like looking at people, couldn't really, they're so unserious, so, so flighty. But ravens! They know everything that's going to happen to us, you know. They even know things about the creatures who will come after us, god knows where they get their information. And besides—nature being what it is—they hope to arrange things for themselves then with as much success as they have now. They have a considerable amount of contempt for human beings. Why couldn't someone have understood that?

*One of the Crowd* That's very smart. It's intelligent, and very new too. You probably had a lot of time to think things over, didn't you,

standing up there next to that window all this time? And water trickling from the gutters onto your head, I suppose *that* wasn't too pleasant, but I guess it would definitely keep your mind from wandering!

*Hercules* Yes, I had plenty of time to think.

*Girl* Perhaps you'd like to try my glasses; I'm farsighted too.

*Hercules* No, they're too plain. But if you could just lend me a pair of sunglasses! I'd really look good in sunglasses!

*Man* Sunglasses! He wants sunglasses! Who's got some sunglasses?

*Second Girl* I do. Here, put these on. No, like this . . . . Well! Now you look totally contemporary. Want to take a walk?

*Hercules* Yes, I had plenty of time to think. Believe me, when I'm with people I feel like a living twig, while all the rest have been cut down to be woven into baskets. Because that's what present day citydwellers have instead of souls, you know, just baskets. I can easily see myself as the priest of Diana, you know, with his bright happy shining eyes and his attractive red mouth. Of course *he'd* say—he's an old friend and drinking buddy, you know—he'd say that it's the same difference between him and a city person as between a live deer and a skull with horns. Imagine a fat gourmet, a fat man who likes to skewer human souls and turn them into shish-kabob, he loves the hiss, sizzle and crackle, loves to watch the glittering drops as they fall into the fire. That's what this city is, that fat man. If you only knew how the ravens hate us, and how clearly they see the future. They feed our superstitious fear of cripples. Doesn't that mean that people in time to come will be without arms or legs, maybe even without lips?

*One of the Girls* You know, there's something about you that's still a little—untamed, wild. All you talk about are ravens, ravens. Do you mind if I think of you as wild?

*Hercules* Oh, come on, lady, what do you expect? I used to rip monsters' jaws apart, and never even ask their permission.

*Girl* Oh, ancient Greece! What a gorgeous, impossible country! It's true, by the way, isn't it, that this magnificent capital of ours looks a little like Greece?

*Hercules* Hmmm. Hard to say. Oh, of course there were lots of pretty girls back then but they spent more time dancing and hunting than they did studying—all this studying would probably have been considered reckless, irresponsible—immoral even. Besides which they would have been afraid it would attract the anger of the gods and call down vengeance from all-powerful Nature, so . . . . . What's going on? Horses in back of us, commotion up ahead. Little Devil—that's what you call him isn't it, little Devil—little Devil is riding on a huge black elephant with dead eyes and tusks. And if I'm not mistaken, that's Hera, leaning on its shoulder. What a strange and curious spectacle. What would my friend Nicodemus say to all this? He'd probably say: "Whatever happens happens less tastefully than it would if I did it."

*Devil* Meet my bosom buddy, a real prince—the Woolly Mammoth. He was just about to take over from his father when all of a sudden, no one knows why, the entire species perished. He tried to escape and found an early grave in a half-frozen swamp in Siberia. Also, this is Hera. Please love her and make her happy. I sneaked him away from the scientists.

*Hera* My dear girls, your clothes and your hairdos are in the worst possible taste. Ugh! Back in our day, even a slave wouldn't go that far. Otherwise, some of you might make fairly decent Grecian maidens.

*(The Mammoth raises his trunk and trumpets a sound.)*

*Devil* Well, here we are at my swamp, see all the swansdown floating around. Pick some up and let's make a crown for my poor dead prince here, since he missed his coronation. Embrace him, my poor dead sweetie. *(He kisses the Mammoth's eyes.)*

*Hera* What a terrible fate, extinction! Have a care, you humans! Tremble, you humans, something horrible lies in store for you! The same horrible fate as his, his and all his kind!

*Devil* What happened to your sphinxes? Oh, here they are, with their proud ineffable smiles, flopping out of the water and setting their paws boldly on the shore. Why are they so silent? You there! Say something!

*Sphinxes* Sh! Sh! He's getting mad! Oooh . . . .

*Devil* And give us a smile!

*Sphinxes* We are, we are, we're smiling, see?

*Devil* And a very good job you're doing at it too.

*Sphinxes* That's just what we were thinking!

*(Hera has gone off into a private discussion with the girls. After a short time they return done up like goddesses, costumes and hairdos. The goddess stands smiling in a great beehive hairdo. A light snowfall leaves garlands of snow on her body.)*

*Hera* Oh, humanity! Oh humans, humans! See how the snowstorm protects us from the burning rays of the sun. If you only knew how much we love you, we gods, how carefully we follow the working out of your destinies. If only you understood that our divine power depends upon you, and that without you we are only shadows. Oh humans, humans, why have you forsaken us? *(She looks up at the stars.)*

*Wooly Mammoth (He falls to his knees sobbing.)* And to think I used to be a prince! *(He sobs loudly.)*

*Hera* Stop that! Why are you crying, you poor fat boy, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Look at your white crown! You used to be a prince once, no? You had a sweetheart? No? No need to cry, let me give you a kiss, right on your dead, unseeing eye. Don't cry. Come on, girls, let's do something to cheer him up!

*(The girls circle the weeping Mammoth singing "Ring around a rosy" and clapping their hands. The Mammoth is seized by a fit of uncontrollable hilarity: he begins to hop and dance and spin in circles. The rest stand smiling as they watch.)*

*Wooly Mammoth* I can see! I can imagine! I can think!

*Sphinxes* How wonderful! We gave up thinking long ago, it was so boring. Now all we do is smile.

*Hera* Yes, he has it all at last. There he stands, deliriously happy. Let's all join hands and voices and sing him a song, like tipsy slave girls before their prince.

*Sphinxes* What was promised is proclaimed.

*Hera* Look down, you stars, and witness the union of earth and love.  
Stars, stars, oh you stars—

*Madman (with burning eyes)*

Desiring all, desired in return,  
a girl by the banks of the old Volokh.  
But from the outstretched hand of the universe  
a piece of bare wire poked out.

*Devil* It wasn't the real universe, you know, only a stuffed model. A stuffed bird with glass eyes and the wire armature sticking out of its bones—ugh. How revolting!

*Sphinxes* How awful. There's nothing funny about *that*. Our smiles are cowards at a moment like this. His outcry sounds like a desperate appeal for help.

*Devil* It's true, the things he says are awful, but of course he isn't dangerous and it's perfectly all right if he stays. Let him look at the Mammoth straight in the eyes. See how he stares with that burning look at the prince's sightless eyes. Look, see how the prince shudders. Everybody close your eyes! Those burning rays—no one can withstand them! And now the prince can see!

*Someone in the Crowd* He could see before.

*Devil* No, he only began to see this minute! The madman brings light to the blind man with the mad light of his eyes. The blind man sees! The dead prince can see! Thus is the half-filled cup of divinity poured out upon the earth, and sight is born. A blind man cannot withstand the rays of madness. Learn from this lesson!

*Sphinxes* We're smiling.

*Devil* Didn't your teachers ever tell you anything about this?

*Everybody* My goodness no, never.

*Devil* We are invisible to all eyes. To anyone looking on, we are only murk and the shimmer of mirage, but we see everything. But look, what an odd sight! A multitude of frogs of all varieties, great and small, and they form themselves into the crest of a wave so that the

tiniest of them appear like droplets of foam, and then—oh, miracle! Look! Look! See how a new priest of art appears, born of the foam, rising out of it—the Great White Hope! What a strange idol! “Yet I begin to smell a rat . . . .”

*One of the Girls* Well, I think I’ve got to be going. It’s getting late and I’m a long way from home. Goodbye, little Devil, you clever thing, you!

*Devil* What an odd thing to see! I’m dazzled by it.

*One of the Crowd* That’s no god. That’s just a brood of young frogs, all of them bravely singing the song of life, each in a different key.

*Devil* That may well be true. An institution for the artificial breeding of young frogs? A perfectly innocent occupation, ladies and gentlemen, no question about it. But why should such questions appear in the numinous form of a god? A breeding school for frogs. Ha! Ha! Ha!

*Voices from Above* We fly on the wings of our friend’s booming laugh. They wouldn’t accept us up there. They wanted to dump us into some sort of soup of incorruptibility, and only a magic spell saved us from premature immortality, despite the displeased howling of the high priests. Olga caught a cold and she’s got a runny nose. All this flying around on clouds and the problem of trying to make conversation at this height have given us a headache. Besides which we’ve got an awful toothache. Any idea what to do about it?

*Devil* There are some very powerful cures. For instance, you could stick your hand into a fire. It’ll hurt so much you’ll never notice your teeth.

*Young Man* You’re right as usual. But who are these creatures in the funny costumes? They all have such fiercely independent attitudes. Well, will you take a look at that! It’s our old girlfriends!

*Devil* Oh, this is just one of my little jokes; it amuses me to play around. These are statues, you see, valuable ancient ones, stolen from the museum. They will stand here for a moment or two, horror-stricken at what has happened to them, as if turned to

stone; and we, meanwhile, will bring on the detectives who are trying to track them down.

*Young Man* Oh, Devil, Devil! You amuse everyone except yourself.

*Policeman* Here they are. And these must be the thieves. Everybody hold it! I'll shoot the first person who moves.

*Devil* Relax. Nobody's going anywhere. (*They all begin to scatter in every direction, except the Devil and the Young Man.*) But think how boring it would be, if my instinct to cause confusion were swayed by my likes and dislikes. Believe me, it bores me to have to restrain myself, especially from the innocent need for amusement.

*Policeman* They're trying to get away! After them, after them!

*One of the Girls* We don't know *what's* happening. We left school under the most improbable circumstances, and now . . . . .

*Policeman* Excuse me, please excuse me, it's all my fault. I'll have them get you a cab at once. This has all been a terrible misunderstanding.

*One of the Girls* It certainly has! But how did all this get started?

*Policeman* Excuse me, ladies, please excuse me . . . . . [*They leave.*]

(*The Young Man and the Devil stroll together, deep in conversation.*)

*Young Man* Look. Imagine you see a lake, and a hunter, and he's hiding in the reeds and he has a duck tied on a string. This decoy duck calls out, and all its companions fly down to join it and the hunter shoots them, and they're all dead. And that duck keeps calling and calling. Now what is the significance of *that*? I can't figure it out, it's terrifying, that dream, that mass descent into death. I was a hunter once myself.

*Devil* It's a horror, that hunt: the reeds are years, and the birds are generations.

*Young Man* The things you say are terrifying. And your eyes today, they're terrifying too.

*Devil* Now suppose you see a young girl, she walks out to the edge of a cliff, she tosses off something she carries in her hand. But, wait!

That living thing she throws away is no insect, it's an entire nation. And it's time to throw it away, it's torn by internal strife. It's surrounded by aggressive, threatening enemies, and it acts as if military preparations were beneath it, it relies only on its large population; it attempts to divide itself into estates, each of which hates the other. Yes! its downfall approaches, and its partition among its warlike neighbors. Oh, we will see forests grow unforeseen by old Herodotus!

*Young Man* The things you say, Devil, they're terrifying. You're in a foul mood today.

*Devil* I can't help it. Oh, there are times I feel like a stricken deer trying to get away. I'm ready to toss my antlers back and flee to some distant star and there gasp out the truth. There's a deep meaning in all this, my friend. Oh, these forests, these forests, their branches are heavy with people, not with fruit. Isn't this a cemetery we're passing? Isn't it awful that whenever we're near a cemetery, we begin to contemplate the nature of immortality and its relation to wire armatures and glass eyes? Because everywhere you look, even in all this snow, you see summer flowers, bright reds and blues, all these pretty fake flowers, on broad, flat, artificial leaves, dark green and pale yellow. Earth groping vainly for immortality. But what exactly gave birth to these droopy artificial flowers? Is this a hunger for immortality, its summons, issuing from the hole in a tree trunk? People purchase plots here long before they die. And on memorial days they pay the groundskeeper to make sure the final resting place is trimmed and neat. That's their way of winning a piece of earthly paradise.

*Beggarwomen* Ladybirds, ladybirds, come let's pray for the soul of our dear departed. (*They stand in a huddle, eating porridge with raisins.*) Give your dear ones a helping hand, ladybirds!

*One of the Beggarwomen* There's some people coming! (*in an obsequious tone*) Please, young gentleman, give us something for your soul's sake.

*Devil* Strange, devilish strange. Let's walk faster. There is the house of deliverance from sadness—from sadness at the absence of immortality. Deliverance in a wreath of artificial forget-me-nots in a glass-



topped leaden case. Strange! Very strange! And see what's written here: "And there came a great silence." And underneath an eye, with rays streaming from it. Faster, people, let's walk faster.

*Boy in the Graveyard (sings)* Full force the falcon flies,  
against the palings of this fence  
it rends its falcon-breast:  
falcon falls, finds falcon-fate.  
See the glimmer-eye, the lucent lake.  
Around these steep enclosing walls  
falcon crawls.  
The dungeon doorway gapes  
in falcon's fearful way;  
falcon crawls until fierce death  
calls off his fast pursuit.  
Oh, judge this silent chamber full  
of fallen bodies, falcons'-fate!

*Devil* He's stopped singing. An array of artificial flowers beneath leaden covers, surrounded by an iron fence! Past the signs! A terrifying conclusion! Where are living people with eastern eyes? If someone doesn't want death, we won't shake his hand. We'll give him the evil eye, the sardonic sneer. (*They come to a vacant stretch of land. It begins to snow hard.*) Who's that? Here comes a soldier, carrying another on his back.

*Russian (He has a long moustache and carries a frozen man.)* I found this drunken bum on my daily walk at the edge of town. He's freezing and helpless. I've carried him on my back for the last three miles and I'm pleased and proud to be able to save him, and now here I am. You're the first people I've met. Help me bring him around, will you? As soon as he comes to, just give him a good slap between the shoulders to get him started and back on the road again without freezing. I'm happy I saved him from death.

*Devil* Freezing! People freezing to death! Judging by your unselfish act, also by your size and the devil-may-care look on your face, I'd say you were a military officer—a retired military officer. You saved his life?

*Russian* That's right, I'm a colonel. A full colonel. And I saved his life.

*Devil* I love to find prototypes in things. I love to look through things with my sharp-eyed step and see the future. You dispel my gloomy thoughts. You are a ray of shining decency that dispels the stormy weather in my soul. But let's not waste any time, let's try to bring him to. Your military bearing, your retired-officer attitude, makes me want to take off my hat to you, sir. Allow me to shake your hand.

*Russian* Oh yes, I'm a retired officer all right. At the battle of Trnovo my regiment crossed a river up to their necks in water, a river full of ice too. We were fighting for Russia. Only a few of us survived. Everyone does it his own way. Die a glorious death? I was only fighting to protect my ancestors' graves! But who are you?

*Devil* I'm the Devil.

*Russian* Ah yes, I see. Well, it takes all kinds. Mmm—right. I'll just shake one finger with you. You'll have to excuse my asking a question straight from the shoulder. Fact is, I'm a straight shooter and proud of it. Once—no, twice, I called a very important person a bastard right to his face. I did, right to his face. "Your Excellency," I said, "you're a bastard!" Now, by God, let me shake you by the hand. Or, no—it's not exactly by God, is it? Sorry. Anyway, I did, I told him the truth, even though, as you can see, I'm not a rich man. I was at an official reception and that's just what I said. "Your Excellency," I said, "You're a bastard." What do you think? Pretty good, huh?

*Devil* More than pretty good. Quite the turn of phrase, I'd say. Quite the turn of phrase—and here you are, older now, retired, carrying a frozen drunk on your shoulders. But you see how cold it is here. You know what you can do, leave him with us, we'll take care of him. And leave us your name, so when the poor man comes to he'll know who to thank for his life, and we'll know how to give a man credit.

*Russian* With pleasure! (*He gives him his address.*)

*Devil* Oh, I know the place! Let me shake your hand again. The hand that held a saber!

*Russian* Why, thanks a lot. Well, take it easy. (*He starts off on the snowy road.*)

*Devil* What a delightful individual! To treat people like that.

*Russian* I'm a man of action. One time a bunch of tramps stopped me, "Ok, rich guy," they said, "see this knife? You're gonna get it." So I said to them, "What do you think I am, your next chicken dinner? You'll have to kill me first. Come on, just try it!" They backed off and ran. And I didn't even have any money on me at the time. Well, here's where we part company. Thanks a lot!

*Devil* Let's get this bum into this tavern and bring him to in there. Hey, bartender! (*He points to the drunk.*)

*Bartender* What do you want?

*Devil* Something cold, and whatever else we'll need.

*Bartender* Coming right up.

*Devil* People like that could be the salvation of Russia. What an honest, open smile! In the last analysis, always and everywhere, choose the animal instinct. Take these cabdrivers—aren't they magnificent, with their red beards, their bright blue eyes and thick necks? Some of them have the faces of rulers of men! Think of the contempt an animal would have for the rest of us.

*Nun* Young man, won't you please make a donation to the church building fund? (*The Young Man puts some money in her coinbox.*) Thank you! Thank you, darling! Thank you, angel! God bless you!

*Devil* You see that one over there, with the big dark eyes that seem to strain right out of their sockets? Doesn't he seem mad to you?

*Madman* (*He stands and holds out his hand.*) You think I'm mad? Really mad? Well, you're right, I am!

*Bartender* (*with a grin*) He's out of his head, that one!

*Frozen Man* (*He wipes his whiskers and stops drinking.*) Thanks a lot! (*He gets up and leaves.*)

*Peddler* Woolen socks! Winter mittens! Best quality, dirt cheap!

*Bartender* Well, at least now he won't freeze to death. Anyway, looks to me like he's an old hand at this.

*Devil* But why is the map of Russia appearing on the stage again, and the word "Russia" in case we miss it? And it happened the moment he left! What a terrifying man!

*Bartender* (*goes up to the word "Russia" and touches it with his finger*) You're absolutely right, sir! It seems to have taken a short intermission, and now here it is back again.

*Devil* (*looks at his watch*) However, several pressing engagements are about to deprive me of the pleasure of your company. Let's meet tomorrow at seven at Kruglikov's.

*Young Man* Good. Goodbye until then, little Devil. [*The Devil vanishes.*]

*Student* (*nodding out over his beer*) I just got suspended . . . .

*Bartender* (*the voice of authority*) No sleeping allowed here!

*Student* Wha? Gimme a beer.

*Sphinxes* (*appearing out of nowhere*) Give us a beer!

*Bartender* Dark? Light?

*Sphinxes* Blue. We drink only blue sky.

*Bartender* To each his own!

*Sphinxes* (*sing*) We stretch ourselves and cross our paws  
as blue sky fills our steins.

We smile with brightly scornful airs  
at beer of other kinds.

At heaven's gate we'll feel at home—

The Milky Way is a head of foam!

And whoever forgets this song

must drink and sing the whole night long!

*La Liberté Française* (*sings*) I just stopped in to get warm,  
the storm has spoiled my finery.

Now I'm cold and all alone—

what's going to happen to poor little me?

*Scientist (enters and sits down at a table)* These witches have been the death of me. My neck hurts, my feet hurt. Give me a couple of beers!

*Bartender (with a glass of beer in his hand, sings)*

I serve whatever drink they want  
to the gentlemen who frequent me;  
Sphinxes, bite on a bit of this—  
sardines somebody sent me.  
My foaming glass ascends on high—  
have a piece of Pisces-pie!  
A glass of beer! Not much to pay—  
and the foam becomes the Milky Way!  
The beer glass foams, the stars arise!  
Only a Russian could visualize  
an hors d'oeuvre tray in the starry skies.

*(The glass of beer takes on the dimensions of the universe. The guests in the tavern light up pipes very ceremoniously, and everything vanishes into the pipe smoke—tavern, guests, and all. The Young Man walks out into the starry sky; a cab tries to drive across—"Get in, I'll take you wherever you're going.")*

*Young Man (as he gets out)* Well, here's where I get off.

*Road Guard* The bridge is out, sir. You'll have to stay in the story until the next act.

*Young Man* Ah! *(He turns around and goes back.)*

*Road Guard (setting up a road block)* Ladies and gentlemen, the way to Storytelling is closed.

[1909: T 391]

# *The Marquise des S.*

[*A reception at an art gallery in St. Petersburg.*]

[*Figure in a Painting*] I went to a dance a day or two ago.

This week, in fact. But when exactly?

Wednesday, Thursday, Sunday?

Anyway—in the humdrum day to day,  
dancing is a delight.

Friends, acquaintances, relatives, the lot.

I danced till I was about to drop. It was hot,

I was all in a sweat. I was on my way out

when a man in uniform stopped to insult

me: “Your hair’s too long, it needs to be cut.”

Then he danced off into the throng.

I wanted to tell him: You’re wrong!

I wanted to send my seconds, challenge

the wretch to a duel, but he’d gone.

Nevertheless, a boundary of sorts  
was clearly here to be crossed.

I found myself lost

in contemplation of the feathers

of someone’s fan. Pale blue and gray.

The science of the thing is painfully simple:

First the formalities: “My dear sir . . . .”

Then you put a bullet in your gun

and shoot him down.

Yes—and then one casual backward glance

as they carry him off to the morgue.

*Delkin* Ha-ha! What the hell’s that all about?

Silly joker. And all with a straight face.

*Perkhovsky* Well, I’m no coward.

Nothing strange in that. My pear-shaped face . . . .

*Delkin* I'd like to stare down someone's barrel—once, at least.

*Globov* This last one's pretty good, I think, don't you,  
a duelist with a heap of cherries in his hand?

*Perkhovskiy* In which case, his bullets are clearly superfluous.  
And that surly figure grim as a hermit  
spoils the whole shooting match.

[*Figure in a Painting*] Hey-hey! You're right. Once I went walking  
tall, proud as a son of the steppe,  
the glitter of a saber and the silver of chains . . . . .

*Lel (steps down from his frame)* Drowning in a sea of looks  
I stand here dressed like picture books  
in peasant clothes. I use my shoes  
for holding flowers.  
And in my shirt, each buttonhole  
blossoms with embroidery.

*Crowd* He's adorable, divine! Doesn't he just kill you?  
My mouth is open with astonishment.  
Lady, pass me a fork, will you?

*Connoisseur* That's absolutely elegant. Absolutely! Yes!  
See the delicate brush work? A real success!

*Amateur* Now this one has *got* something! By the way,  
is this the way  
to the buffet?

*Writer* What an image, what an image! I'll just make a note of this.

*Collector* I'll just have a bite to eat.

*Connoisseur* I already stopped for a bite on my way here.  
But a slight distortion comes into play here,  
no?

*Artist* Bravó!  
Bravissimo! Absolutely inspired performance!

*Writer* It's all so *recherché* and yet—so blunt!  
It's intellectual, refined—yet terse.

A real handling of color and of paint,  
and an obvious taste for the perverse.

*Old Gentleman* What a piggy little charmer, giving me the eye  
from this canvas. I'd pay a hundred or more  
without a quibble. He's quite,  
quite totally dressed in white,  
with Russian peasant shoes. Very artful!  
His childlike eyes could answer the burning questions:  
*Must* youth be served? What *does* youth  
want to know? Someday we will surely  
acknowledge anger, childhood fears . . . . .  
yes. I shall be pleased when my name appears  
on a sign marked "sold" by this work of art.  
What's this? He wants to shake my hand?  
I'll take my word, my dear, this is no mere  
*painting*, something to charm the eye  
with an extraordinary color field—  
we are about to make a new friend!  
A work of the imagination here unsealed!  
What lovely brainstorm gave you the idea  
to come as Lel tonight, in fancy dress?  
Will your folkloric charm break hearts  
in some new *recherché* caress?

*Lel* The gods of Rus  
have ordained me thus.

*Old Gentleman* Really? How absolutely divine. And what a joker.

*Lel* Besides, there is a tie that binds me to another.

*Old Gentleman* Binds you? Oh, an *affair!* To a Polish girl? A Swede?  
A daughter of Rus?

*Lel* No. To the star-filled sky above us.  
I swore to devote myself to Rus  
and to die with her heros, if it had to be.

*Old Gentleman* What an odd thing to swear  
in this arrogant age of ours.  
Goodbye, dear boy. Ta-ta.



*Poet (dressed as a faun)* My torso gilded with the down of youth;  
My eyes are juicy, moist, and blue.  
Observe my horns. I stand like watchtowers.  
I am hairy, especially my armpits.  
See the cutting curve of my lip,  
see the mysterious smile on my face.  
Half-goat, half-man,  
behold a remnant of antique dust.  
I was once a happy little goat,  
until I conceived the idea of embracing evil,  
and with that kiss I lost my ideals,  
and the mystery of life became a bore.  
My eyes are manic, knowing, ancient,  
and they burn like foxfire in the woods.

*Man in Charge (to a waiter)* Bring us another case of Raphael.  
Now who are these two?

*Waiter* It's the Marquise des S.!

*Marquise des S.* I find things somehow don't depress  
me here. It all seems quite smart, really, and refined.  
Now, which are the best things here—tell me, do!  
I adore that young man's animal neck, don't you?  
And it's all so much, so very much like Paris!  
You've done exactly right to keep our custom!  
It's all quite cheerful, bright and gay.  
What elegant fabric on that chair.  
What do you call that pattern, *mouche ennuyée*?  
Too, too divine. And little pots of flowers  
by all the paintings? Essence of wildwood, is that  
what they're called? And are those dog-tooth violets?  
A dog on the trail who lost the scent  
in the soul of a writer descended—  
let's put it delicately—from dogs?

*Her Escort* But there he is—hardly a dog . . . . .

*Marquise des S.* Allow me to reverse your word: perhaps a god?  
You see? I am *some* help in matters of your craft.

*Escort* Yes, if dead dogs reversed themselves,  
returned to us as gods . . . .  
if the dead, tired of retirement,  
came back to us, divine . . . .  
but death straddles him like the Pope on a donkey.  
He'd seem a pleasanter person in the grave.

*Marquise des S.* My god, what a dreadful thing to say!  
You do go on, dear, don't you, about death?  
Do spare your humble servant.

*Escort* I've told you, I used to look for death.  
I was arrogant enough once  
to seek to die, incessantly;  
I had the soul of a sky-flier.  
But today I have lost the outlines  
of the elusive prey I followed,  
enticing and whispering,  
thrusting my damascene sword in the neck of a wild bull,  
unmasking my face upon Port Arthur's walls.  
Indefatigable Hunter!  
A Cossack belt of inlaid steel  
reminds me of far-off silver rivers,  
a time of deadly raids by dawnlight—  
dear, my soul's delight was "die"!  
But now I hear a voice that commands me "do"—  
Freedom? Horror? Joy? Fate?  
I don't know. An unkempt vowel  
crisses the crossing of two roads.

*Marquise des S.* Oh, darling, drop it! You're a pest  
sometimes about the past!  
See? You make me  
smile. For me, what's past  
is past. Not "do," but "done."  
Oh, look: Here's a woman wrapped in sun-  
light, not much else,  
half-lying, half-enjoying  
all the power of her body,

holding with spreading fingers  
the beautiful hemisphere of her breast,  
and oh, the devout pilgrims of her eyes!  
So that a sister quenches  
the thirst of her horned sister  
with warm milk,  
a black tongue, black horn goat.  
How sweet! How poignant, full of light,  
this moment of sworn brotherhood  
between two sisters!  
A moment of thirst has made them two—  
made mother into daughter, daughter into mother,  
see? The relationship plays both ways.  
Don't make a face at my incoherent image;  
there's more than laughter in it, darling.  
And I still love you, no?

*(She laughs and squeezes his hand.)*

I probably sound like a wild woman—  
my words may be common,  
but at least they make sense.

*Escort* My empress! No—my goddess!  
Your every syllable is melody today.

*Marquise des S. (laughing)* True! I hadn't realized!  
But darling, get up off your knees.  
I'll give you my veil as a souvenir.  
Not so fast! Let's sit down here:  
surely we can work this out.

*Escort* I know the voice that told me "do"  
meant you—you and your golden hair.

*Marquise des S.* Of course it did, dear. Listen—  
hear them laughing over there?  
Someone's just arrived—it must be Mayer.  
Sit here beside me. Give me my fan.  
Where did you go last night? And why  
do I see such sorrow in your eyes?

*Raphael* Did someone call my name just now? I was looking for the Pope—and Michelangelo, a friend of mine.

*Man in Charge (to Raphael)* Wine? You want some wine? Of course!

*Waiter (stammers)* It's Raphael—that's who you wanted, no?

*Man in Charge* What do you mean, who I wanted? My boy, you've made a mess!

*Waiter* I swear to God, believe me—

*Man in Charge* This must be a misunderstanding!  
Maybe you called the wrong place!  
Or maybe this idiot has borrowed the Raphael name? Or what?

*Raphael* My sainted parents named me Raphael  
when I was born! Are you suggesting I'm a thief?

*Man in Charge (to the Waiter)* Stupid! Raphael's a French apéritif!

*Raphael* I seem to be causing confusion—  
Why do the gentlemen constantly come and go?  
Something's wrong. Forgive me, I didn't know.  
I came here looking for Michelangelo.

*Man in Charge* This is *all* wrong. (*He shakes Raphael's hand.*) I can't take much more of this, I really can't. This whole affair has turned into an absolute mess. Blame it all on the waiter! Please! I'm getting out of here! (*He does.*)

*Waiter* Jeez, that Makovsky, what a ditz . . . . .

*Bystander* Oh, Raphael the apéritif, and Raphael the painter—a pun!  
Someone's bitchy idea of fun!  
You're at the wrong party, obviously. What say  
we go to my place for a drink?

(*Raphael and the Bystander leave.*)

*Red-Haired Poet* I scream in my dream: oh, Chénier!  
Like a seagull in ocean's spray!  
(Of course, the poet is dead:  
that dreadful year in gay Paris, he lost his head.)

Whenever I go upstairs  
to pursue my amorous affairs,  
I always think with surprise  
of the stars I will find in her eyes!

O Tiutchev thunderhead!  
Alone in heaven's howl,  
for you this earth is only  
the disgorgement of an owl.

*Waiter* Some wear sables, some wear mink,  
some of them stand and pretend to think,  
but sooner or later they all want a drink.

*(Spectators come and go. The Marquise des S. and her Escort in a side  
alcove.)*

*Marquise des S.* That young man waltzed away, his dark eyes smiling,  
The dark moss of his moustache gleaming with stars.  
I was innocent once, I knew the stars above my head:  
I was a birch tree, the world was marsh grass underfoot.  
Now night is still, and the marsh invisible.  
What's happening? Is this another mysterious Flood?  
Can't you feel it? Life seems absent, far away,  
and someone exclaims: I like it this way!  
People stand frozen, in various poses, still smiling.  
Look there—that smile! That schoolgirl innocence—  
yet still she says, I'm made of stone, and blue with cold.  
But why did their clothing cruelly disappear,  
and leave these snowy bodies hopelessly naked?  
A living heart, open to all the emotions  
of the compass, suddenly becomes  
a lump of mindless mud.  
Hear that howling, roaring, cackling! Creation's  
creatures rise against the rich!  
Beneath the unseen shade of Pugachev,  
They all rebel, refuse to serve.  
And who are their victims? We human beings, who else?  
Scarlet, green, and blue,  
roosters recover their feathers from hats  
and peck at foreign feed—

gold fillings packed in teeth that rise  
like ghosts from the grave mouth.  
Look, a snarling leap! A pair of snowy ermine scampers  
from her shoulders, and the bright blue boa's  
feathers rise and fly.  
There a rye field moves in gentle waves  
and the crowd around it imitates its sheaves.  
Someone's mouth gapes, and a chaffinch  
makes her nest in cavities of amazement.  
We seem to have crossed some mysterious boundary.  
Someone's sable waves its tiny paws,  
then leaves by leaps and bounds.  
The goats step down from that painting: with glitter-  
eyes they set their cautious feet upon the floor;  
that owl, that previous plaster cast, now flaps new wings.  
My dear, be brave!  
A chaffinch on a hatpin sings!  
Have we come here to choose a stone for our grave?  
That lady's lace disintegrates,  
becomes the living flax in flower!  
Her cheeks burn with shame,  
her face is alive, though the rest of her is stone.  
Shadows leap and flutter  
from every neck and shoulder! Are these people  
alive? All of them stand like statues in a park  
and animals artlessly gambol around them—  
How sad! See that woman's eyes—shame, passion,  
the pale reflection of a distant shore.  
Some feeling hand has pulled her hat  
over her eyes, to block her view of all this nakedness.  
The scene becomes a painted Judgment Day:  
Some moan in terror: God!  
Others mutter: Gott!  
Still others whisper: Dieu!  
That's on the left hand. On the right they lie in lechery  
and lust, oblivious to the death-dream that surrounds them.

*Escort* Dear, let's go! We've got  
to get away from this!

*Marquise des S.* What is it? You're shaking! You're afraid!  
I won't ask why. Where shall we go, my love?

*Escort* To some divinity that saves us when we close our eyes!  
All earthly power is only real estate.  
"Tomorrow" is a lie, a snickering family joke.  
What a bore, to be a constant servant to the clock.  
This path we tread is sorrier than slavery. It terrifies.  
Mass murderer, I stab the heart of the world!  
Divinity. We must become divine. The envy of Perun.  
"Do" unfolds before me, widening its sense.  
I am the clouds' commander,  
hurling my white thunderbolts to earth.  
Laws of nature, gnash your angry teeth—  
or pile up stones to build my mighty mansions!  
I must expand to fill the dawn, the sky,  
to feel the lightning as it leaves my hand!

*Marquise des S.* You're wild tonight. Calm down.

*Escort* Hot haste, my inconsolable! It's not too late!  
How can your sorrow counter fate?

*Marquise de S. (turns her face away)*  
You're trembling! Are you crying?

*Escort* Of course I am. All my enchanted mansions  
have vanished with the morning. The winds  
have blown them all away. I stand at the abyss.  
My "do" dissolves, and tells me "die."  
Inconstant vowel! My "o" is "i"!  
The unquiet voice of death! Calling for whom—for me?  
I've seen too much, believe me. Death wants me.

*Marquise des S.* My dear, you're just depressed. Let's go.  
How horrible, the knife of silence scraped  
against the glass of some listening spirit,  
whose ears are elongated as a bat's.  
Listen, how strange—the onset of that sudden silence,  
and through it—let's run!—a pair of ermines come,  
their narrow bodies snaking like rivulets.  
What's that? The hiss of blade or bullwhip in the night?

Oh, let's get away, let's run! You can't? New beasts  
are breathing everywhere! My name is not Des S!  
I'm Russian, native born!

*Escort* Divinity of "do," divinity of "die"!

*Marquise des S.* Look, your moleskin gloves—they squeal and scamper from your hands. Isn't that sweet? But something strange is happening to us, dear. See? I'm shaking already. But I'll put up a brave front, I promise.

*Escort* We've got to get away!

*Marquise des S.* I want to but I can't. You monster, what have you done to me? My legs have gone to sleep. Monster, must you *laugh*? *Weep* is the rhyme for *sleep*! Cruel man, goodbye! I'm afraid I can no longer take your hand—and you can't take mine. Goodbye!

*Escort* Goodbye. Something strange is happening. We're growing attached to the floor. We are turning to stone, part of the marble pavement! But the animals are all alive! Your sable raised its head and looked with greedy eyes at your naked shoulder. Goodbye!

*Marquise des S.* Goodbye! How exquisitely those ermines run!

*Escort* That gull in your hair has cleared its tangles, and with a screech flies free. And now suddenly . . . . Doesn't it seem to you that we sit talking side by side, by some delightful stream, both of us naked and beautiful, strangers to each other once again? Do you hear the sound?

*Marquise des S.* I do, I do! It's true, we are lost in conversation by a rushing stream! But love and these goodbyes have turned me to stone, and now, as my clothes fall from my body at last, I can no longer make the requisite gesture.

*Escort* Alas! I raise my hand after those scampering ermines, and my eyes follow the disappearing gull. Now what?  
Now we must be silent. My lips have turned to stone.  
Be still! Be still!

*Marquise des S.* I am still.



*The Marquise des S.*

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*Voice from Another World* How beautiful, this statuary pair! The very picture of passion—a passion of shared hearts and stillness.

*Second Voice* I agree. It's quite impeccable, the impression of their bodies in the snowy stone.

*First Voice* Absolutely. Shall we go have a cigarette?

*Second Voice* I was just about to suggest it myself.

*(They leave.)*

[1909–1911: T 404]

# *Asparuh*

## ONE

*(A military encampment in the steppe.)*

*Boy* Asparuh! Can't you hear the horses, hear how they neigh? The princes are all in their camp, they won't come out. They prefer the bright eyes of their women, they will not fare forth to war. They remember the fates of their families, left in the cities of Swanland, abandoned to care. If a man goes to war, why does he take so few arrows? That's what they say of your war summons, and none of them smile when they say it. They want to go home.

*Asparuh* Listen. Watch me now as I ride, fast, with the moon at my back: an enormous shadow will flee from me over the hills. And if my horse cannot catch that shadow, as I gallop across the hills, then my horse will die by my hand, and will lie dead-still forever. *(He gallops off.)*

*Boy* It happened as he said it would: the old horse falls to the ground, he raises his head, and now his master's sword has pierced his throat.

*Asparuh* Go. Tell word of what you have seen.

## TWO

*Barbarian* From here you can see the walls of Borysthenes.

*Asparuh* Our tents will stand here. Are those the princes' heads?

*Barbarian* Our forefathers taught us to obey, and we are faithful to their commandments, though your orders were fearful. Among the princes we laid low were many in the beauty of manhood.

### THREE

*(The encampment. Evening.)*

*First Warrior* Look at the Greek. He lies there singing, forgetting his heart-care.

*Second Warrior* I saw them once, when they took me captive.  
What happened was, young girls and boys  
pour sacred oil on a white stone.  
They think that feeds their god  
and afterward they strip and leap about their fires.  
Those naked girls with wreaths,  
they burn my blood. They set my soul on fire.  
And white-beard priests would bless  
their sacred dance.  
Their customs are more interesting than ours.

*First Warrior* Where is the Greek now?

*Second Warrior* He lies there, watching us.

*Boy (points to the prisoner)* Let him go free!

*(The Greek makes his way into a tent; the sound of laughter is heard.)*

*Guard* That clever Greek has given them something that makes them feel good.

*Voice from the tent* Lead him out to the gates.

*(Someone wrapped in a cloak goes toward the gate and leaves the camp.)*

*Guard* He has grown taller. And wider in the shoulders. And he walks with a longer stride. But we must obey orders. Still, something's wrong. The night seems much darker.

*(The older warrior follows after him.)*

*Warrior* He says nothing. I'm going after him.  
Hey, you! I want a word.  
You think you'll gain by keeping quiet?  
Only a beating, that's what you'll gain.  
But look—the people standing on the city walls  
have come out meet him, that's his reward!

*(He tries to attack him.)*

Agh, agh—who are you?

*Asparuh* Die, Slav! Die, slave! *(He stabs him with a short sword and leaps over the moat.)*

## FOUR

*(The city. A feast day. Priests wearing wreaths of undying white flowers stand wordless in a corner of the square. A procession of what seem to be white gods and goddesses lays wreaths on the altar stone. A murmur in the crowd: "Be no more! Fly away, prayer-bearers, flame into heaven.")*

*Worshippers (dressed in white, they sing)*

The world is false, all things deceiving.

Fire alone can set things free.

Here we humans stand unmoving  
offering our flower wreaths.

Let our songs rise ever higher.

Every girl and boy now prays—  
all must come to dust and ashes  
when we lie in narrow graves.

*Priest* Woe and anger, woe and horror,  
fall to earth and say your prayers!  
See the dawn-bright hero standing  
radiant in shining rays.

All things come to one last tumble;  
grief and pleasure, nights and days.  
See God's face, its swarthy beauty  
where he stands in silver rays.

Woe and anger, woe and anger!  
Sing the sorrow of your days.  
See the thunder-face of heaven  
pale and radiant with rays.

*(The worshipers fall to their knees, praying and genuflecting. Asparuh in a dark cloak stands for a while undecided, tall and unmoving, then*

*he too kneels down. Cries are heard: "thieves in disguise!" Armed guards rush brutally upon him.)*

*Asparuh (He draws his sword and waves it.)* Back, scum!

*Warrior (Downed, he raises himself.)* This is no common man!

*Voices in the Crowd* Here is a prince who mistreats his people.

He wastes his gold at night in the slums.

His army stands abandoned in the open field.

A young Greek girl enslaves his will.

Here's golden wine in golden goblets.

Join the dance that teaches pleasure.

Come with us, Asparuh! Come dance!

Forget the frigid kisses

of some untaught girl—

dance our shameless dances,

see our shameless women whirl.

*(They lead Asparuh away with them.)*

## FIVE

*Archon of the City* Where is Asparuh? In what low den is he hiding from his subjects? His army is in a rage and wants to attack. Someone is already dead by the gates. Where is Asparuh? Under what low hedge is he hiding from his subjects? Already three arrows have reached Diana's altar.

## SIX

*Barbarian* Warriors, to horse! Forward! Let the dice throw of war decide all.

*(A battle begins.)*

*First Warrior* Some days ago a boastful Greek said they'd make Asparuh their gatekeeper.

*Second Warrior* And someone brought a ring and a sword, said they belonged to Asparuh. The Greeks are fighting for their lives. But the dice have been thrown. Look, who is that? Someone in a tattered cloak, running through no-man's land! He cries: "Where is my war-host, where is my horse?"

*Asparuh* Crowd me, crush me, bows at the ready.

I accept your doom.

Fly down upon me, you arrows,  
like swifts to their cliff nest at evening.

I stand like that cliff at evening,  
bound and abandoned. When I am dead  
do not desert me. Bring me to the final portal.  
I wrap my cloak around me and I wait.

*Priest (holds out his hand)* Courage, Asparuh!

*Warrior* He began to sway, and then he fell. And now the rest depart,  
each to his home.

[1911: T 417]

## “Laughing-Eyes”

*First Bee* Laughing-Eyes, go feed that honey to the young ones, and you, Sad-Smile, you oversee the business. Now listen to me, all you nurse bees! There is more to your job than filling these tender young mouths with our best honey. You must also keep your own minds full of noble and beautiful thoughts. The young are the point and purpose of our structured lives, of our careful conduct! They are mirrors that reflect the old! Think back! It wasn't long ago that flying nurses cared for you in the same way! Now what? Here comes a drone! Silly dillydally!

*Drone* What a hard life the poor dears lead! A grand good day to all you respectable nursemaids! Tell me, does honey really taste good? Or are you only concerned with how the babies like it? Farewell, you frigid ladies, I'm off to an early death!

*Second Bee* Lazybones! Lollabout!

*Third Bee* The other day a cell full of those good-for-nothing drones fell onto some workers and the honey was damaged, the very honey they'd spent the entire day gathering, from morning star to evening, in the forest of white locust flowers.

*Second Bee* When do you suppose our queen will have had enough? One drone after another! It's high time for her to slow down, I'd say, she's really past her prime . . . .

*Third Bee* She'll make short work of this bunch!

*Fourth Bee* I always feel sorry for them. One brief fling of happiness, and they die so young. After all, they're just as much a part of the social order as we are. I gave a drone a little honey myself the other day, one I met flying out in the fields.

*First Bee* Time to turn these children over. There, that's the way. Asleep already? Poor little thing. But you must remember, sisters, we're the ones who slave away all day—we gather honey here and there, we're attacked by bumblebees, chased from flowers by gadflies, and God knows the fields are full of things that eat bees. It's danger, danger everywhere, the least little thing can turn into a disaster. But to let *them* live *here*—how can you be so indulgent? I certainly don't share your sentiments!

[?1911: NP 302]



# *Mrs. Laneen*

CHARACTERS: Voice of Sight  
Voice of Hearing  
Voice of Reason  
Voice of Thought  
Voice of Recollection  
Voice of Conjecture  
Voice of Will  
Voice of Joy  
Voice of Intellect  
Voice of Consciousness  
Voice of Touch  
Voice of Terror  
Voice of Attention

*(The action takes place during two days in Mrs. Laneen's life, a week apart.)*

*(Twilight. The scene takes place in front of a blank wall.)*

## ACT ONE

*Voice of Sight* It's stopped raining. There are a few raindrops still hanging on the bending ends of the darkening garden.

*Voice of Hearing* Silence. You can hear someone opening the gate. Someone is walking along the garden path.

*Voice of Reason* Which way are they going?

*Voice of Thought* There's only one way you can go here.

*Voice of Sight* Someone has frightened the birds. They've all scattered.

*Voice of Thought* It's the same person who opened the gate.

*Voice of Hearing* The air is full of frightened birdcalls. And loud footsteps.

*Voice of Sight* Yes, someone is coming closer. But he walks very slowly.

*Voice of Recollection* It's Doctor Loos. He's been here before, it wasn't too long ago.

*Voice of Sight* He's dressed in black from head to foot. And his hat is pulled way down, you can barely see his laughing blue eyes. His reddish moustache is turned up at the ends today, just like it is every day. His face is flushed and full of self-confidence. He's smiling, his lips look as if they are saying something.

*Voice of Hearing* He's saying: "Hello, Mrs. Laneen." He's also saying: "Nice weather we're having today, isn't it?"

*Voice of Sight* His lips smile with assurance. He seems to be expecting an answer. His face is beginning to look serious. Now his face and his mouth seem to be relaxing and smiling.

*Voice of Reason* He's pretending to apologize for the silence. But I won't say anything.

*Voice of Sight* His mouth is forming an ingratiating expression.

*Voice of Hearing* He's asking it again. He's asking: "How do you feel?"

*Voice of Reason* Say something to him. Say: "I feel fine."

*Voice of Sight* His eyebrows are quivering with pleasure. His forehead is wrinkled.

*Voice of Hearing* He's saying: "I hope . . . ."

*Voice of Reason* Don't listen to what he says. He'll be saying goodbye in just a minute. He'll be leaving soon.

*Voice of Hearing* But he still keeps on saying something.

*Voice of Sight* His lips never stop moving. Doesn't he look kind! And polite! And he seems so interested!

*Voice of Conjecture* He's talking about something important.

*Voice of Reason* Let him talk. He's not getting any answer from me.

*Voice of Will* He's not getting any answer from me.

*Voice of Sight* He's surprised. He's making a gesture with his hand. An uncertain gesture.

*Voice of Reason* You've got to shake his hand. What an intolerable ritual!

*Voice of Sight* His black hat floats in the air, it goes straight up, and then it goes down again onto his light brown hair. He turned around, he moved his straight black shoulders, there's a speck of dandruff on one of them. And now he's going away.

*Voice of Joy* At last.

*Voice of Sight* You can barely see him—that dark figure, a gleam beyond the trees.

*Voice of Hearing* I can hear his footsteps at the end of the garden.

*Voice of Reason* He won't come here again.

*Voice of Hearing* The gate slammed shut.

*Voice of Reason* This bench is cold and damp after the rain, and everything's quiet. That man has gone away, and now life is returning.

*Voice of Sight* The garden is wet. Somebody has made a circular mark. Footprints. The leaves are wet, the ground is wet.

*Voice of Intellect* People here are very unhappy. There is evil here, but no one does anything about it.

*Voice of Consciousness* Thought conquers all. Loneliness is thought's companion. You have to keep your distance from people.

*Voice of Sight* Pigeons fly into the garden. Pigeons fly away.

*Voice of Hearing* The gate is opening again.

*Voice of Will* I won't say a word. I am keeping my distance from people.

ACT TWO

*Voice of Touch* My hands are shaking. My fingers are touching the cold knots on this jacket. My arms are prisoners, and my feet are bare and I can feel the cold from the stone floor.

*Voice of Hearing* Silence. I am here.

*Voice of Sight* Blue and red circles. Spinning around, and moving from place to place. It's dark. A light.

*Voice of Hearing* More steps. One, then another. They're loud, because it's so quiet everywhere.

*Voice of Terror* Who is it?

*Voice of Attention* They went away. They changed direction. Now they're coming back.

*Voice of Reason* This way. That means me. They're coming for me.

*Voice of Hearing* They've stopped. Everything's quiet.

*Voice of Terror* The door will open soon.

*Voice of Hearing* The key is scraping in the lock.

*Voice of Terror* The key is turning.

*Voice of Reason* It's them.

*Voice of Consciousness* I'm afraid.

*Voice of Will* But I still won't say a word. Not a word.

*Voice of Sight* The door is open.

*Voice of Hearing* Here's what they're saying: "You're a sick woman. Please come with us. It's doctor's orders."

*Voice of Will* No.

*Voice of Consciousness* I won't say a word.

*Voice of Sight* They're all around me.

*Voice of Touch* There's a hand on my shoulder.

*Voice of Recollection* . . . . . white, it used to be white.

*Voice of Touch* My hair just brushed the floor.

*Voice of Recollection* . . . . black. Long and black.

*Voice of Hearing* They're saying: "Hold her head! Take her by the shoulders! Got her? Let's go!"

*Voice of Consciousness* They are carrying her away. It's all over. World-wide evil.

*Voice of Hearing* I can hear someone saying: "Haven't they gotten that patient moved yet?" "Not yet."

*Voice of Consciousness* Everything's dead. Everything's dying.

[1912: T 414]

# *Backworlds*

## SCENE ONE

*Olly* Imagine, just imagine. Here I am a man of seventy already, and what do they do? They lay me down, they tie me up, they babify me, they sprinkle me with smelly stuff. What am I, a doll?

*Polly* Don't get upset now. Of course you're not a doll.

*Olly* Horses in black sheets with drippy eyes and droppy ears. And that carriage! It goes so slow and it's all white and me in it just like a vegetable. Lie down and shut up and keep your legs straight, keep your eyes open and keep 'em on the neighbors and count the number of times the family yawns, and those fake forget-me-nots messing up my pillow and passersby poking around. Well I tell you I got out of *that* one fast! To hell with them all! I climbed right into a cab and got here as fast as I could, not a hat or a coat, and all of them shouting: Grab him! Grab him! Grab him!

*Polly* So you got out of it? Well, if that isn't something! What a bright boy you are! A soaring miracle, and that's the truth.

*Olly* Oh but you have to let me rest. You can hide me right here in the closet. All these clothes, well they can come out, what are they all still here for anyway? Now this one, this one I wore the day I got promoted, who was it now? God rest his soul. Old Georgie, that's it, it was him was in charge and me they made councillor. This was the one. I got all done up and went to the head office, here's the crease on the cloth where my medal went, good cloth, you don't find this kind of goods about nowadays, and this little place here where the sword hooked on, oh he was a great one, I tell you, a great one that tailor, down on Ocean Avenue. Ah god, will you look at that, it's a moth, grab it now, quick! (*They chase the moth, hopping about and clapping their hands after it.*) The nasty

thing! (*They both catch it at once.*) I remember he kept on saying I'll sew you up a purse out of this, he'd say, a purse of the best goods going, it'll never wear out, he'd say. Tight as a purse, he'd say, and you fill my purse when you pay me, he'd say, and fill it full, I don't care if you wear out *that*, he'd say. And now there's a moth at it! And this is your wedding dress, darling, remember? Church of the Holy Cross. Now we'll sprinkle everything all over with strong tobacco, that's what they used to use, and this other stuff, the smelly stuff, the smell makes you want to start crying, now we'll lay it all out in the trunk and lock it up good, and get us a good big lock, you know what I mean, a big one, and the pillows, you know, right on top, make sure it's the feather ones—I'm tired, darling, I'm terribly tired, gimme a minute, so's I can take a little rest, there's something pounding right here at my heart, it's all those cats, you know, they come clawing and scratching away at your heart—and first thing you know all those awful things are right out in the open—the carriage, and the flowers, and the relatives all singing hymns, and oh, you know, it's not easy, darling, not easy at all. (*He sniffs.*) So if they show up tell them he's way the hell and gone and he can't come back anyway because of the doctor, he said he was dead already, and here's the paper, you know, you just take this paper, shove it right into their faces and tell them they already took me, the damn fools, he's gone to the cemetery already and it's no business of yours, you say, and I'm glad he's gone, you can say, but the paper's the main thing, you know, they give up when they see a piece of paper, and now I. . . . (*he smiles*) I gotta take a little rest.

*Polly* Darling, your eyes are all wet from weeping, you've had such a terrible time of it, let me wipe your poor eyes with my little hanky. (*She stands on tiptoes and wipes away his tears.*) Rest easy, my old darling, rest easy. There's none of them worth all the upset, so smile, now, give me a smile! Here, I'll pour you a nice little berry brandy, you drink that up, that'll fix you, and here's your peppermint pills, and that candle now, take the one in the black candlestick, it'll last you better. (*There's a knock at the door.*)

*Olly* And sprinkle this stuff in the trunk. Keeps off the moths. (*He jumps in with the candlestick in his hand. She locks him in with a*

*victorious flourish, gives a look about, and marches into the hallway with her hands on her hips.)*

*Voice in the Hallway* Good morning! M-m-m ah-ah-ah bz-bz-bz  
Pa . . . . . Nik . . . . . Nik . . . . . Hey ah ah?

*Polly* Well, God rest his soul! You see, ahmic, mic, mic (*starts to cry*).  
They came and got him. Covered him right up, and he was still  
alive, the lovely old darling!

*Voice in the Hallway* You mean? ah, ah, ah. The old lady's touched,  
she's off her rocker. Ah, ah? That's awful peculiar, you could almost  
say this is something, now, couldn't you?

*Polly* He's dead, so help me, believe me, he's dead. Only half an hour  
ago, now why should I lie to you, an old lady like me with a foot  
in her own grave already. No, he's dead, he's dead, I swear to god,  
now what about you, are you all in a hurry? Got someplace to get  
to, I'll bet you. Am I right? And if not, you just come right in,  
come in, sit down, rest up if you're tired, of course you are, and  
I'll just go light a candle, you know that's the custom, and you,  
you just rest, take a seat in the parlor, smoke if you wish, but the  
one thing I'll never give up is this key. Not if you put me to a  
thousand deaths! You can cut me to pieces, you can tear me apart,  
you can tie my fair white body to a herd of wild horses, you'll  
never get this key and that's all we're going to say about *that*. Now  
don't be nervous, just take a seat in the parlor . . . . .

*Voice in the Hallway* She's bats . . . . .

*Polly* Now what's your hurry, don't you go running off on me like  
that! Well I never. He's gone. This sure is something, he said. (*She  
bangs on the closet with the key.*) He's gone. Goddam spy, he's gone,  
what I did is I did this and then that . . . . .

*Olly* What? He's gone?

*Polly* All gone, darling.

*Olly* Well thank God for that. You have to give him credit for that, for  
going, I mean. Here I am sitting in here and thinking how is this  
all going to turn out, and wouldn't you know it all turned out for  
the best.



*Polly* And of course I says to him, “You must be in a hurry, I says, you look like you got someplace to get to.” And it never occurred to him what’s going on, God love him! You can come out now, darling. Oh there’s the door again! Well I’m not even going to open it this time, I’m just going to tell them I’m sick. Sick, I’ll say, sick enough to die! Who is it? (*A muffled reply.*) I’m sick, you can’t come in, I’m sick!

*Unknown Voice* But I’m the doctor!

*Polly* Oh, I’m so sick, I have this strange disease, every time I see a doctor I grab hold of a broomstick or a poker, or a pail of water, or maybe even something worse!

*Voices Outside the Door* What? I suppose so. How could it happen? God help her! So what should we do? She can go take a ride on her broomstick.

*Polly* They’re gone, darling, my brave darling, they’re all gone.

*Olly* I can’t seem to hear too well.

*Polly* I got after them with a broomstick, what else could they do, of course they’re gone. (*She opens the closet door and sets the table.*) Let’s go back to the country, shall we? It’s awful, people singing hymns, people we don’t know, horses in hats . . . .

## SCENE TWO

*(An old house in the country. Ancient pinetrees, birches, a pond. Turkeys and chickens. The two of them are taking a walk.)*

*Olly* Oh I’m so glad we left! What was life coming to: having to hide in your own house. By the way, I keep meaning to ask you, do you dye your hair?

*Polly* Why do you ask? Do you?

*Olly* Not at all, but I remembered it as gray, and now its gotten quite dark.

*Polly* You know you’re absolutely right. And your moustache is quite dark too, you look as if you’d lost forty years, and look at your

cheeks, why they're just like they say in the fairy tales, snow-white and rose-red. And your eyes! I swear, they're all sparkle and fire! You're a dashing young man, just like they say in the song! What do you suppose it all means?

*Olly* Oh look, we're in luck, there's our next-door neighbor, he's come over to visit and he gets our little Nadia into conversations about natural selection, no less. You'd better keep an eye on them, that could turn out very badly.

*Polly* Yes, yes, I know, I am quite aware of what's going on, believe you me. And our young Petey is always hanging around now and does nothing. It's high time to send him off to school, don't you think? Maybe he'll learn something.

*Olly* He can still learn what he has to from his young friends, boys will be boys and he'll get kicked and beaten up and that will take the bloom of youth off him. God forbid he should turn out to be a mama's boy.

*Polly* Well I certainly don't think that's very likely! You remember, running away without a hat and the coachman and the friends and relations and then he grew up and the horsehair crest waving on top of that bronze helmet and the way those sullen eyes looked in that hard soldier's face, they burned like fire it was so sad and so sweet and now a little dark fuzz on his upper lip, you can barely make it out, like sandpaper, oh it's the worse time of all: you take your eyes off them for barely a moment and it's all over. (*Little Petey runs up with a rifle, carrying a blackbird.*)

*Petey* I killed a crow!

*Polly* But why, why, why? What did you have to do it for?

*Petey* He was croaking at me.

*Polly* Well young man, you'll just have your supper tonight in your room, all by yourself. And from now on you remember: whenever you kill a bird, you kill something in yourself.

*Petey* I'm not hungry, I already had some milk at Molly's.

*Polly* At Molly's? You're leaving here tomorrow!

*Olly* Yes, young man, tomorrow! And very very early in the morning, too.

*Petey* And she gave me a piece of black bread.

*Olly* It's high time you went into the service!

*Petey* What kind of service? It depends on who. I don't mind servicing somebody if I really like them.

*Olly* That's a nice thing to hear! Well, look who's here, the origin of the species himself. Always very nice to see you I'm sure. Nina, dear, it's the young man from next door! Now correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't monkeys supposed to have a bone somewhere that's shaped like a key? Of course we're none of us scholars here, but we old folks certainly respect the mind of a man with a good education.

*Polly* Why—they're gone! Where did they go?

*Olly* It looks like they've gone to the gazebo. That's a dangerous little neighbor we've got.

*Polly* The gazebo, hmm? Well it's high time, high time, believe me.

*(Nina appears, radiant.)*

*Nina* He's the one! He's the one! *(Answering the unspoken question)* Yes! Yes! He did! he did! He started off talking about Darwin and all of a sudden very innocently he was saying "The sun is in his golden carriage, may I have your hand in marriage" and he seemed oh a totally changed person and he began kissing and licking my hand.

*Olly* Oh I'm so glad, so very glad, I want you to be very happy, healthy, wealthy, and wise. Also don't ever go too easy on him.

*Nina* Oh I know all about that already, way back when we used to sit together out in the garden on the bench where he carved our initials in the green paint and we used to watch the beautiful showers

of shooting stars and the whipoorwill whistled in the distance and all the clamor of the earth had grown still.

*Olly* Our time then, their time now, your time soon—that's the way it is in this world, everything changes.

*Nina* See there he is now standing under that tree. I'll go tell him yes. Yes? (*She takes Olly's hand.*)

*Olly* M-m-m.

### SCENE THREE

*(A boat on the river. Olly is dressed in an army uniform.)*

*Olly* We are dear, dear friends, that's all, shy seekers after togetherness, we want to be close to each other and we are divers for pearls in the ocean of our eyes, we are dear, dear friends. And the boat drifts along, casting its shadow on the current; we bend over the edge and we see our own faces reflected, there among the dancing clouds in the water, all caught in the river's drifting net when they fall from the skies: and noonday whispers in our ears, "Oh children, children!" it says. And we—we are the freshness of midnight.

### SCENE FOUR

*(Polly walks by carrying a book bag; she meets Olly. He starts upstairs, whispering a prayer.)*

*Polly* You got your Greek now?

*Olly* Yes.

*Polly* We got Russian.

*(A few hours later. They meet again.)*

*Polly* What did you get?

*Olly* Zero. Like Mucius and Scaevola I sailed across the sea of low marks and like Manlius I sacrificed myself. I jumped head-first through the hole in the zero.

*Polly* Bye-bye.

## SCENE FIVE

*(Polly and Olly, silent and solemn, are wheeled by in baby carriages. They hold balloons in their hands.)*

[1912: T 42]

## “A coarse black face”

*One* A coarse black face, wrapped in a white sheet. Tell me, Black Woman, who lives in this Russian hut? The swift sound of a brook is not far off, a wolfhound approaches.

*Two* White Man, a Gray Old Father and his Old Woman live here in the Russian hut. Take off the dusty shoes on your feet and come in. The son of the house is called Veren, the daughter is called Verena. I am their old nurse, and soon it will be twenty years I have served them.

*One* A weather-beaten, dried-out stuffed boa constrictor, a plain old table, frayed, decrepit, a bit the worse for wear. Guns on the wall, above them the works of Tolstoy and Vrubel side by side. A Russian hut here at the source of the Nile. Isn't there something odd about this, almost a joke? And the old woman sucks on her pipe, as if she were chewing a candy.

*Two* When you hear a voice, or if the rustling of a snake joins the rumbling in the sky—remember, White Man, that means Verena has returned. But listen—do you hear the sound of footsteps in a hurry, the sound of an anxious voice?

*Three* I was walking through the forest with my water jar, making my way through the underbrush. Suddenly I saw an eye gleaming behind a tree, as if someone were there, but it wasn't him. It glittered beyond the tree, like a black ray of darkness. Then a hairy hand gripped the trunk in convulsions and a fingernail scraped hardened gum resin into a ball. And a shadow—it might have been the shadow of a star—followed in my footsteps, now and then the hand waved, and still those two eyes, those two gentle dark eyes, shone through the twilight. It was the ape.

The forest folk went along their evening paths. But they mean us no harm. Their faces are like overturned cups: whitish, with a blue sheen, patterned with wrinkles. And their eyes are sad—you

noticed that very accurately. As if there were a world of fairy tales crowded between their eyelashes. And their hands are dark blue, long and broad.

Suddenly I heard a voice, it was soft but severe, there was something incomprehensible in it, almost like my sister's or perhaps Veren's. I pulled a sharpened stick out of a pit the trappers had dug and carried it alone through the twilight and the long grass. The ashes of evening fell on my shoulders and my arms, but there was no longer anyone else in the forest. Twilight fell coarsely, like a black snowstorm.

*One* Answer me, blue eyes: isn't he the one who wanders around from place to place in the zoo with the hairy king, pounding his fist against the cold round bars of his cage, hopping off into the corners?

*Three* Stranger, you are right. He is the one: that cautious walk, and a quick scamper into the woods. But then there came a groan from the woods, the inner bark of the trees shuddered, as if heart-struck. The way people will fall on their faces to escape from another's fury, the way a candle flickers and darts its tongues into the surrounding dark. You remember the beehive. Veren found it; they made a candle from the honeycombs, from the wax of wild bees. (*She falls silent.*) That is Veren's voice; he has returned. Many destinies seem to crowd today at the door of this hut, by this worn threshold where I have mourned so often, my hair all tangled, my eyelashes wet as the Dipper high overhead.

*Four* My life today, you know, was a gift of heaven. I fell into a trap last night, but the sharpened stick was no longer in it. But who is this cruel-eyed stranger? I am not afraid, you know. I can be bold if I have to.

*One* Why say things like that? A little good will, and I'll leave soon. Eat something, and heat up the stove of your mind with these logs. You'll find things more pleasant that way.

*Four* I'll tell you what, stranger. Let's capture the ape that wanders around here at night. He'd be better off in a zoo.

*(The stranger kills Veren.)*

[1914–15: NP 294]

# *Miss Death Makes a Mistake*

*or, The Thirteenth Guest*

CHARACTERS: Miss Death  
The Twelve Regulars  
The Thirteenth Guest [The Stranger]

*(The action takes place in the Last Resort, a tavern where rowdy boys go when they die. They clench tin whistles in their teeth.)*

*Miss Death* All right, boys, Death is about to have a party. Everybody take hands and let's dance!

*(Song)*

In shivering shawls the madman strolls—  
I hear the snowflakes bite.  
The floorboard cracks and creaks beneath  
the scraping claw of night.  
Come on, you bony drunks, let's dance!  
Beat me out a rhythm on your skulls!  
Come sing songs  
with the tongs and the bones  
and listen to the slick falsetto  
of the doo-wop worms.  
Crack my skull along a seam  
and fill it full of beer;  
let's all sing Happy Birthday  
now that death day's here.  
Dead drunk or live drunk! Dead drunk or live!  
Let's have a good time at the old soirée,  
let's hear it for the midnight cabaret,  
where an empty skull is a party favor  
where the guest of honor is a weird old lady  
and her good-time daddy is a dead old man  
all done up in a poor man's shroud.



Everything on earth is empty voodoo;  
in this world Death is the ultimate hoodoo.  
Life is the square root of minus one  
inside us. Extract it. There. I'm done.

*(She stops the circle dance.)*

*The Twelve Regulars* What do we do now, Miss Death?

*Miss Death (Song)*

I'm o'clock and you're o'clock.  
You guys don't know squat about it!  
Turn your prickly whiskers up  
and close your eyes forever!  
When you see the moon dangling over the roof,  
Set the hands of your heart at midnight!  
Tell them: stop! stop! stop!  
Everything on earth is a sleep or a wake.  
Hear the antique creak  
of this mortal portal.  
Time is a-wasting.  
Drink up and die.  
Scatter your daydreams  
like beads from a string.  
Turn out your light.  
Time to turn white.  
Shiver, shake and fall, fall, fall.

That's it for now, boys. Death has done dancing for a while. The lady is *tired*, honey. I'm sitting this one out.

All this whirling, twirling, bending,  
burning, yearning, earning, spending,  
waiting for a happy ending,  
What's the point?  
Just like sparrows in the snow,  
laugh a lot at weep and woe;  
life is only come and go  
with a dinner in between.  
When life is all over  
then Death has a ball,

and only big spenders  
have something to show for it all.

*(The party scene. Miss Death takes a straw and sucks cherry juice from a clear glass. The Twelve Regulars do the same. A long table covered in white. The glasses are full of dark red liquid.)*

*Miss Death (sucking the sweet red juice through a thin gold straw)* Pass me that head. Alas, poor Oleg! What a sweet brave boy he used to be! *(She drinks, then thinks dreamily for a while.)* Hey! Bring us some ice! The lips on some of these skulls are turning black. *(She yawns.)* Hey! That old white magic . . . . I'll drink to that. Ok, boys, it's time to eat. *(She gets up slowly and heads for the door.)* Hmm. I think I see that boy at the door again.

*(Very slowly, she strips the cover from her straw. A whip. She moves among The Regulars, all dressed in white, a liontamer among her animals. The Regulars hold mugs with yellowing eye-sockets and gray cheekbones. Someone knocks at the door.)*

*Miss Death (Song)*

Who's that? Who's that so late in night  
and fire, trying to get in without a reservation?

While you're up, darling, answer the door, will you? And hand me  
my whip while you're at it. It's over there.

A man has to be a hell of a sport  
to knock this late at the door of the Last Resort.  
It's an ill wind brings a boy to my window—  
and this is a hell of a hole to want into.

*Voice* Hey! Open up!

*Miss Death* How many are we here, anyway?  
Honey, we can't have thirteen at table!  
Maybe he's deaf and dumb. Or dead.  
I can't make out a word he said.  
Look at him there, dancing in the doorway!  
Hit him, honey, knock him to the floor!

*The Stranger* Hey!  
Is this the club where Death is the dealer?

The lady who rules the roost  
is a crook! The game is rigged,  
the show is fixed,  
and the house if full of white boys!  
They sit around and wait, wait, wait,  
in the clutches of a crazy crook,  
and their teeth have lost their bite, bite, bite,  
and their faces they are white, white, white.

They don't say zip. All of them dead, like a fire tossed out in a snowbank. Their faces are white as wash on a wall. Yeah, this must be the place. This is the slop-chute where the rowdy boys go when they die. What a place to wind up. But I wanna O.D. on everything like these white boys, like these faces on a whitewashed wall. Some of them are still having the D.T.s—they die like flies on a flower—makes death look like an easy thing, a lazy thing. Listen up! (*He flexes his saber.*) I'm the thirteenth guest at your table, and I wanna drink some of that beer, that Drink of Death. I like the idea!

*(Dreams descend: some of them lie down and whisper "mama," others whisper "buddy", and they grumble and growl.)*

*The Stranger* Listen up! Gimme some of that beer, that Drink of Death! Before these white boys drink it all up, these faces on a whitewashed wall. Their clothes are streamers, long wax drippings from a candle, and they all have a skull-cup cocktail clutched in their hands. Hey! Anybody gonna take my order?

*Miss Death* I hear you, big spender, but listen. We've only got a dozen glasses, and they're all being used.

*The Stranger* I don't care, I just want a drink. I finally made it to the Last Resort, and I wanna try some of the local poison. I wanna taste the Drink of Death.

*Miss Death* You're a mean man, stranger. What do you expect me to do, go shopping for beermugs at this hour?

*The Stranger* I'm no help. I don't give advice.

*Miss Death* You're a close-mouth type, I'll say that for you.

*The Stranger* If I don't get a drink, you get your license revoked. And then Death's out of business. Permanently.

*Miss Death* You drive a hard bargain, stranger. (*She puts on a kerchief.*) You understand this is causing me grief. Well, what are you staring at, goddam it? I gotta go shopping. When you drink with the dead at the Last Resort, you can't use another man's glass.

*(Some of the dead boys start to move around. You can see the living fire behind a few dead white masks. Their eyebrows and mouths begin to quiver.)*

*Miss Death* (*She raises her whip.*) Back, boys! Back up, you bastards! Lie down and die! (*She cracks the whip.*) Who's gonna watch you while I'm gone? Lie down and be quiet! (*She leaves.*)

*(The Twelve Regulars have been propped against the wall like a row of corpses; they start to come to life. Some of them ask for cigarettes, light up—"got a match?" "Thanks." Some of them yawn peacefully and stretch, and laugh a little. Miss Death returns.)*

*Miss Death* Nobody home next door. And look at my boys, all of them jumping around like jacks. (*To the Stranger*) Hey, you! What do you want here anyway? Out! Before you cause me real trouble.

*The Stranger* Don't expect sympathy from me. I'm cruel through and through.

*Miss Death* (*runs over to get the Twelve back into line*) Settle down, you buzzards. All this is making me lose my head.

*The Stranger* Now there's a thought. Here's a question from your thirteenth guest. Is your head empty?

*Miss Death* Empty? Honey, it's empty as can be.

*The Stranger* Then that's the mug for me. Give it here. I'll use your head.

*Miss Death* I have to admit, he's got me stumped. If I had a thing in my head, I could figure out how to get out of this.

*The Stranger* Is it a deal? I'm betting that Death is dumb.

*Miss Death* It's a deal.

*The Stranger* I remember you once, you were standing on a platform with a lot of fancy doctors, wise guys, all of them, and wires connected you, bone to bone, right down to your spiderweb hand, and your skull had something written on it in Latin. Am I right?

*Miss Death (embarrassed)* You're right. There were three of us, all hung up in a row.

*The Stranger* Unscrew your head. That's it! A glass for the thirteenth guest! Here's my hanky, you can wear that instead. It's stained with scent and still pretty unsnotty. (*He unfolds his handkerchief.*)

*Miss Death* My conquering hero! You're worse than Stenka Razin. All right. At least leave me my lower jaw. It won't do you any good. (*She pushes back her braids and unscrews her head and gives it to him.*) A bargain's a bargain, sweetheart.

*The Stranger (He gives her his handkerchief.)* A bargain's a bargain, sweetheart.

*Miss Death* I can't see a thing with this hanky on. Fill 'er up yourself, honey. Try the stuff in the black barrel, that's your poison. Say, listen, play fair with me, will you? I'm in your power, I'm the lady on the scaffold and you're the hangman, honey, and I kiss your feet, believe me, I do. But I'm blind, I can't see a thing. You've got my head in your hands. You're the winner.

*The Stranger* First time in my life this has ever happened, and I'm really touched by your sincerity. Miss Death, kissing my feet!

*The Twelve Regulars* You gotta play fair, stranger, but we don't: we're prisoners of the wall. Our eyes will soon crawl with the kingdom of worms! So listen up good and believe what we say: don't play fair with her, if it's the last thing you do!

*Miss Death* I can't see any worms, I can't see the party, I can't see the bar: poor little me, I'm blind, I kiss your feet—you come in here, you make a fuss, you want the Drink of Death. Ok. It's in the black barrel. My own private stock is in the blue barrel. Don't get them mixed up. Just look at me! Lady Grave, *moi*, weeping and wailing, lying at your feet like a floral tribute. And if you're ticking and tocking between YES and NO—have a heart, honey, have a heart!

*The Stranger* I want you to pour the drinks.

*Miss Death* How can I? Where's my skull? Where's my eyes? Listen, I know when I'm licked. (*She gropes around for her head.*) What will my little hanky whisper to me now? Nothing! Zip! Did I win or am I dying? (*She dances around.*) More noise from the whistle-bones, the shin-bone flutes! More clatter from the back-bones! Pound out a rhythm in the pelvic region! More finger-bone guitars! And you, the twelve of you! I hear your nasty whispers! You used to like the taste of my whip, didn't you? Don't stab me in the back now, boys! Back! Back!

Beat me out a rhythm on the skull-bone lute!  
Play me a tune on the old bone flute!

I'll pour the drinks. The cup of life, the cup of death. And soon I'll be different, sour, like a poison weed at the side of the road. Go ahead, take one.

*The Stranger* You go first.

*Miss Death* I can't, I'm blind.

*The Stranger* That's why you go first.

*Miss Death* (*She drinks.*) It tastes awful. I'm getting woozy. I'm dying. This is what you call Miss Death's Mistake. I'm dead. (*She falls onto a pile of pillows.*)

(*The Twelve Regulars twitch back to life as she dies. Everybody's free. The real party begins.*)

*Miss Death* (*She sits up.*) Gimme that script. (*She pages through it.*) "Miss Death Makes a Mistake." Well, I got through it, right down to the final scene. That means I can join the crowd again. (*She jumps to her feet and steps to the footlights.*) Ladies and gentlemen, glad to be back among you all!

[1915: IV.251]

## “A street of the future”

*(The scene: A street of the future. Two figures wearing suits of armor made of snow-white cloth, crowned with nodding black plumes.)*

*One* Friend, why are you off in such a rush? *Weel-weel okayit yukut yulin yulin kwaintz wog!* Aren't you supposed to die tomorrow?

*Two (He thumbs the pages of his notebook.)* I was born on the third of November. Two times two is four . . . . You're right! I do die tomorrow, sad as it may seem.

*One* I was born on the feast of the blue-eyed Ganges. Well, old friend, you're on your way out! Don't forget, though, you have to make sure your slot in this present life doesn't get assigned to someone else. Don't put it off now, I know how absent-minded you can be! Stop by the police station, make sure everything is in order for your transfer from this life to the next one. Of course you have a tax to pay, but it doesn't amount to much.

*Two* Dear oh dear oh dear. Yes, tomorrow I die, sad as it may seem. It's time for me to wade into the river of death, take the cold plunge! Brrrr. Well, can't be helped. The last time I died, I got chilled to the bone and caught a cold. This time I must remember to wear my long underwear.

*One* Just get to the other side as fast as you can, and shake off the water like a wet goose. But what about your elegant research on the significance of  $1/365 \times 365$  days? Will you save that for another life? I'd be glad to keep it for you, if you want.

*Two* No, I've been having all these problems with Nagy Wein, that girl with the pretty eyes. That research will have to wait until after my *next* death, into life number three.

*One* Whatever you say. Well, good luck in your second life! You mean you do want me to keep your work for you?

*Two* Yes. This next time I'll still be head over heels in love, but the life after I'll be cold and calm, all intellect. Oh, and listen, would you be a real friend and do me a favor? Have me cremated, will you, and then give me a little sack of my ashes when I get born back? You should be in the prime of life by then, if I'm not mistaken. Will you?

*One* Of course I will. Glad to oblige. Goodbye now. If you run into anyone we know, give them my regards. Good death now, don't forget. Zizi and Dudu have died recently, say hello to them too. Tell them we're expecting them back any day now. A big welcoming committee, with flowers and everything! Don't forget, say hello to all our friends!

*(They go off in opposite directions.)*

[1916: V.142]



# The Gods

*The land where Izanagi  
reads Monogatori to Perun,  
and Eros sits on Shang-ti's knees,  
and the topknot on the god's head  
looks like snow, a lump of snow;  
the land where Amor embraces Maa Emu  
and Tien and Indra sit in conversation;  
where Juno and Tsintekuatl  
adore Correggio  
and admire Murillo;  
where Unkulunkulu and Thor  
with folded arms  
play peaceful games of chess  
beside Astarte, who worships Hokusai—  
take me to that land!*

May 9, 1919

## SOME OF THE CHARACTERS:

*Unkulunkulu*, a log of wood with staring fish eyes gouged and scratched by someone's knife. A cruel, upended log with scratched-in circles for eyes.

*Tien*, an old man with a bald head and fluffy puffs of hair over his ears; they look like two rabbits trying to hide. His narrow slant eyes are like two birds hanging by their tails.

*Maa Emu*, a savage oceanic female, her dark eyes the color of evening at sea. She is a powerful goddess, a savage huntress of fish, and she clasps a salt-water sheat-fish in her arms.

*Shang-Ti*, who wears a long gray beard. He keeps tripping over it.

*Indra*, a powerful maiden with dawn-clouds in her hair. She wears a black belt of forest flowers draped about her body.

*Juno*, the wife of heaven. Her limbs draped in gray clouds, a string of delicate morning clouds.

*Thor*, an old man whose snowy beard is a swarm of bees. The curls of his beard are bees of snow, his face is a willow hive, his eyes are the two entrances.

*(Juno, dressed in a hopvine, scrapes her snowy stone feet with a file. Unkulunkulu listens intently to the sound of the termite that gnaws its way through his wooden body. Tsintekuatl mentally catches a mosquito larva floating in the pool of water caught in his hollowed-out head. Venus applies a fresh patch to her stony white shoulders; she passes her time repairing the white stone of love. Shang-Ti wipes a cloud of soot from his bald head. Two puffs of gray hair, like rabbits, hang over his ears. Tien's long hair, which reaches to the ground, is his only clothing; he presses it with a flatiron. Astarte stands by a waterfall, hugging a little sheat-fish to her breast. Izanagi winds a string of tiny silver fish around her shoulders.)*

*Eros* Yunchee, Enchee! peegogaro!

Zhooree keekee: seen sonega, aps zabeera meelyuchee!

*(He tangles a wasp into the gray floor-length hair of old Shang-Ti.)*

Plyanch, pet, bek, peero-eezee! zhabooree!

Geepch, gepch, ganch! apseelyukee-cheekeelee!

*Amor* *(He flies by, leading a bee on a leash. The leash is a strand of Shang-Ti's long hair.)* Seeno-ana tsetseereets! *(with his bee, he looks like an elegant young man with a poodle).* Peecheereekee cheekeelee!  
Emz, amz, oomz!

*Juno* *(She streaks her snow-white hair with yellow meadow flowers.)*

Gelee googa gram ram ram.

Moory-goory reekoko!

Seepl, tsepl, bas!

*Eros* *(He beats her white shoulders with the long stem of a papyrus plant.)*

Haheeyookee! Heehoro! Ehee, ahee, hee!  
Eemcheereechee chool bool gool!  
Moory moora moor!

Juno Chageza! (*She shoos him away with a twig, as if he were a fly.*)

Unkulunkulu Zhepr, mepr, chok!  
Gegogageh! Grororo!

*(He has been eating wild honey, it drips from his wooden mouth. In his hair, streaked with the dried blood of defeated enemies, golden wasps are nesting. Their bodies are golden panpipes, and they crawl over the old god's face.)*

Juno Moory goory reekoko.  
Someone kissed me yesterday.

*(She carves the date and the day of the week into the god's wooden shoulders.)* And here is the name: Zeezee reeze! *(She carves that too.)* See-okookee seeseesee!

Unkulunkulu Perch! Harch! Zorch!*(He snorts and grunts and leaves. He is the great goddess of beauty's notebook; love's traces written in capital letters. Snow begins to fall.)*

Juno Hanzee-opo! I'm getting cold.

*(Perun gives her a black bearskin coat from the Siberian forests. The shivering goddess wraps herself against the snow. More snow falls.)*

Venus Enkenchee! Today I found the hand of Osiris  
on rocks beside the waterfall.  
Enkenchee! Zeebgar, zorgam! Dzoog zag!  
Mench! Manch! Mee-oo!  
Kiss me! Zef zeef dee-obey! Tseekeereekce tsatsa! Kiss me!  
Comb out the hair of my suffering with the comb of your  
mouth!  
Seekeeechee hazadero.  
Omr, brom, mey-oo tsetseeleetsee tsee!  
Tsoogee boogee horm!  
Barg! brezg! dzo!  
Arakaro dzoogo dzee! bzdrak!

Lull me in your eyelashes, where great birds fly with frightened wings. Weep for me . . . . .

*Omrey, imrey, oomrey, mom.*

Halla halla heetee tee.

*Hurm!* Hurm!

Mee-ogey! Mee-ogey!

*Anche Patyai (His mouth is an eternal hive of bees, and he sucks his honey-smearred gray whiskers.)* Barhar kooko pso pso pso!

*Eros (He settles on his shoulder.)* Latee laytee kool kool kool!

Amza omza meego-anch!

See-o elchee bool choolur!

*(He flutters his snow-white wings, riding the god's arm.)*

*Chompas (An old man with divine eyes.)* Gdrak rareero reeroro! Hoove, have, heve! *(He takes off his black hide.)* A bear bone is good for sucking on and also for writing names.

*Juno* Give it to me.

Mara rama beebabool—

Ooks, kooks, ell!

See-obassa cheecheedee!

Rededeedee deedeedee!

*Kali (She is dressed in black snakes.)*

The water flows, but no one drinks. Here is a skull. Drink from it.

See how the beautiful enemy stares at the stars.

The gods have ordered him destroyed, and his backbone is broken with silk.

Wave, you snakes of death!

Yagza, *perchee, bebzee* oy!

Zergza oolee loy moy toy!

Groy emch *amchee pareeree!*

*Zeeereyoo gora, peecheeree!*

*Thor (He is wrapped in snowdrifts, as if they were white bearskins.)*

Rtep nagogee peeleecheelee?

Palee *chogee cheepoloch!*

Broog gavevo reegorap!

Rameegoma zabzarag!  
Mooro baba booro pchekh!  
Gagagoya—geegagaz!  
Gheeyee! Geek!

*(To Unkulunkulu)*

Out of my way, old one!  
Wood must bow before iron!  
See how I sweat in drops of lead!

*Kali* I greet you! Let me embrace you!  
But beware my snakes!  
Their fangs are fatal, god!

*Eros (He grabs a snake and flies away, trailing it behind him.)*

Beegoo goo barz, berz, gheecheechee!  
Peepsee opee, paga goo  
Chochee googa, ghenee gan!  
Al, ell, eel!  
Alee, ellee, eelee!  
Cheerch, charch, smool, nozee! zeeka!  
Moolee, molee, mole!  
Ek, ak, ook! ka-yee yokee peenee yook!  
Gamch, gemch! keerokeevvee vero!

*(He circles around with the snake, beating his wings like a nighthawk.)*

*The Gods* Ehcha oochee ochee  
Kezee nezee zagzarak!  
Neezareezee ozeerec!  
Mea-oomoora zeemoreh!

*Kali* The winds of death upon them! The death spirit!  
Mazacheechee cheemoro!

*Perun* I have brought you a new god: Unduri.  
Greet him! Applaud from the stumps of your trees!

*(Eros smashes the snake on the stone fingers of Tsintekuatl.)*

*Kali* Glyoopch! Pench! Dzero. *(She reaches out toward the dead snake, where it hangs like a hank of hair.)* Forgive me, serpent.

*Tsintekuatl* Map! Map!

Bragaveero tsegaro

Watch it, kid! No more tricks like that!

*Eros* Leilga, oinga, ekhamchee!

Reechee *cheechee* cheecheecheechee!

Brodadoodo beeraro

*Pouilsee peilsee* peepapay. (*He hides in Juno's hair.*)

*Juno* What is it, darling? Makarao keeocherk?

(*The ashes of the gods fall from on high.*)

Logooaga dooapogo!

*Veles* (*god of cattle*) Broovoorooroo roorooroo.

Peetseh tsapeh sesese!

Broovoorooroo roorooroo.

Seetseeleetsee tsetsetsee!

Pyanz, penz, panz!

*Eros* Leilga, oinga, ekhamchee!

Reechee *cheechee* cheecheechee!

*Lenee noolee elec alee!*

Bacheekako keekako.

Nakeekoko kookakeh!

Kookareekee keekeekoo.

Papa *poopee* peegeegee!

Morod, morod, meeoohalee merd.

*Kapa, kapa, kap!*

Emch, amch, oomch!

Doomchee, dalche, dolchee!

(*He takes Veles's hand and goes off with him.*)

Makarao keeocherk!

Tsetseeleetsy tsetseetsy.

Vrakoolokee kaka kam!

Chookooreekee chok!

*Stribog* (*He looks toward the mountains, sniffing a scarlet flower.*)

Beerorry zeerora! nelee malee keeleeko!

peegogaia rananee; vooroo toory peeroro!

*Perun* Tarkh paraka prak tak tak!  
Peereerara pooroorooroo!  
Tokho dago porororo! prokrokro!  
Prokrokraptee!

*Unduri* Sharsh, charsh, zarsh.  
An Ostiak carved me today, and forgot to give me seal blubber.  
Rschchee chakooroo koomybal!

*Juno* Layolola booaro! veetse-oleh sesese!  
Lyoonoonoolya eezazo  
Veenaveeva melch and oolch.  
Seetsotsara grozaza! morokhoro ratatatee  
Kozomozo mee-ohnegee kheerakookee stseetseelee!  
Serakeekeeka kookooree!

*Amor* Bay bayooro! lee-oh-elee!  
Manee eza, plyookee okee, pel, pel, pel!  
Peecheepee toortoortoo!  
Peench, pench, panch!  
Solololo moramee.

*Tsintekuati* Proog, booktr, rkeerch.  
Praktv, bakv, zham!  
Zhrab, gavrt, teeft!  
Marzh bzor merch  
Geegogago! gro ro-ro!  
Bzoop, bzoy, cherpch zheerkh!  
Rapr grapr apr!  
Perzee orzee cheeveeree.  
*Lyaya* oolya noilzee  
Monee keeno ro.  
Bzlom!  
Kookakoka aps cheemeh!  
Lazhd nazhd kazhd, shazhd! Tseeree!  
Poom tam toorktr! Zhepr, mepr chokh!

*(He begins to roast venison over a fire he has built on the stone hands of the toad-god.)*

*Lel* Levee-opee, leeparoochee cheezeleh!  
Moory goory reekoko!

Bookh, bakh, bokh, boor, bear, bar,  
Eh, geel okh!  
Tsetseeleetsee!

*Juno* Baldur, come here!  
Zam, gag, zam!

*Unduri* Dekh, mekh, dzoopl.  
Tookee, pakee seetsoro  
Meego-anchee, mechepee!  
Rbzook kvakada kvakeera! khlyam!

*Tien* See-oh-ookeen seeseesee.  
See-oh-kookee seetsoro!  
Khryooryooryooree cheetsatso.  
Pech, pach, poch.  
Khaveekkhokho khroom door por!  
Amt, goolp, pelp!  
Khapree epree khamtee ooksee.  
Tsog! beg! geep! zoo-eep!

*(He eats leaves from a tree.)*

*Loki* And now behold the murderer's knife! *(He stabs Baldur in the neck.)* Mezereze bolcheecha!

[1921: IV.259]



# *The Tuberculosis Spirochete*

*or, Shakespeare under a Microscope*

CHARACTERS: A Blood Cell  
A Tuberculosis Spirochete (a coil-shaped organism)  
The Writer

## PROLOGUE

*The Writer (me)* Shit! My lighter's busted! The spring fell out. Now what do I do? (*I fall into a reverie.*)

## ACT ONE

(*A battlefield in the fight against TB.*) [*Enter Spirochete.*]

*Spirochete* First TB platoon! A-bout *face*! Stand fast! Ready, thrust! By the numbers: one, two! One, two! First cavalry regiment! Mount up, MOUNT! Ready, ri-ight! First TB cavalry regiment, dra-aw sa-bers! Sabers OUT! Arrgh! Arrgh! Hold it, shithead! Stop right there! Whoreson! Ready! Now have at you! Lie there . . . . Life-less . . . . Fall, as the red-faced government shall fall.

## ACT TWO

[*Another part of the field. Enter Spirochete.*]

*Spirochete* You fearful warriors of blood! See how you move in close procession, like a string of beads through the greasy fingers of a priest! So many beads, all in a single string. A flock of sheep who follow the crook of a single shepherd. A pile of petty coins, stacked up by a yellowing eunuch into a column of wealth! A pile of coins on the moneychanger's counter? What say you? Who will come

singly out against me? Leave these womanish ways! Who among you is a warrior bold? Who meets his match in me? Know me for myself, I am the dreaded Spirochete! Be bold, my soul! Come singly forth, in the holy virgin's name! Be bold, my soul! Swing wide from your shoulder! Why else did my mother bring me forth, if not to wield a mighty hero's strength? God's holy mother! Singly, singly! Ere else I run thee through, thou lily-livered warrior of blood, as a fork will pierce a piece of pickled herring! And like the spotted snake I'll wriggle forth from both ends of your gut, Spirochete triumphant! I'll shake you with my fevers up and down, thou miserable fry. Hell and lightnings! Perverted eyes of saints! Heaven and hell! Puddle of pennies! Knives and niceness! Saint and merchant! Saint and sanctuary! Three and thirty misfortunes! Arrgh! Arrgh! Caught by the throat! Breakest thou? Stop! Thou liest!

Doff the helm of righteous thinking! The wind of days has thrown at odds and evens, and odd comes up. Ah, unlucky chance! Hell and lightnings! With the spear of my body I'll pierce the bloody sphere of yours, your soft rotting belly! Like a martial, warlike twisting spear, I'll pierce you through, escaping by your nether door. Arrogant sphere! Round wafer of conceit! Thou puffed-faced strumpet! Lie not there beneath a hungry man's fork, thou silver plattered delicacy! Hell and lightning! I'll pierce thy belly, thou picture of rosy-cheeked health, as the deer's sharp horn pierces the belly of the drowsy boa who devours him. Dost thou hear me, thou red blood cell?

Through and through and through and through! Zeeeeessss!  
Zeeeeessss! Ehhh-YAAAAAAH! Aiiiiii-YAAAAAAH! Veiiiiii-YAAAAAAH!  
Bzzzzeeeeeee!

First TB Regiment! Draaaaaaw sabers, DRAAAAAAW! Hack right! Slash left! Folloooooow meeeee! Gods and thunder! A babel of worlds. The alphabet's afoot—what greater terror is there? Enough of this traffic in delicate lady manners. Off with the helmets of prudence! Song and roaring! A hundred kisses in a single spot! Zzzzzzeeee-YZZZZZZ! Lay by! Onward, and pile up rapturous mountains of skulls! Towers! Forward! Destroy! Hack to pieces! Let brazen-face meet brazen-face! Wail of walls! I am a spiralling sword! Die, or else I die and you'll roll me into a spring, a coil, paper me over with prudence and squash my martial ardor, as

if a man, pompously reading his newspaper, had settled into his easy chair. Do you think you can simply slip me into the great sack of your belly and drowse as you consume me? I have martial passions, butcherly strategems! Just as the deer horn pokes the streaky gut of the boa constrictor, I will butt you with my tiny antler, pierce your striped skin with my tiny needle.

A duel of honor! Devil and damnation!

The Virgin and her royal curls!

The devil and lovers' kisses!

Plague and consumption of pale walls! Poison and lightning!

Come, thou coward warrior of blood, advance to meet me hand to hand!

Coward! Wilt thou play the fool? Flaunt me thy cowardice? Shame upon thee! This is the TB war, the battle between ruddy health and consumption. The knocking noise of skulls. Hearest thou? Hearest thou? The jaw-gates and the black eye-holes vaunt in the field. The skull has come! To conquer the inner core of a single hair.

Oof! Oof! Spirit of battles, delight in blood, delight in being, I fill my nostrils with delight in battle. I rejoice in the day! I am a warrior!

Thunder and lightning! I'll pierce thy gut!

Uuuuuurrrrr! Uuuuuurrrrr!

Arrgh! Arrgh! Follow me, troops!

Halt, carrion! Thou canst not flee from me!

Grrrr, grrrr . . . . Whoreson! Whither away! The mightiest battle of the universe fought upon a single hair!

### ACT THREE

*(Another part of the field. Enter Spirochete and a bloody warrior [the Blood Cell].)*

*Spirochete* Like a wild avalanche the warriors of death have swept over all. Aha! I have risked my neck fighting for white TB!

*Blood Cell* Aiiiiieeee! The hair of my head has turned gray! Snow falls in my hair, it is winter, it is sledding weather there. It is autumn in the ravines and runnels of my face. Yellow leaves. Behold the sere

and yellow leaf! Black ravens fly from my eyes. The TB warriors have overrun the cage of my brain. Now begins the murder of wise men as they sit at their writing desks, thinking on thoughts of food to be made from clay, holy thoughts of lofty beings.

Blood stains their snow-white heads, blood stains their manuscripts covered with minute calculations about edible clay.

Major battles take place in these gray hairs.

There the great game unfolds.

Time breaks open new decks of forces.

The aces of finest regiments have already been led, the bravest and most martial, onto the field of the first cutting of a single hair.

A dead time. The warriors have met and grappled, now they perish in connective tissue. Unite! In the place that separates brain and blood and bone.

Universal truths tumble like deities. And the body watches with attentive eyes, moving them back and forth like glassy black birds, watching the combat of TB and health, in wheezing lungs that heave like a blacksmith's bellows.

Fan up the flames! Other bodies are waiting.

*Spirochete* Fighter for health, advance to the cruel struggle! Don't play the woman!

*The Writer* What am I do to with this malevolent corkscrew, this twisted character? It's out of its mind! Bah! Perhaps it needs a practical destiny. Except for a missing spring, my lighter is in very good shape . . . . I've used up a whole box of matches today already, and I can't afford that. I wonder if I could use the spirochete to replace the spring?

*Blood Cell* Well? Can you? Does it fit?

*The Writer (He laughs)* It fits! (*He demonstrates the lighter.*) See? It lights! And what a beautiful crimson flame! Redder than lipstick. I've turned the deadly spirochete into a replacement part for a lighter!

MORAL: Use your spirochetes to repair lighters!

[1922: IV.268]

# Introduction

Khlebnikov invented the term “supersaga” in 1922 and used it only with reference to *Zangezi*, the last of the four works in this section. His definition is, typically, metaphorical in the extreme. The supersaga is a sculpture of particolored stone, an edifice whose building blocks are individual tales, an ecumenical gathering of texts professing different creeds and rules. The main metaphor, however, is so simple that it is almost always overlooked: the supersaga is an extended utterance whose components are *like words*. Just as a sentence normally consists of words belonging to different parts of speech, so too a supersaga consists of texts that differ widely in function, form, and meaning. Some may appear to be little more than conjunctions or interjections, while others seem to work like nouns or verbs or adjectives. What is important is that together they constitute a kind of sentence. The “words” themselves are generally quite comprehensible; the challenge lies in the syntax.

All of the supersagas have certain formal properties in common. The first is that they are composites of works written at different times and without obvious reference to one another. The second is that the constituent texts display an extraordinary generic range. Within a single supersaga we may find pastoral lyrics, dialogues, epistles, dramatic monologues, prose tales, songs, and sermons. A third common property is a shifting voice or persona. Even within the most conservative of the supersagas, *Azia Unbound*, the speaker takes on the role of a teacher, an epic narrator, a timid lover, and the very incarnation of Planet Earth. The addressees of the poems are equally multifarious: in one poem the implied listener is a disciple awaiting enlightenment, in another a seductress, in a third the Asian continent, and in a fourth the heavenly spheres. What this diversity conveys is the fundamentally dramatic character of the supersaga as a genre. In *Zangezi* and *Otter's Children* it is realized literally in sections identified as acts or scenes, replete with stage directions and set speeches by dramatis personae. In *Azia*

*Unbound* and *War in a Mousetrap* the individual poems establish a dramatic identity internally, with the speaker typically apostrophizing a reader, or group of readers, identified in the opening lines. Alternately he will frame his words in the first-person plural to ensure that we, his readers, are included in the dramatic context.

Khlebnikov's architectural metaphor is particularly apt for describing the four supersagas as a whole. They form an elegant colonnade, with *Otter's Children* and *Zangezi* supporting the corners of the edifice. These two sagas are alike not only in terms of their formal heterogeneity, but also in their basic thematic impulse. Both are concerned with the nature of destiny and predestination, with humankind's attempt to wrest the threads of life from the hands of Fate. In *Otter's Children* the theories of the great determinists—Karl Marx and Charles Darwin—are revealed in all their meanness. The heroes of the supersaga are those who have attempted to defy the gods and demigods of history, and usually perished in the process. Prometheus plays the central role, accompanied by Hus and Hannibal, Copernicus and Lomonosov, Pugachev and Razin. The poet himself betrays his feelings of helplessness by setting the players in his central scene aboard the *Titanic*. In the end he appeals to the spirits of the great rebels who, like shipwrecked sailors, have washed up on the island of his soul, begging them to aid him in his quest to comprehend destiny.

The two supersagas that occupy the center of the colonnade are major markers of the poet's progress in this quest. *War in a Mousetrap*, as the title suggests, documents his attempt to reduce man's greatest enemy to the dimensions of a rodent. This task is achieved, however, only by virtue of a transformation in the poet's own persona. The frightened voice of the child that sounds at the end of *Otter's Children* becomes the growl of a warrior at the end of *War in a Mousetrap*. The transformation takes a dangerous turn in *Azia Unbound*, where one hears for the first time the voice of the Prophet—not the conventional prophet of romanticism, but the man who regards himself seriously as a seer and sage. He is on the verge of a discovery that will indeed allow man to control his destiny.

In the work that intervenes between *Azia Unbound* and *Zangezi* Khlebnikov does, in fact, begin to take on this particular identity. His theoretical treatises on time and history and language—the *Tables of Destiny* in particular—purport to be a genuine algebra of fate. The fourth and last supersaga explains this algebra and, among other things,

describes the vision supported by these treatises. The spokesman, however, is not the poet in his own right, but the prophet Zangezi. He presents himself as a master of fate because he is the perfect master of language. He has learned to control not destiny itself, but the sounds of destiny. And to the extent that sound and meaning are in perfect accord, he can control the world.

# *Otter's Children*

## CANVAS PANEL ONE

1

The sea. A shoreline spurting golden fire, falling toward the water. Two spirits in white cloaks sail across the sky; they have slanted Mongol eyes. One of them touches the shore and holds up his hand, which begins to drip fire; they groan and move away, like swans on a dark night in autumn. The sound of their weeping drifts in the distance.

The shore has been burning forever. Fires burst from its surface and streams of lava flow into the sea; waves break against red cliffs and black walls. Three suns burn in the sky—guardians from earth's earliest days. In the upper corner of the surface, laid out in perspective, the festival of the bear is depicted. A large black bear attached by a chain, northern pines. At first the people dance around him, they shake their spears and pray to him. Then to the sound of bells and dancing they eat him. A cascade of lava falls from the cliff into the sea. Otter's Children fly on, silver-soft spirits on white wings.

2

The waves beat against the shoreline at regular intervals. The first sun is white, the second smaller—red surrounded by a ring of bluish light—and the third is black, with a green corolla. What seem to be words of complaint and anger in a strange language can be heard. At one corner of the curtain the tip of a wing is just visible. A winged spirit with a black spear in his hand appears above the golden shoreline, his eyes bright with ill-will. A spear shivers and flies, and the red sun falls as if it were setting, drops like a red pearl into the sea. The land changes appearance and begins to darken. A few shoots of green immediately spring up on the cliff. Floods of birds.

Standing on the dying sun, they raise their hands and sing a word-



less hymn of praise to someone. Then Son of Otter—dark-haired, dark-skinned, his round head covered with curls—pulls out the spear and with a rush of black wings attacks the black sun, beating his wings against the air for support. And that sun too falls into the water. Deer and other animals appear.

The earth grows immediately darker. The sky becomes bright blue again. The sea changes color—its black hue, gleaming with red, becomes green. Otter's Children grasp hands and for the first time set foot on earth. The thirst of noonday makes them kneel and touch their mouths to the cold stream that has replaced the golden lava flow; Son of Otter takes a stone hammer in his hand and shatters the rock. Everywhere there are grasses, groves of birches. He bends a birch tree, strips its leaves, attaches a bowstring of twisted hair, and makes a bow.

A small winged Mongol appears. The one remaining sun sets in clouds of sorrow, its rays touching the burial mounds of its former companions.

Lulling these first days of golden happiness, Otter—the Earth Mother—appears in the waves with a fish in her teeth and gravely contemplates her accomplishments.

Then the first smoke—a sign of life rising from that cave, and a butterfly led them to it.

3

Otter's Children sit together by the campfire and thaw out their waxen wings. Son of Otter points at the white sun and says: "That's me!"

A black horse of the sea-steppe swims by—water spouts from its round nostrils, flows past its round eyes. Someone sits astride it, holding in his hands an ivory sounding board and strings.

Those were the first days of existence on earth.

Enormous piles of sea sand. Whale ribs blackening on the beach. Sea horses playing in the waves. A solitary naturalist walks by them carrying a tin can, studying the dry whale bones. Otter's Daughter scoops up water in a seashell and pours it down the naturalist's collar. He frowns, looks up at the sky, and disappears.

The sky is dark gray. Otter's Daughter is wrapped head to foot in her hair. Rain. Letters of lightning. To hide from it, they seek shelter in the cave. The sky grows darker. Enormous stars. Hail. Wind. A dark automobile crosses a square. Wild calling sounds. The moan of a mor-

tally wounded swan and the savage grunting of a rhinoceros. Two shafts of light cut through the darkness. The chauffeur in a winter coat sticks his head out the window, thrusts out an arm, and shouts “There,” and throws a bag onto the sand. A terrifying wind. Shaking with cold, they leave the cave and grab the delivery of blankets. They put them on. He wears a felt hat. Otter’s Daughter wears a black fur coat and a fancy blue hat. They get into the car and drive away. A bearded centaur with hooves and blue eyes goes by on the sand. A fly settles on his ear; he shakes his black mane and drives it away. It lights on his flank; he turns and thoughtfully catches it in his hand.

## CANVAS PANEL TWO

### *Scene One*

*(The curtain rises—we see the Dreamtheater of the Futurians, boxes and rows of seats. Otter’s Children take their seats, led by an usher in a gold-braided uniform. Onstage the scene depicts a mammoth-hunt.)*

The golden birch trees of autumn crown a hill. Aspens, fir trees. A crowd of old men and young boys stand aside with their arms raised to heaven. Yellowed tusks spiral upwards, cracked and worn, like frozen lightning. A trunk is raised aloft in clouds of dust, like well-aimed death. In the tiny eyes with their hairy lashes—disdain. An artist rudely dressed in animal skins carves what he sees on a bone. He furrows his austere brow. Rocks rain down into the pitfall, where only the trunk and eyes can be seen moving.

Storms and lightning lashed your hide,  
you once knew thunder-crash and rodent-squeak,  
now your curved tusks, gleaming as before,  
trail beneath your ears upon the ground.

*(Curtain.)*

### *Scene Two*

*(A candle burns in Reason’s name, in a candlestick made from a skull; beyond it a globe, which casts its round black shadow over everything. A teacher and his students.)*

*The Teacher* Full stop, as Boscovich used to put it.

*A Contemporary of Lomonosov* What? (*A game of soccer suddenly starts in the wings. The ball flies out of sight.*) These people play a wild game!

*One of the Players* The bat of a boot  
and there goes the globe, cloud-climbing.  
But the shadow sits like a sheep,  
communing with candles.

*(The atom speeds toward the Second Player. Mountains appear: Mount Olympus. On the snowy peaks, the local inhabitants, the ones people pray to.)*

*The Gods* Har! Har! Har! Nee! Nee! Nee! Nay! Nay! Nay! The meter of the *Iliad* determines the fate of the Myrmidon!

*(And there he is now in the twilight. He kisses Briseis, who lies with her eyes closed, and he, dark-haired, dark-skinned, raises his hard eyes to heaven. His hand caresses the strings like a wind.*

*High above they discuss him in Homer's words: "Andra moi enepe, Mousa . . ."*

*The snowy menagerie, heads bowed, take counsel to determine the hour of his death. It must come sooner or later.)*

*Achilles* Chryseis! I love you! Lie still, lie still, give me your black hoof, go on, put it here. Oh gods in heaven! Who can equal my Briseis? Am I only a mosquito? What are you mumbling about up there? (*Until this moment, the scene has been hidden by the shadow of the atom.*) Don't laugh. It upsets me, your pleasure in laughing. Look at me with your pale blue pitfalls.

*(Above on Olympus, they have cast heartfelt words into the balance, a passionate judgment on Achilles' life and death. Olympus soon becomes covered with clouds and turns into our own Bald Mountain, with a single witch on it.*

*Otter's Children watch all this very carefully from their seats in the balcony. They have come from the seashore, with salt spray still wet on their faces.)*

CANVAS PANEL THREE

*(Son of Otter thinks about India on the Volga. He says: "Now I plant my heels in the Mongol world, and with my hand caress the sculpted curls of India." He drops from the clouds, saves Nushanbey and her kingdom from the Russians.)*

The river-thief, in bitter sorrow,  
calls companions to his rescue—  
in vain! The keening wind alone  
twists him on his coffin-rope.

Well did he know the oarsman's knack,  
the heavy stroke, the gunwales' creak,  
the ice-cold presage of his sails,  
side armor bent with body blows,  
wailing merchants mew'd in chains:  
wounded, fear-frantic, still conniving.

Screech owl moves, opens wide  
the slits of bloody eyes;  
squinting eye a knothole, ringed  
with barklike convolutions.

Harebells shake, their rustling dies,  
sleepweed moves its tiny flowers. Again,  
again, the screech owl calls.

Then came the sudden sound of bells,  
the halting march of tired feet,  
great humped figures draped in black,  
pensive camels, swaying file.

The Arabs pass in caravan:  
Al-Mas'udi and Ibn Faldan go  
to Bulgar and beyond, to Kuyaba,  
along the ancient Persian road.

He plots his poem: *Iskander-Namé*,  
a poem about the golden Russians,  
how all things fled when they appeared,  
imploping pity as they ran.

How unforeseen is war-reknown,  
the raging heavens in its eyes;  
a grimy thrust beside the slaveblock,  
forcing goddesses in chains to kneel,  
which in war-tumult hurls itself  
hand to hand through the pipe-skirl,  
screaming: Banish fellow feeling!

The scream of the wind in sails on wagons,  
prophesying raid and wretchedness,  
hauls to the vaults of looted shrines  
priests of the desecrated idol.  
Behind those sailing ships on wheels,  
whole graveyards gape forever.

In the sacred grove, where all is dark,  
Ibn Faldan recites *Iskander-Namé*:

“Where fire worshippers stoop to pray  
their clothing makes white mounds,  
and deer at dusk take timid steps,  
raising their heavy eyelid-horns:  
There lies the city of Berdaia,  
brighter than horizons full of dawn.

Songs of battle, splash of oars,  
sea storm draws the Russians down.  
The old Ossete weeps in his rage  
to see the shining mansions fall  
like straw before a fire.  
He leans upon his spear.

A stretch of sea, sameness of salt spray,  
the watch sees palaces along the shore—  
and now the pleasure toys of Abhazia  
comb out their curls in northern rooms.

Nushanbey and the king of Berdaia,  
full of grieving, pray to fate:

‘Hasten to help us, wing-wearer!  
Great Iskander! Iskander, hear

the cry of the weeping earth!  
Arm yourself! Appear!

You are the firstborn of the ages!  
Forget your feast with heaven's sages!  
Come prove the praises all men give you,  
bring these daring Russians down.

Take your great sword in your hand,  
give us shield-shelter, save our land!  
Become once more the pivot of earth,  
forget the dusty discourse of the wise.'

And lo, Iskander came  
to earth, ghost of himself!  
Dare-all, your cause is lost!  
You cannot fight the dead!  
See, two handsome Kashubs, Kama-born,  
drop at the point of Zorevenda's spear.  
And Russian Kental—  
whose hair floats like feather-grass,  
whose heroic hoofbeats  
trample battle-beaten dust,  
who rages leperlike against the world—  
is still the lover of some snow-white girl.

Then Iskander bowed his silver  
helmet, signaling his host.  
He waited—and with his house-lords moved  
into the temple as the Russians faltered.

And Kental fell.

But still he kept riding, breathing,  
his chain-mace still dangling,  
slumped on the neck  
of his now-maddened steed.  
And the stallion went carrying him, baring its teeth,  
through corpse-heap, mountains of massacred men,  
until Russian hands stopped him, catching his bridle,  
and fled to their sail of boats by a sandbank."

God is great, his pathways are his own.  
Arabs are men of peace, and wise—  
they hear without disquiet  
this tale of others, men of war.

(And the sea grows green,  
more salt from Russian blood.)

A water-sound, the trickle of a stream.  
The Arab's Mordvin guide  
intones a prayer to the oasis,  
says: "This is a place of rest.  
Here let us set our camp, close  
to the royal city of the land.  
They love the Persians here in Bulgar,  
though *keremet* may yet undo us all."

But a cry of anguish shakes the forest,  
reminder of the late entombment:  
the voice that cries denies salvation.

Fitfully the campfire burns,  
its dying embers sigh.  
Struck down by fever,  
an aged guru, about to die.  
He places his head between his hands,  
his dying breath convulses him.  
Again that cry pierces the stillness,  
again the guru moves his hand:

"Go set him free, my children.  
Put me there instead.  
My death-dream is at hand,  
while he dies guiltless.  
I do not value my few days:  
he will inherit the age to come."

Not one voice speaks against his wish.  
At once they make the grave-site ready.

The river pirate roars, set free,  
still choked with rage and spite.

He snatches a sword from the Indian,  
traces an arc, as Cossacks do.  
But the unarmed Arabians  
with signs and gestures calm his rage:

“We are weak, unarmed.  
We are friend. No need to fear.  
We keep no roof except the stars.  
We live in peace; our life is trade.”

He stares, harsh frenzy in his eyes—  
this man is mad, they realize.  
He leaps once, twice, then flees,  
and disappears among the trees.

#### CANVAS PANEL FOUR: PALIVODA'S DEATH

Campfires surrounded the camp. The wagons that had creaked and groaned all day in response to their drivers' boring maneuvers now stood silent. The Cossacks clapped their hands and nodded their heads as they sang:

Zaporozhian men are famous.  
Once they saw a marsh bird.  
The hetman, he says: What a beauty!  
The captain, he says: I could love her!  
The sentry, he says: Marry me!

They twirled their whiskers as they sang the old ironic song; no one knows who wrote it. They laughed at the harsh customs of the Zaporozhian Sech, the Russian answer to the Crusaders and the Teutonic knights.

They grew still, smiling behind their whiskers: a frightened sandpiper flew into the light of the fire, flapping its wings, and flew away again. The corncrake, echoing ornament of all southern nights, settled crying upon the meadow. Oxen lay scattered about the steppe like enormous gravestones; the tips of their horns shone darkly. One almost expected to find on them the inscriptions of devout Arabs, they looked so astonishing, like gray slabs rising from the earth at a sharp angle, in



the middle of the steppe. A solitary camel driven by a Crimean outrider looked haughtily at this gathering of warriors, baggage, and oxen in a savage green land, these assembled weapons with rich decoration on the butts and gunstocks, these spears with their tally marks, the set of these heads, these double cloaks thrown carelessly across a shoulder, draping the figure in a harsh, warlike silhouette—where only yesterday, perhaps, two wolves had snarled over the body of a third, or Tatars boiled horsemeat for their meals. Fluttering petals tremble tenderly beneath the body of a great moth.

On the following day, when dawn was scarcely pale in the sky, they broke camp and set out again.

Once again the wagons creaked and they moved out, like a multitude of people who fear nothing. At one point Tatars appeared: they galloped back and forth in the open distance, then disappeared. Narrow hats above their oriental faces—"mugs," the Cossacks never failed to call them—expressed a wariness no European could ever understand. The Cossacks loaded their arquebuses, blew dust from the priming, examined the flints cocked menacingly over the firing pans, and fired in jest at the vanishing horsemen.

They continued their journey in swift, frail longboats. Straining their bodies—some pale, some tanned—the Cossacks rowed. They exulted in good weather and laughed at storms, while the wind that went with them made them ever bolder.

They had plundered the whole countryside. Now, triumphant, they made their way back toward the sea, dragging dark-haired weeping women or carrying ragged sacks of gold and silver dishes thrown over their shoulders.

It was then the fighting men smoked the pipe of victory. It seemed almost that a Cossack sword had leapt from its scabbard and danced a hopak across the entire land. Now on the voyage home, the satisfied Cossacks laughed and joked; they rowed lustily and sang. Palivoda sang as well. None of them could imagine that death for such brave men might be close at hand. But what life, after all, would be worth living, if we tempted destiny with such questions?

Palivoda stood lost in thought: his braided hairlock fell across the back of his neck; his death-pasture, the handgrip like a tuft of forget-me-nots, was thrust into his wide belt. Its crosspiece shone bright above the belt, colder than the sea's waves. A white shirt and pitch-

stained trousers of Ukrainian cloth completed his outfit—harsh, proud. A sunburnt arm stretched out against the sunset. Other Cossacks wore wreaths of autumn poppies.

Clutching his hoard of turquoises and sapphires, the Cossack stared into the distance, at the crimson-flaming sea.

Meanwhile a detachment of Crimean Tatars had hidden themselves in their path, like wolves in ambush, and a battle took place. Many were the bodies that were left there, arms thrown back, a feast of eyes for any Tatar on wings. A fierce, harsh battle—and those days, a battle furnished eagles with their daintiest dish—often the gorged eagles spurned the trunks of corpses on the battlefield and ate out only the eyes.

And now behold Palivoda in a troop of immortal souls, winging their way toward the Throne. As he lay dying he had cast a knowing eye over the battlefield and said: “I leave my body now to be a Eucharist for holy Rus, while I rise up to the Heavenly Throne.”

And he left his body for the rains to wash, his hair for the winds to comb, and ascended to the heavenly mansions, there to recount the glory of the Zaporozhians and how he had died for Holy Rus.

And as he ascended he beheld Nechosa and his companions, and the one the Zaporozhians called the “Old Lady,” who granted audience to emissaries from the Zaporozhian lands and extended her gracious hand. They bent their shaven heads to kiss it, while around her stood a herd of noblemen.

His heart grew sorrowful and he wept, but soon began to sing a harsh fighting song. And he flew lordly onward through the sky. Then he saw a curl of blue smoke, a white farmhouse and sunflowers and cherry trees, and he shouted in a harsh, proud voice: “I’m coming, brothers, coming! Zaporozhians, here I am!”

And a kindly, pleasant face looked out of an upper window and answered: “Welcome, welcome!”

And in a voice still shaking from his recent ordeal, the Cossack answered: “I’m a Cossack from the great meadow.”

Again the old man nodded his head and invited the Cossack into the house. His good wife spread a table cloth and smiled upon the warrior. And thus did the Cossack’s spirit find the repose he longed for. He listened to the story of the battle and wondered how he would be able to help his brothers in arms. And leaning out of the ancient window, they looked down at earth and watched as young Kudry, howling

the cry of attack, hurled himself at a cloud of the enemy, then suddenly turned and combed the field for the fallen. And saw how the Cossacks raised their spears and attacked like light breaking through the clouds, and everyone panicked and ran before them. Then all the Zaporozhian Sech seemed to grow wings on their shoulders. Victory belonged to the Russians. And Palivoda bowed low in farewell and ascended higher, troubled but grateful.

And he heard the exultant Cossack song, rising like the song of a lark through the clash of swords and the noise of battle and the shouts of the victors: "I'm coming, brothers, coming!" Warriors flew to greet him on trailing wings. With the shining faces of heavenly youths they whirled away his mortal soul in their folded wings, toward rest and peace.

And thus did the proud Cossack come to stand before the shining presence: his gray moustaches hung from cheeks that seemed carved out of stone, and his blue eyes stared calm and unmoved into the face of Death itself.

And the victorious Cossacks stood long and mournfully where they buried Palivoda, until the oldest among them gestured with his hand and said: "Sleep, comrade!" At that signal they began to fill in the hero's grave.

## CANVAS PANEL FIVE: AN OCEAN VOYAGE

### *I. Conversation on Shipboard*

Bulky shore receding into shadows,  
Terek vanishing in swirling wake—  
an ocean liner steers toward open water,  
cuts its way across the waves.

Toward what clash in foggy darkness?  
The liner's star is dark, austere.  
Layers of mortal lovers lay within it,  
cocooned along its silken curves.

Lined at the ropes that rail the deck,  
childlike figures lean to look

at iridescent spray, at water  
curving in the sea's blue light.

The glassy shallows beneath us  
and these shore-hugging gulls are signs:  
like flutterings of fate, they seem  
to say: we have not yet come far.

Passengers stroll about your decks:  
Sail on, you water-voyager, sail on,  
sealed in your austere chrysalis,  
while ocean's changelings sing their song.

Painted an unassuming gray,  
efficient, streamlined in design,  
like some enormous island in the dark  
its path divides the width of water.

Her captain comes upon the bridge,  
gold sheen on the shoulder straps  
of an overcoat the worse for wear.  
They relay his commands by service bells.

Don't let me interrupt, someone  
said, laughing, your train of thought.  
Someday of course we'll leave the earth  
and colonize the ocean and the sky—

Suppose we do? Suppose some distant day  
finds us adrift in still more distant blue—  
why, I will stand upon some distant star  
and sight our planet shining through the night!

Today, you see, discourse of power  
and the continent keep life and death in balance,  
like some old man, tired at last  
of carrying the petty weight of war.

Time was, the coachman of the world  
whipped lightning from his horses' manes  
and carted from this place of lamentation  
more shadow-sufferers than he does now.

The life primordial savages led  
still burns in their descendants' dreams.  
Some nostalgia makes them long for  
a life without language—"yes, yes!"

Or suppose the world were one united  
nation (how people hate that notion!)  
will warriors' children think of  
their fathers' swords as rusted plowshares?

Competent scientists stand hopeless  
as the entire planet shudders  
at the clash of heaven's winding patterns—  
and I am helpless, hearing what they say.

Yet those same tribes—much younger once—  
were rarely charmed by universal brotherhood.  
They'll always fight to find a place  
to call their own [ . . . ]

Fate comes in ordinary disguise,  
a footloose figure we rarely recognize,  
who often bursts upon us in  
the middle of an uneventful day.

"Vengeance is mine, I will repay"—  
we rarely think of that, perhaps we must—  
though usually the storm is overhead  
before we see the lightning scar the sky.

I remember watching, once, a building burn.  
Nearby, a dauber swallow's nest,  
a pair of pulsing silver throats—  
How could I forget!

The fire leapt, flared, scattered  
everywhere its gorgeous gold,  
while in that window, austere aperture,  
the swallow twittered, unconcerned.

The lightning flared, raised heaven's  
hackles, ocean shaken like a reed,

and angry wind-hordes howled  
like kisses suddenly gone wild.

Still worse than fire was flood:  
where children chattered yesterday,  
the waves hurrah and overwhelm  
some helpless settlement, bawling

cattle everywhere, as if  
their panic were assistance,  
and naked figures unashamed  
run screaming from the bathhouse.

A crash of hulls against stone wharves,  
the tearful tolling of a bell,  
and far across the stretching plain  
shouts, screams, pallid groans.

Soon afterwards, where waves like hissing knots  
of snakes had risen to embrace the sky,  
appears a dovelike, dreamy ocean  
with spots of sunlight skittering upon it.

From palaces and smoky huts  
riot marches on reason's realm.  
Some earnest man in glasses  
seems annoyed: no joke, stupidity—

The subject: destiny. A man who's lived it *all*,  
whose life is dusk and flame,  
will easily believe in a seeing eye,  
some all-seeing pair of eyes.

Think twice before you persecute  
the Russians! We'll raise our knives again  
and howl our discourse with the storm  
at the gates of destiny's outposts.

And if the seventh generation,  
sharpening its knives, brews poison,  
this is its justification: treachery  
today hides in great men's faces.

Some latter-day avenger sails  
upon a frenzied flood of crime  
because his ancestors once were robbed  
of rays, of wreaths, of reputation.

Young man, your conversation!  
Courage one day, clown the next—  
it's proof, for me, you've never drunk  
the cup that's common to us all.

You're right, of course. I'm only piled-up  
tinder, haven't yet caught fire. No,  
I've never drunk from that cup.  
You, though—your harsh intelligence—  
are only ashes, old intelligence burnt up.

"We are not born to life a second time":  
this is the song the wise man sings.  
So then be bright, seek light, be merry!  
Welcome the happy clink of rings!

Complete your course at last,  
you captive of the cruel sea!  
Follow the path mankind would take.  
Pilgrim, progress is all.

A sacred ground for slaughtering bulls,  
its vast encircling tiers and arches,  
a whirlwind of bloody noises—  
and the bull kneels down in ashes.

Now then: life's textbook begins to make sense:  
the living truth of the anthill perishes  
when you, mysterious bringer of magic,  
hidden behind a tree, destroy it.

Lovely to take on the part of death's sorcerer  
hiding behind the huge trunk of an oak,  
to rain down ruin and destruction  
on an anthill bustling with purposeful labor!

Remember, the life of the leaves on a tree is their own—  
later they fall, by some power in the tree trunk.

That's our path too—we are death's true lovers,  
murky catch in a dragnet of bodies.

To proclaim that the gut makes the man—or prince—  
I'm sure there's some dark meaning there.  
It's time to end our resentments  
of those who raised us to the cliff of thought.

How to erect the edifice of poetry  
in the petrifying glare of snakey meanings?  
How to make clear the dominion of numbers,  
make them accessible noon and night?

Oh madness of the prophet's voice  
that made the world of nighttime tremble,  
you were only a child in the arms of fate  
moving through luminous starry vestments.

And the depiction of the head  
of someone you hold dear—  
a sister, bride, or brother—these  
are rays of another nature.

Whoever contemplates this sorry life  
and sickens at the weight of retribution—  
he will curse his ancestors before the face  
of silent constellations.

Risky to think religion is the price  
for landing safe on a shore we intended  
to reach—or something to keep the devil in darkness  
from coming too close to your brother.

We will seek out the dice-throw of wars,  
the dice-throw of wars, unknown to earth,  
and with the blood of war will splash  
the painted faces of heaven's vault.

Still we live on, true to our rhythms,  
and wars themselves are harmonies;  
Number moves into the place of religion  
and takes on the helmsman's task—



a giant wave rises from nowhere  
in a glittering rainbow of spray—  
we completely forgot about fate, didn't we,  
when we sat in judgment yesterday?

Remember the addled behavior of swallows  
as they wheeled madly past our faces,  
or the flight of the white-fierce falcon  
through cloud-filled regions of storm.

Oh, woe to you, lonely standposts  
of vision raised in the meadows of blindness!  
We answer with weeping and groaning  
the march-step of destiny's boot-heel.

And dark and stormy breakers clamor  
as they shatter into foam, like  
the sound of some outrageous conversation,  
trading guffaws with grim-faced destiny.

In vain the horseman swims to assistance,  
the black horse rides snorting behind  
the receding waves of the ebbtide,  
and afterwards frightened pulls up, turns, and runs,  
its rider slacking the reins and galloping on.

And again, taking heart, he approaches the breakers  
as if in the deep he could see his familiars,  
in the distance could make out his homeland.  
Foaming around him, snowy traces of surf. [ . . . ]

Books, why do I write you? So someday  
a pedant will crumble this sacred earth  
in his fingers, trying to reconstruct  
what it was I once described?

And still it moves: the steel hull  
shoulders its way through ocean's front,  
and two smokestacks of different heights  
belch smoke: I grow depressed.

These floating mansions go confidently onward,  
But no cheers yet, from the ancestral grandstand—

we still have no idea of who we are—  
some sacred entity, mere hand, or thing.

Of course we know some day  
we'll tear away these mortal chains,  
so raise the cup and drink. Thirsty  
or not, drink up the cup of life.

But aren't we exigent about the future!  
We want to see the farthest stretch of time,  
exchange our worn-out rags for rainbows—  
yet sorrow dogs us everywhere.

Crankshafts and cogwheels turn, and  
war slips through, intent on something else—  
then somewhere a nut shakes loose from its bolt  
and the entire contraption stops.

You, though, are always the same: 300, 60, and 5,  
again your bright teeth smile.  
These are the numbers (you too, 48):  
In our hearts we Futurians bear your weight,  
with your sharp blades we reap our harvest.

They beg in vain: give back the world  
we once had, free from cogwheels and bolts—  
the Futurian merely adjusts a screw,  
seeking to build a shield that fits.

He knows he can build what he wants,  
and number offers him support.  
When lightning strikes, or avalanche,  
the masses shout: "It's not our fault!"

Oh man! Forget humility!  
See there! Like an ancient axle creaking,  
barely able to grease its friction  
or manage its missing points,

alone, alone! a feeble constellation  
comes to passionate grips with destiny—  
There! Go there, you statuesque young man,  
be older brother to that stricken hind!

For among the wheels of night and stars  
you stand alone upon that cliff.  
And wars abate when a rider comes  
who can ring the changes of fate.

The flywheels moving this orbiting planet  
and evenings and rivers and pine branches darkening,  
the drive shaft propelling earth's axis, hidden  
in clouds—they return to the lyreplayer his lyre.

And the drive-belt sun speeds over oceans and distances,  
moving from sky-blue juncture to juncture.

*(Son of Otter shouts "Hello!" to the sleeping land of India.)*

## 2. *Game on Shipboard*

*(Otter's Children play chess on the deck of the ship. The stage represents a chessboard: Pawns, Queen, Knight, and others as characters. Otter's Children's hands can be seen moving them, also enormous matches. Black is silent; White tends to chatter.)*

*First Pawn* Tantara, tantara!  
Hip, hip, hooray!  
Fight and feud and fire!  
Ready, aim—play!

*Second Pawn* Whenever war and conflagration call,  
we form ranks, comrades one and all.  
We bring immediate disaster!  
*(ominously)* . . . . or even faster.

*King* Get that morose cannon mouth  
trained in your sights.  
The clarion voice of battle calls!  
Come on, men, follow me!  
Those cannon mouths  
are eloquent . . . .  
until their shot is spent.

*Third Pawn* Up the Whites!  
Train your sights  
on the heights!

*Knight* I curvette, caracole,  
then gallop out  
against the Foe Queen.  
Protect our Snow Queen!  
I prick my ears,  
I prank and prance.  
Among a hostile host  
I do my dance.

*Queen* I am a maiden all in iron.  
Although this tower  
is in our power,  
it is not ours.

A savage urge to shout hooray  
though victory is far away!  
I go to sustain  
when valor is vain.

Warring, wanton, wild,  
my foot flies fast.  
In bloody armor we appear,  
and living bodies disappear.

*Taciturn Black Chessmen* Starseeker! Starseeker!

*Black Chessmen* Checkmate!

*(The chessmen are replaced in their box.)*

*Son of Otter* Well, that's the end of that. I'm bored. Let's think up  
another game.

What a bore to beat a bear!  
O Day O Dag O Dies!  
O Night O Nat O Nox!

### 3. *Disaster among the Icefloes*

*(Beside the seaside scarp of universal unity. Son of Otter takes out a penknife  
and carves his name in the cliff face: Velimir Khlebnikov. The cliff shudders  
and begins to move: clay oozes from it, and the vegetation begins to shake.)*

*The Cliff* That hurts. Don't you know me?  
I am the son of Porus, child of plenty.

*Son of Otter* Hi there. No one's poor in plenty.

*The Cliff* Why deface me with cheap wit?  
Once I molded men of clay  
and brought down visions of my own,  
I scorched the fields of earth with fire  
and rattled heaven's throne.  
Tell the old overseer I am one with  
the men in the fields. We are the same.  
I will attack his majesty again,  
and clatter my chains in his face.  
I reckon him as next to nothing,  
and would still try to accomplish  
what I almost did. Hear my harsh curse:  
my theft and our encounter is my pride!  
I'll satisfy the hunger and anger  
of the eagle sortie he sends me,  
crusted over with snow  
here in this falcon canyon  
where hunters stalk the antelope  
and mountains meet the clouds—  
he raised them once, the old intelligencer,  
castles and mansions of eternal stone.  
I hang here like a stony corpse  
chained to the darkness of this rock  
because I tricked away his bright idea  
and stole the intellect he promised.  
I remember our falling-out: insurgency, riot  
with a tangle of giants underground,  
a crash of arms and shoulder blades,  
of shattered ribs and stoved-in sides.  
Midnight comes upon this world  
that now shines fresh as morning,  
and to this feast devoid of festival  
a skeleton will rise, tangled in meshes.  
See where the water jars of Georgia seek the well  
and light already fills the hollows of the world.

*Chorus of People* Where was your power, almighty thunderer,  
stalking in a cloak of darkness,  
while he ran through the fitful gleam  
of tangled skeins of lightning?  
You kept reason's fire from our fathers  
all those time-imprisoned years ago,  
And doom him now  
to stare at mountain peaks forever.  
What have his enemies done to him?  
Taken his happiness, his life and joy?  
He strings his centuries together,  
chained in this craggy dark ravine  
where only melancholy deer will stop  
to lick the salt blood from his feet,  
while eternity empties its water jars  
upon his tangled heights.

*Son of Otter* I hear the sound of someone making music.  
I must be going.

*Chorus of People* We salute you, ecstasy of offal,  
liver bright with grease and blood!

*Son of Otter* Forgive me, colleague. Forgive my unintended slight.  
Blood brother! I kiss your sacred feet.

*Eagles* We descend full of desire  
to see the heart-root swell,  
to the dew-dark slopes of morning  
where the sleek deer dwell.

*Otter's Daughter* Suppose I now resembled  
in my form and shape  
the eternal enchantress  
of the lowly and the great,  
consort of limping artistry—  
could I set you free?

*(She breaks his chains like Pushkin's Circassian girl and sets him free.  
The sound of a rush of water; Otter's Children head toward it.)*

*Voices* What's that noise about? What's all the shouting?  
An iceberg! the ship is sinking!

*Son of Otter* What a waste. What an absolute waste.  
Who took my gloves? And where's my walking stick?  
Just time for some talc—so—  
and a splash of cologne.

*Someone Trying To Save Himself* The great ship shudders, standing  
suddenly  
stern to, every rivet straining in the air.  
Like some anthill upended, passengers  
in shock run screaming. Swirls, groans.  
The great prow dips, sinks down.  
What iron horror! What a fatal lesson!  
Moaning everywhere, and nearer,  
everywhere, My God, to thee, as ocean avalanches  
over all. By what justice? By what law?

*(Curtain.)*

## CANVAS PANEL SIX

*(The scene depicts Son of Otter's soul.)*

*Hannibal* Scipio! What a surprise to find you here!  
How did that happen? I don't know  
if it's only a whim, or if some law's involved,  
but old or young, eventually everyone  
seeks shelter in the shadow of this cliff.

There's a rumor going round—messy business,  
and it seems the men behind it all  
are Karl and Charles—  
you know the ones I mean.  
Blame them.

Two old men in beards—that always does the trick, you know,  
a long gray beard, and people pay attention—  
anyway, they're out to seize young minds in their claws,

as if they were catching creatures in the sea.  
With their pincers they tear at religion's flaws  
like the carcass of a fish,  
and of course they allow their victims the pleasure  
of twisting in the wind (why shouldn't they even sing,  
in fact, in that iron vise, fit for a torture chamber?).  
They have trapped us all in their net, pincerd us in.

Besides, it's big books now, books by the pound,  
books by the page count, the size of the cover,  
books thick enough to break a skull,  
and nothing else to recommend them.  
More often than not there's nothing inside.  
A book nowadays is an empty box,  
not an ounce of intelligence in them.  
You have to hand it to them, though!  
Here. Here's a brick for you, and one for me,  
ready to throw at a book.  
A battle with books! I've done it before  
and I'd love to begin it again.

This Karl, you know, writes books.  
He teaches a gloomy theory: I went to war, you see,  
ramrod straight and pale, marching to challenge  
the might of Rome, brought my elephants over the snow,  
left behind me a trail of smouldering towns  
and like a phantom suddenly seized a throne;  
protected African freedom for years,  
can scarcely reckon up the pains I've undergone—  
but none of that, he claims, because I felt  
my homeland's gaze upon me!  
Some of the things I went through pierced my soul.  
My own brother's head thrown into my camp—  
hurled on a makeshift catapult,  
his tangled hair on the stump of his neck  
(he wore it long, a true son of the desert)  
a young life sacrificed to austere duty—  
and why?  
Because a flock of Roman merchants,  
overdressed and on their way to Hell,



victims of gluttony, laziness, disease  
(different births mean different deaths:  
a man who breathes the perfumes of the desert  
is indifferent to the thought of death),  
are a kind of stinking surplus—  
lardlike bodies, rotten fat  
assuring an awful evil.

The pathway here is broad and wide,  
and the powers that rule the underworld no longer traffic  
in back-door deals with crooked traders  
in the oil business; they don't have to take  
the greasy dregs of stinking Roman stockyards,  
its rotting offal and its rendered oil—  
the oil is necessary, you may know,  
if you follow the teachings of holy writ  
(I do believe these tenuous teachings!),  
to cook us up in the fat they sweat,  
up to our necks in vats of boiling oil,  
still in our outlandish outfits.

Forget about bravery in battle, ignore  
the clash of arms and gleam of weapons,  
no sense in that, nor profit either,  
instead we guzzle vodka on the sly—  
a concession run by the fearful guards in hell,  
who have always worked out deals  
their boss was unaware of.

So then: the reasons for a war, this Karl maintains,  
are economic: some have oil, and some have not!

His comrade in reknown, meanwhile,  
gathers a crowd of credulous neighbors  
and makes up stories about the dawn  
of human cares and joys. My first dim ancestor,  
he maintains, lost in the murky depths of time,  
was some wild animal—not without a certain charm  
but leaving, from the mental point of view,  
much to be desired.

Some proto-thought flickered on his eyeballs  
as he rocked with one arm in the fork of a tree,

wearing his gloves of fur;  
he lived like a squirrel in the leaves overhead,  
ate seeds and painted butterflies,  
ate toadstools, slugs, and snails,  
stared with dark eyes at the showers of stars  
that burst above his treetop,  
and used his dexterous palm and opposable thumb  
to grasp what he wanted and get where he wanted to go.  
To sum it up, he was a total simpleton,  
our hairy-handed ancestor, all done up in fur—  
but because of him, says Charles, I fight my wars!  
These are the kinds of fools my angry looks  
once put to scorn. Knocked flat, in fact.

*Scipio* Bravo, Hannibal, you're absolutely right.  
They're not worth the time it would take  
to discuss them. Our old world wasn't so bad,  
don't you think? After all,  
it created you and me.  
A few more happy fleas like us—  
is that too much to ask?

*Hannibal* All I did, he says, was for value received!  
What about fame, and reputation?  
Did that mean nothing at all?  
Was the cause a matter of skeletal similarity,  
a few bones common to apes and man?  
Do you believe such nonsense?

*Scipio* By God, I don't! Hee-hee!  
We watched their song and dance, we laughed, yawned,  
and left to join our ancestors.  
Life had as much of them as it could take,  
so they show up here, the precious pair of them,  
tracking the soot of their grubby notions,  
a pair of pincers for the new dispensation.  
Why even talk about them? Shadows of shadows!  
  
How many stars there are up there! Remember the nights  
you sat in your camp near Rome, swatting away—  
did you kill as many mosquitos as there are clusters

in the trusty void of night above us,  
clusters of worlds and constellations  
returning our gaze?  
I've seen fewer pimples on a punky Roman face—  
smaller, too—than there are stars on fire  
in the nighttime dark above us.  
Some things in life we praise,  
some we discard.  
Nothing means much (I borrowed the image)  
When the sky is so full of stars.

Suppose you meet two country singers  
traveling to some small town, and they tell you  
how the stars move, and how to build a beehive—  
you wouldn't treat them harshly.  
Take a look: did you slap as many mosquitos  
on your Punic neck as there are stars  
sparkling above us? Listen—someone's coming,  
dragging an antique spear.

*Sviatoslav* Again I rush your ranks,  
shouting my war cry: I come for you!  
Woe. A golden wine-cup  
sits in my skull-cup.  
Ease I disdained,  
fear I forgot—  
now feasting Pechenegs pour wine  
into my skull, drinking  
to death in my glory.

*Pugachev* I brought together a band of deserters  
from every part of the country;  
into the land my fathers loved  
I brought the wail of graves and death.

*Samko* The victim, I, of different streams of time.  
My timepiece ticked before the clock of the stars.  
People are ruled by clocks:  
scales tilt, the cup of doom sank toward me,  
I fell through the fault of the stars.

*Jan Hus* Yes, they burned me long ago.  
And I remember, there was an old woman,  
she must have been older than the universe,  
dim, bent, groping, she brought a bundle of twigs  
for my pyre. And I remember thinking,  
she must have lots of delightful grandchildren,  
and I thought, there's world enough  
for what we plant, and old age after all  
is full of strength. "Sancta simplicitas," I said.  
I thought those thoughts, and suddenly  
I found myself here.

*Lomonsov* I raised my hand: toward the skies I soared,  
where Reason's calm constructions I adored.

*Stenka Razin* My rabble erased all memory of laughter,  
and turned the entire Black Sea blood-red.  
For the world is not made for enjoyment,  
and laughter is sister to sorrow.  
Clatter your hooves, my gallopers,  
trample the gourds of enemy heads.

*Volynsky* Remember, there are Birons yet to come  
in Russian history, and more "like me"  
to die in Biron's vengeance.

*Hannibal* Yes, I suppose that's true. But look at this new arrival:  
Copernicus! I've heard good things about the fellow.

*Copernicus* A life devoted to war might seem better than light rays—  
the more the better, a soldier might say. I won't argue.  
I'm not an arguer at heart, really.  
My only enemy has always been a cloudy sky.  
Life follows a strict sequence, a pattern  
the hand of fate reveals.

*Hannibal* Look at them come! Crowding hard on each others' heels,  
bending their starry helmets, each man comes here  
speechless. Crowned with a spike of stars,  
shadowy, exhausted, weightless,  
unalive, each one sets foot on this island.

Are all these ghostly figures fugitives  
from the tiresome preachings of Karl and Charles?

*Chorus of Spirits* Welcome to this island. We call it Khlebnikov.  
Among the flaring wars of hostile textbooks,  
our valiant Velimir stands, an island-refuge  
in a lofty star-filled soul.  
Only the peak of the island is dry—  
its shores are washed in a sea of nonentity.

*The Multitudes* All our oaths and promises  
are undone by envious spite.  
we dress in white garments  
for victory or the grave:  
either invisible garlands,  
or else inaudible chains.

*Voice from within the Soul* Come to this island, this pleasant land,  
you throng of drowning sailors,  
when you see my beckoning hand.  
Come take possession of my soul.  
My island spreads before you  
its wide embracing haven;  
here all great minds delight in ease  
and equal conversation.  
Souls of heroes, I salute you;  
see my sorrow, comfort me.  
You and I are kin: one mind, one heart.  
We can no longer stand a race apart.

*(They sit down to debate in a grand assembly.)*

[1911–1913: T 431]

# *War in a Mousetrap*

1

Remember? I ordered the shoeshine boy  
to scrape the Little Dipper off my shoes;  
I tossed a coin to the universe, made  
an anxious hash of ancient words.  
Where the ragged fields of dawn  
are plowed by the horsemen of centuries,  
I ordered a crow to fly  
and said in passing to the sky:  
“Do me a favor, heaven. Die!”  
Later I got a better idea—  
always looking for bigger laughs—  
I smashed the matchbox race of men  
and started reading poetry.  
Planet Earth was an easy fit  
in the dark curve of a madman’s mitt.  
Follow me now! What’s there  
to be afraid of?

2

Once Planet Earth goes up in flames,  
cools off and asks: “Who am I really?”  
then we will create *The Igor Tale*—  
or something a lot like it.

These are not people, not gods, not lives—  
these triangles hold the twilight of the soul!  
These are goblets raised in dim funereal  
feasts, full of Pythagoras’ shadows and angles.

The maiden of iron kept knitting her stocking,  
wearily, obstinately. But planes of iron  
now fly through the air, and a dead gunner  
is gone, although he was handsome and young.

Consider the suits and the face-cards  
in this deck of rumor, debt to idle talk!  
These dentists' drills set up at sea,  
the *Bouvet's* turrets—molars, crowned with towers!

And the blear-eyed sea-foam Ancient  
looms up from his glass of beer,  
threatening destiny and shame  
as he shakes away the foam.

3

Their faces by Maliavin, their flowers by Korovin,  
these women have captured a flier. They scurry about.  
The downed sky-wagon sticks in their throats.  
They don't like the German, he is well-fed and fat.

How commonplace and familiar it all is:  
that some survive, that a mouse chews  
at the edge of the book, and after the raven of Poe—  
ravens fatten at the battle by the Kalka!

4

Who, me? Me too? This triumph of torpidity?  
Me, offended that people are the way they are?  
Me, reared up by all that is best and brightest in Russia?  
Me, tangled in the brightest of bird-song?  
(be my witnesses, you thrushes, swans, and cranes!)  
Me, who dreamed my life away?

Me too? I'll have to grab a gun (a dumb  
thing, heavier than handwriting)  
and go marching down some highway,  
beating out  $365 \times 317$  regular heartbeats a day?  
Knock my head to fragments and forget

the government of twenty-two-year-olds  
that attacks the madness of elder statesmen,  
their pater-familiar pontification  
(the public vice of the old),  
me, who wrote all these poems,  
their lines a ladder to the silver moon?

No! Not me! I have a gift  
from the sky-eyed enchantress, my sister:  
with it I track our human thread through the labyrinth;  
we haven't let slip the prophetic visions  
of ancient Greece from our fingers.  
Though we have learned to fly.

I'm bitter, I haven't got words  
to describe one I loved, who betrayed me.  
Now I'm the hostage of crazed elder statesmen;  
I'm only a scared wild rabbit they want to tame  
and not at all the King of Time  
that people call me:  
one small step, only add "a"  
and the "i" drops out, a tiny golden scepter  
lost on a slanting floor.

5

You were exacting, and fired with spirit.  
I was the Danube, you were Vienna.  
You didn't know some things, you wouldn't tell others—  
you were waiting for some sort of indistinct omen.  
Faraway poplars flourished their shadows  
and summoned the fields to sessions of silence.

6

Is it the voice of the goddess of foam,  
or a breeze in the poplars, or is it a dream?  
Or only the fatal word "him"  
beating against the wharf?  
Or is it a dove that beats its wings



beneath a white dress,  
as the gloom-gray ghost of war  
drops to a vanishing point in the sea?  
It's a flock of gray gulls!  
It's eider-ducks quacking!  
Full of strength and courage  
he crosses the belted horizon.

7

“Hey!” the wolf cries out in blood,  
“I eat the meat of strong young men!”  
and a mother says: “My sons are gone.”  
But we are your elders! *We* decide!

Anyway, young men are cheaper nowadays,  
no? Dirt-cheap, slop-cheap, coal-chute-cheap!  
Pale apparition, scything our man-crop,  
sinews all sunburnt, be proud of your work!

“Young men dying, young men dead,”  
the city wails along its streets,  
wails like the barrow-boy hawking his birds—  
new feathers for all your caps!

A man who once wrote “Last Deer Songs”  
now hangs, trussed up by the knees,  
beside a silver rabbit pelt—in the larder,  
next to the meat and eggs and cream!

Consolidated's up, Petroleum is down,  
but the young man is gone, the dark-eyed king  
of our talk after dinner is gone,  
and we loved him and needed him, understand?

8

The trumpets never squealed a signal for defeat:  
“Your comrades, your brothers and sisters, have fallen.”  
I'll never be proof against your power—  
the cruel equation sings its song.

Nations came willingly, swimming,  
like Poland, into my mansions;  
a sweet sight for the crow as it flies,  
banners of the beautiful Savior!  
Follow them, follow them! To No-man's-land!  
To that green field in Nieman-land,  
beyond the leaden Nieman river!  
To Nieman-land, No-man's land, follow, believer!

9

My arm accidentally knocked away  
a scythe, sister to the darkening raven.  
I clawed my way across a bridge  
of piled-up footsoldiers' bodies.  
The murderers sobbed beneath the waves  
where they listed, like willow planking.  
Death sat combing  
her virulent hair  
and like swarms of gnats, expendable lives  
did what they could to attack her.

10

Young girls, young men, remember  
who and what we saw today;  
those hollow eyes and mouths don't smile  
as they did—remember?—yesterday.  
Woe unto you, you dwellers in plenty,  
sunk deep in wrinkles of wholesale murder:  
the sorrows of men are dished up for you  
on a platter of filthy diseases.  
Soldier leaps to combat, warlike, skilled.  
Unskulled by death, his S falls off. Killed.  
Older, he sleeps. Sounder and sweeter than life.  
There's death in charge of war relief—  
keeping the worms supplied with food.  
Shame on you! Cut all the trees in Siberia—  
still not enough for the crutches you'll need.

Why not bring experts from the Fiji islands,  
Grim black teachers of the butcher's arts,  
and let them develop culinary institutes  
where we learn to eat man-meat, hands and hearts?  
I say no! Let's go find War, the Ogre-Wife,  
who combs the corpses from her hair,  
And let's all shout, as men did once before:  
"Mighty Mammoth, feel our spear!  
You've eaten too much man-meat Stroganoff!"  
Don't come trampling down my continent!  
Do something undreamed of, strictly new,  
you horses pulling the hearse of the world!  
Thunder along and keep the dark secret,  
bury it deep in your midnight ears.  
Buddha, someday, or Allah, or both,  
I firmly believe, will call a halt.

II

White horses, white hearses.  
Black dresses, shriveled faces.  
Just let my mind shoot straight, straighter than musket or  
flintlock.  
I've picked my target, the ragged deer.  
Follow me, Amerigo! Cortez and Columbus!  
Sabers are waving, deadlock is near.

12

The shining shower dripping from the oar  
deepens the water-sailors' blue.  
Explorer, in your incorporeal crown!  
We watch and wonder, see and believe!  
Where is he? Our thoughts are with him!  
Like waterfalls, numberless fires  
blaze with a blue incorporeal  
flame, and stream from the oar.  
But he stands with his hand fixed  
on the tiller. His weapon rests.  
Does he search for something on the sea?

Does something somewhere search for him?  
Describe the man: hair bright as dawn,  
tawny as stalks of ripening rye;  
eyes like oceans where walruses dive.  
And again like a crown the fires  
flame, blue nacreous gleam.  
His deeds forgotten now  
he stands apart, remote.  
The wind begins to rise, harsh,  
the voice of ocean foaming at the mouth!  
Who knows the name he whispers,  
this man enthroned by storms?  
When the great unbroken stretch of blue  
swallowed the towering constellations,  
he cried: "I was expecting you,  
blue fleece! Now be my inspiration!"

13

People in washhouses rush to scrub their souls,  
rush to a mirror to powder their consciences,  
so someone, proud of his grinning madness,  
could howl: "You don't mean a thing!"  
So many people put on collars  
and then don't know how to behave:  
stand on tiptoe and hang them from branches  
or write down the promised name.

14

Tell your kitten not to bite,  
I'll give you angels when I die.  
Hokusai will paint your mouth,  
Murillo paint your virgin eye.

15

Herd of hoofsteps, iron of elephants,  
let's crown the tiger as if in a dream,

let's gallop together. Ourselves together,  
hordes of us, bodies with trunks.  
Ten is nothing! Lots of us—a unit of friends.  
Let us make doves transport artillery shells.  
Let us move like the world's first citizen, the wolf,  
and stampede the horses carved on the Chartomlyk vase.  
Outsmart the wolf, ur-scribe of the Russian land,  
and praise extinct incisors, murdering saurians.  
Let's break the necks of dialects like baby geese.  
We are bored to death by their "ha-ha-ha!"  
Let's muzzle the universe, keep it  
from biting us, who are young;  
let's move among lean white hunting dogs  
flicking our riding crops, smearing  
the brittle buttercups with blood from our hands  
ripped by the tusk of the universe,  
the slaver-mouth of the universe.  
And let's cast a dream of cannons  
from cast-off literary canons.  
We who are young and wise will abandon the old,  
who are not, and establish world government  
for ourselves, and for our generation.

16

Awash in filaments of flying fish,  
harsh, the fish-god frowns.  
Blast, boom, noise, clash, hiss,  
helter-skelter—and it's gone.  
Beyond the scarlet sheet of flames  
men's bodies twist and blacken.  
Sea-robber waves shout death,  
grinding our faces in visions of graves.  
And some repellent trace of an inkwell  
falls, his ribs caught in death's webbing.  
Fallen, like an abandoned cannon.  
Now the deck rears on its hind legs,  
no longer steadied by anything.  
Mermaids in your sea-weed helmets!

Gather to bury the dead,  
washed clean of their mournful clay.  
Cover these waxy bones with kisses!  
And there in the sky, cloud-country,  
humanity sends plane surfaces up  
to cut white smoke into slices.  
Where has this gotten you, people? You are trapped  
still in the whited graves of your ancestors:  
it is death who wheezes and shivers  
in harness here, at the end of her tether.  
She is worn out at last. Pity her  
the voice that pesters "Giddy-yap!"  
How painfully slow she moves.  
She falls, she stumbles in skulls.  
Someone who sees in the iron machine  
the unseen fall of a sparrow,  
aims a smoking bestial snout  
and shoots with the strength of your sorrow.  
He batters the staggering beast  
with a heavy beam of wood.  
The bloody hide drips freedom in the cup:  
though it be bitter, it will fill it up.

17

When Freedom comes, she comes naked  
and fills our hearts with flowers.  
We march in time to her music  
and talk to the sky like a lover.

We are Freedom's fighters, we bang our fists  
on our harsh, uncompromising armor:  
"Now let the people rule themselves,  
everywhere and forever!"

Let girls lean out their windows and sing  
about wars our grandfathers went to,  
about autocrat US, the people victorious,  
faithful citizen of the Sun.

18

Autumn that year was a rabbit affair  
and no eye could distinguish  
the shivering season from the shaking beast.  
Shifty, all yellow,  
autumn-dweller color.  
Dead leaves in the stubble  
and the hayrake and the horse mane  
everywhere, and even the eye  
blinks blindly, not knowing  
one quick shiver of fear  
from another.

19

Yesterday I whispered: "Coo! Coo! Coo!"  
And flocks of wars flew down to peck  
the grain from my hands.  
Unclean, a demon loomed above me  
plumed with slabs of stone,  
dangling a mousetrap from his belt  
and destiny's mouse from his teeth.  
His whip-like walking-stick is bent  
and his eyes shine blue and mean.  
A swan-white bone stares  
wide-eyed from his basket.  
"Mouse-catcher!" I shouted, "Grief!  
Why keep destiny clenched in your teeth?"  
He answered: "I am the Destiny-Hunter,  
Bone-Breaker by the will of numbers."  
Ghouly females rigged for battle,  
bones all stripped of meat,  
do their horse-dance on our eyelids—  
and still we call them women.  
They whirl in a ritual witch-dance  
screaming: "Veles! Veles! Veles!"  
They crush out their butts on the sun disk  
and streak like specters as it sets.

My red shirt was my only joy  
when I chomped at the bit—  
but War breeds now, beneath my shirt.  
My eyes grow dark as a full stop.

20

How many centuries have I had to wait  
for this discovery: the sky-blue enemy  
and dark familiar puffs of smoke?  
I have shut myself up under lock and key.  
You have abandoned me, gods:  
wings no longer shiver on your shoulders,  
you no longer look over mine as I write.  
We drown in filth, drag blind humanity  
in tangled nets behind us.  
We were children once, we were children—  
we are a priesthood now, and wear your wings.

21

The silvery buds are orphaned already  
in the hands of an addled old maid  
with no reason now to wave them.  
From the pen of war comes one full stop after another,  
graveyards grow suburbs like capital cities—  
different people, different dispositions.  
The whole wide world has bandaged its feet  
in ragged strips of young men's bodies;  
from the nacreous shell of my heart  
I bring you only the spiteful hiss of grass.  
Ancient gates beyond a chain,  
a beggar, and a crooked stick.  
And the power of human shoulders  
shines beneath rags, O knowing astrologer!

22

Warrior! You choose a cue from the rack of heaven  
and break with the ball of the world.



And a new Jan Sobieski  
barks out: "make your shot!"  
to one  
who etches his gray helmet  
with the lines of Minkowski's equation,  
who burns against the darkening sky  
with Mayakovsky's poetry.

23

You whose mind flowed  
like a gray waterfall  
over the pastoral life of early antiquity,  
whose numbers enchanted a serpent  
docilely rolling in hoops of jealousy,  
and the hoop and hiss and whistle  
of the dance and spasms of the snake in trance  
made you hear the sun's bright thistle  
more and more clearly as song.  
Who drilled a quiet hole  
in the skull of his father's son,  
and into the hole defiantly stuck  
the dewy twig of the Milky Way—  
to go visit people and dazzle them;  
in whose skull, like a glass,  
stood the dewy twig of the black skies—  
and the stars bore inspired tribute  
to him, who had entered the forest of midnight.

24

I wear the whole of Planet Earth  
on the little finger of my right hand—  
my signet of unknown enchantments—  
and I speak to you. You!  
You blaze in the center of darkness!  
I shout out shout after shout  
and a wild raven, a sacred thing,  
builds her nest in my curdling shout

and her nestlings grow,  
and the snail of centuries crawls up  
my arm stretched out to the stars!  
Blessed is the dragonfly, broken by storms,  
who shelters itself on the underside  
of a leaf on a tree.  
Blessed is Planet Earth, when it shines  
here on my little finger!

25

Someday I'll forget about Swanland,  
and the feet of the trembling daughters of foam.  
I'll leave to my flute the songs I sing,  
songs of the Horse Kingdom, that's where I'm from.  
Where a purebred midnight stallion  
with his gaveled hoof passes sentence  
on ruthless killers of the young:  
they must chew the bitter metal of the bit.  
Where a wild-eyed white-maned stallion  
stands like a judge on his platform,  
and the tongue of the wagon is hitched  
to criminal fractions, one to a hundred.  
Where a purebred mane-shaker  
places his hoof in a cold  
but respectful hand—but whose  
it was, no one remembers.  
Where manes are air, and eyes are songs,  
far from the yahoing Nyam-nyam tribe!  
We were better people, closer to heaven,  
when we let horses be our guides.  
“People”—why do we call ourselves that?  
You may hate me for saying so  
but it's always a wonderful thing  
to embrace a horse's hoof:  
they don't resemble us at all;  
they are smarter, more disciplined.  
The snow-white chill of their hides!  
Their sure-footed steps on the stones!

We are not slaves, but you are masters.  
You are the elect of people!  
Handsome lieutenants neigh,  
they test us with the word “Do!”  
The race of horses sits in judgment on people,  
and Planet Earth gleams with new lightning.  
War crosses a border, looking for blood.  
We shout: “This land’s not yours!”  
And black, white, yellow—all of us  
abandon both barking and speaking.  
A different judge—your heavy step!  
A judge whose power isn’t human.  
Prance, prince! And study, steed!  
(see the cruel prophecies of language).  
We share a single destiny. That yoke  
on us lies easy, like our middle names.

26

Wind whose  
song, wound  
whose wrong?  
Sweat of sword  
to turn to word  
(I’m dead, I’m dead)  
staining arms in sanguine streams.  
I renew, eye  
you, know you.  
Brave new.

[1919: T 455]

# *Azia Unbound*

## THE ONE, THE ONLY BOOK

I have seen the black Vedas,  
the Koran and the Gospels  
and the books of the Mongols  
on their silken boards—  
all made of dust, of earth's ashes,  
of the sweet-smelling dung  
that Kalmyk women use for morning fuel—  
I have seen them go up to the fire,  
lie down in a heap and vanish  
white as widows in clouds of smoke  
in order to hasten the coming  
of the One, the Only Book,  
whose pages are enormous oceans  
flickering like the wings of a blue butterfly,  
and the silk thread marking the place  
where the reader rests his gaze  
is all the great rivers in a dark blue flood:

Volga, where they sing the Razin songs at nighttime,  
yellow Nile, where they worship the sun,  
Yangtse-Kiang, oozing with people,  
and mighty Mississippi, where the Yankees strut  
in star-spangled trousers, yes, in pants  
all covered with stars,  
and Ganges, whose dark people are trees of the mind,  
and Danube, white people in white shirts  
whose whiteness is reflected in the water  
and Zambezi, whose people are blacker than boots,

and stormy Ob, where they hack out their idol  
and turn him face to the wall  
whenever they eat forbidden fat,  
and Thames, which is boring, boring.

Race of Humanity, you are Readers of the Book  
whose cover bears the creator's signature,  
the sky-blue letters of my name!  
Yes you, careless reader,  
look up! Pay attention!  
You let your attention wander  
lazily, as if you were still in catechism class.  
Soon, very soon you will read  
these mountain chains and these enormous oceans!  
They are the One, the Only Book!  
The whale leaps from its pages,  
and the eagle's pinion bends the page's edge  
as it swoops across sea-waves, the breasts  
of ocean, to rest in the osprey's bed.

---

I have rivers for hair . . . . .  
See! Danube streams upon my shoulders,  
and this turbulent tousel is Dnieper's blue rapid!  
This is Volga falling through my fingers,  
and with a mountain range  
I comb my hair.  
But this long hair—  
I draw it through my fingers—  
this is Amur, where geishas pray to heaven,  
folding their hands against the storm.

## ASIA

Always a slave girl, your breast bronze  
with the birthmark of kings, you turn the pages of this book  
written with strokes of ocean's pen.

Ink from the well of human beings!  
a tsar is shot—an exclamation point!  
Triumphant armies are commas  
and crowds are lines of dots,  
their rage unhesitant—  
the people's anger, no mistake—  
bracketed by gaps between centuries.  
Instead of an earring, your ear  
gleams with a government seal.  
A girl with a sword, dead set  
against conceiving—or an old  
woman, midwife of insurgency.

Always our goddess of prophecy,  
you pore over yellowish pages—  
ignoring soldiers who stumble and die.  
You overturn thrones with the tap  
of a jaded debutante's toe,  
you pick an antique ruble up  
from the rubble of cities sunk in sand.

Here are eyes veiled in tenderness  
and exotic enchantment—  
Qurrat al-Ain,  
whose chaste life ended in a heretic's fire.

Here plows uproot the habitat of mountain martens,  
there—in those towers—rise stinking charnel houses.  
Here, young girls' bones are brought  
to the old ones, the elders of heaven,  
the ashes doled into empty jars.

Here a king's son praised poverty,  
set his regretful heel on an anthill  
and wandered as a ragged beggar.

Wise men here were buried alive  
but never betrayed their ancient book.  
And here lie fractions of forgotten centuries,  
so that the lion devours his prey  
upon inscriptions praising war.

There a king, a boy in his arms,  
his army sleeping in the sand, leaps  
from a cliff into the sea. They drown.  
O tears of the women who lived through it all!

There are the steppes, the grave mounds,  
wave upon wave, and in scaly armor,  
dead Bogdo-khans, lords of vanished horses!

Here elephant multitudes  
thrust their tusks  
from savage crag-rock  
sprung from antediluvian upheaval  
and throng a multitude of caves;  
they move through musical downpours  
in purposeful patterns:  
like avalanches of water,  
waterfalls leaping and rearing,  
like horses of azure who trample green grass  
and snakes hooped into rings.

You grant the race of monkeys  
their own government and kings;  
in swooping squadrons they devour  
the wild forage of the fields.  
And high in their green lookouts  
you hear our tree-top kinfolk, laughing.

How old you are! Five thousand years.  
How sweet the jagged ridges of your mountains!  
How long now—not millenniums, since  
Hsi and Ho, those smiling drunkards,  
lost their heads.

They swilled themselves smiling  
into the sin of drunkenness,  
smiling over paunchy bodies  
sunk in silly revelry,  
forgot their duties in the skies,  
and perished by imperial decree.

Idling through the sun's eclipses,  
clutching their greasy-fingered glasses,

they overlooked a second coming,  
the new attack of Medina-Sidonia—  
his wrecked Armada swamped Tsushima!  
He appeared again in a year  
splashed with the blood of Mukden,  
when Korea found an overlord,  
and the Orient fished up Rozhstvensky's sailors.

Land of stake and block, of fire and rack,  
you unroll the annals of nations  
with the fingers of centuries.  
You kiss the hem of venom and oblivion,  
while minds today forge Asia into one.

---

The land where Izanagi  
reads *Monagatori* to Perun,  
And Eros sits on Shang-ti's knees,  
and the top-knot on the god's  
head looks like snow,  
the land where Amor embraces Maa Emu  
and T'ien sits talking with Indra;  
where Juno and Tsintekuatl  
adore Correggio  
and admire Murillo;  
where Unkulunkulu and Thor  
with folded arms  
play peaceful games of checkers  
beside Astarte, who worships Hokusai—  
take me to that land.

## THE PRESENT DAY

Slogans hung like necklaces on walls  
say: "—will be shot on sight!"  
and flames of hate blaze up before  
the universal bride;  
the farmer refuses to haul his hay



into the exhausted city,  
then suddenly there's news: the gates are down.

Pills of Cossack lead prescribed  
for one-time solid citizens.  
Death consumes our former games,  
our days of ready cash and instant profits.

We have forgotten how to love, forgotten  
there were women once who kissed our fathers,  
while trains with their alarming eyes,  
the flaring midnights of their eyes,  
smash cattle barns to pieces.  
Rumor follows rumor's heels,  
and in a deaf mute's strangled call,  
one meaning vibrates: "Up against the wall!"

Like whales spouting inspiration  
Tagore and H. G. Wells appear,  
but reef your black sail, voyager;  
steer by the stars of the world.

A century of rule by those we thought wise  
was only camouflage for killers' knives;  
all their talk was set in crooked type  
like one of Khruchonykh's editions,  
where crowds of misprints push  
and shove like Christmas holidays.

Like, for instance, one who said:  
"The end of war will mean the end of weapons.  
Watch. I'll make you scissors out of swords."  
Or, wrongly, kissed the holy icons  
with a harlot's kiss,  
while true believers stared in shock  
like bulls before the butcher's knife.

Along a double ray of steel  
the night song of a Chinese girl  
streams in dark ears by the Zambezi,  
followed by reports of Yankee business deals.  
Chinese characters on worn silver,

Turkish script on folding money—the USSR  
bangs at the walls of other governments.  
The copper conversation of the gongs  
makes Congo dance to Ganges' sound.  
African heat, brought to the icy north  
by migrating swallows, hoped to help.  
Night like a sick-nurse sits up late  
beside dismantled locomotives.  
Where chamois antlers glisten like a knife  
the stare of freedom's eyes is bright.  
The prison lock of India is wadded shut  
with Rabindranath Tagore!

“Anything old! We buy anything old!”  
Chant full of foreboding echoes!  
Fatal song, the funeral march of kings  
in this age of pregnant steel!  
Time's rag and bone man packs his sack  
with grimy tattered remnants of the tsars;  
now the Ragpicker of the world calls out  
as he passes windows, passes doors:  
“Anything old?” He drags his bag  
by a rope with a noose  
in a derby hat full of holes,  
and hauls off a worn-out throne.  
“Anything old! We buy anything old!  
Odds and ends!  
Tsars and thrones!  
Rags and bones!”

Coursing over the skulls of cities  
in this age of clandestine conceivings,  
carried on currents of steel wires,  
a printing press flashes on high:  
Upon these steel wires that cut the sky  
monsters of actuality go sailing by.

---

It was in the merry month of Ay,  
the lackadaisical month of Ay.  
Listen, lad, you look away—  
Say when? The month of then?  
May nonny! May nonny!  
Lilting May comes pouring down  
in a shower of rain.  
The merry month of May!  
I chant and enchant, I call, I croon!  
I sing the jolly month of June!  
Hay nonny! May nonny!

---

Asia, I have made you my obsession.  
As maidens touch their brows, I grasp at thunderclouds;  
I grasp your nighttime conversation  
as I would reach for tender vibrant shoulders.  
Where is he who prophesied a day of unconstrained caresses?  
If only Asia's hair in dark blue streams  
would flood my knees, envelop me,  
and a maiden whisper secret reprehensions,  
and then in silent rapture sob  
and with her braid-ends brush away her tears.  
She has loved! Yes, and suffered! She is  
the dark soul of the universe!  
Then would feelings once more flood my heart  
and kindle there the jangling of catastrophe,  
of Maha-vira, Zoroaster, Sivaji,  
wrapped in riot and rebellion.  
I would become coeval with their dreams, become  
like them creators of a catechism,  
and you would bend to unbraid your hair  
like a heap of coins at my feet,  
and whisper: "Tell me, Master,  
is not this the day  
we two will go, at last at  
liberty, to seek the way?"

INCANTATION BY THE PLURAL

*Chant No. 1*

Planets of Earth! Forward, march!  
Like a blizzard of eyes, I . . . .  
Planets of Earth! Forward, march!

*Chant No. 2*

Now that the lilt of nightingales  
shrivels, and the cry of the cranes  
fades from “Birds of the Kharkov Region”  
—written, I think I’m right,  
by Sushkin—  
and autumn hangs like a hesitant comma,  
now I turn to you,  
whose wondrous Grecian hair  
invites me to taste the cold wine  
of those “Egyptian Nights”—  
by Pushkin.  
Two pairs of eyes—nighttime and daytime,  
two halves of a turn of the world.  
Blue day, you are black night’s slave,  
drowning, and you love it and hate it.  
The last dribbles of passion, dregs  
in a pint flask of instant moments.  
You must have combed your brains, called  
Nero a hero, while you were playing Christ  
as chairman of the local Cheka.  
You are aboriginals of love, a nation  
where language has no place in conversation.

[1920: T 466]

# Zangezi

## INTRODUCTION

A story is made of words, the way a building is made of construction units. Equivalent words, like minute building blocks, serve as the construction units of a story.

A superstory, or supersaga, is made up out of independent sections, each with its own special god, its special faith, and its special rule. To the old Muscovite question about one's orthodoxy, "How dost thou believe?" each section must answer independently of its neighbor. Each is free to confess its own particular faith. The building block of the supersaga, its unit of construction, is the first-order narrative. The supersaga resembles a statue made from blocks of different kinds of stone of varying colors—white for the body, blue for the cloak and garments, black for the eyes.

It is carved from the varicolored blocks of the Word, each with its own different structure. Thus do we discover a new kind of operation in the realm of verbal art. Narrative is architecture composed of words; an architecture composed of narratives is a "supersaga."

The artist's building block is no longer the word, but the first-order narrative.

## A STACK OF WORD PLANES

*(The mountains. At the edge of a clearing rises a steep craggy rock; it resembles an iron needle seen through a magnifying glass. Like a pilgrim's staff left standing against a wall, it stands against perpendicular slopes of layers of rock overgrown by the pine forest. A bridge-platform connects it to the bedrock, the result of a landslide that has fallen across*

*the top of the crag like a straw hat. This platform is Zangezi's favorite place. He comes here every morning to recite his poems.*

*Here he reads his sermons to the people or to the forest. Beside the crag an enormous fir tree moves its heavy branches like blue waves; it hides part of the crag as if befriending and protecting it.*

*Here and there sheets of the bedrock have pushed their way above ground, black surfaces among the roots. These are the corners of stone books read by the dwellers beneath the earth, and roots lie twisted in great knots wherever they appear.*

*The sound of a pine forest in the wind.*

*Pillows of reindeer moss, silvered by the dew. Night weeps as she passes here.*

*Among the tree trunks stand living black stones, like the dark bodies of giants on their way to war.)*

## PLANE ONE: THE BIRDS

*(These are the birds' morning speeches to the rising sun.)*

*Chaffinch (from the very top of the fir tree, puffing out its silver throat) Peet pate tveechan! Peet pate tveechan! Peet pate tveechan!*

*Yellow Bunting (quietly, from the top of a walnut tree) Kree-tee-tee-tee-tee-ee—tsuey-tsuey-tsuey-ssueyee.*

*Tree Swallow Vyer-vyor veeroo syek-syek-syek! Ver-ver veeroo sek-sek-sek!*

*Mountain Sparrow Tyortee yedeegredece (he sees people and hops into the tall fir tree). Tyortee yedeegredece!*

*Yellow Bunting (rocking back and forth on a branch) Tsuey-tsuey-tsuey-ssueyee.*

*Green Chiff-Chaff (alone, fitting over the green sea of the pine grove, grazing waves that the wind keeps forever in motion) Prueyn! ptseerep-ptseerep! Ptseerep!—tsehsehseh.*

*Yellow Bunting. Tsuey-suey-suey-ssuey (rocks back and forth on a twig).*

*Blue Jay Peeoo! Peeoo! pyak, pyak, pyak!*

Barn Swallow Tseeveets! Tseezeets!

Black-Banded Warbler Behbot eh-oo-vehvyats!

Cuckoo Koo-koo! koo-koo! (rocks back and forth on a treetop).

(Silence. A young birdcatcher passes, with a cage on his back.)

## PLANE TWO: THE GODS

*(Litte by litte, the mist clears. Sheer cliff faces appear: they resemble the faces of men who have led harsh, uncompromising lives; clearly this is the nesting place of the gods. Swanwings hover upon transparent bodies, and the grasses murmur and bend beneath invisible footsteps. And, in truth, the gods are at hand! Louder and louder their voices resound; this is the assembly of the gods of all nations, their great gathering, their encampment in the mountains.*

*Tien stands; his long hair touches the ground; it forms his only garment. With a flat iron he smoothes away wrinkles.*

*Shang-ti wipes from his face the soot of Western cities. "Little better so, maybe." Two snowy wisps of hair, like little rabbits, perch above his ears. He has a long Chinese moustache.*

*White Juno is draped in green hopvines: she scrapes at her snow-white shoulder with a diligent metal file, cleaning scales from the white stone.*

*Unkulunkulu listens attentively to the sound of a beetle tunneling its way through the beam of his wooden body.)*

Eros Mara-roma,  
Beebah-bool:  
Oook, kooks, ell!  
Rededeedee dee-dee-dee!  
Peeree, pepee, pa-pa-pee!  
Chogi, goona, geni-gan!  
Ahl, Ell, Eeell!  
Ahlee, Ellee, Eelee!  
Ek, ak, oook!  
Gamch, gemch, ee-o!  
Rrr-pee! Rrr-pee!

*The Gods in Chorus* Na-na-na!  
Echee, oochee, ochee!  
*Kezee, nezee, dzeegaga!*  
*Neezareezee ozecree.*  
Mayahmoora zeemoro!  
Peeps!  
*Mazacheechee-cheemoro!*  
Plyan!

*Veles* Broovooroo roo-roo-roo!  
*Peetse tsape seh seh seh!*  
Broovoo rooroo roo-roo-roo!  
*Seetsee, leetsee tsee-tsee-tsee!*  
Painch, panch, painnch!

*Eros* Emch, amch, oomch!  
*Doomchee damchee domchee,*  
*Makarako keocherk!*  
*Tsetseeletsee tsetseeetsee!*  
*Kookareekkee keekeekoo.*  
*Reechee cheechee tsee-tsee-tsee.*  
Olga, Elga, Alga!  
Pects, patch, *potch!* Ekhamchee!

*Juno* Peerarara—peeroorooroo!  
Layolola Vooaroo!  
*Veecheholo sehsehseh!*  
*Veechee! Veechee! ee bee-bee!*  
*Zeczazeeza eezazo!*  
Eps, Aps, Eps!  
*Moorec-goorec reekoko!*  
Mio, *Mao,* Moom!  
Ep!

*Unkulunkulu* Rapr, grapr, apr! Zhai!  
Kaf! Bzuey! Kaf!  
Zhrap, gap, bakv kook!  
Rrrtoopt! Toopt!

*(The gods rise up into the air. Once more the mist thickens and burns  
blue upon the rockface.)*



PLANE THREE: THE PEOPLE

(From a stack of varicolored word blocks.)

*The People* Goddam, what a climb!

*First Passerby* So this is the place? This is where your fool of the forest appears?

*Second Passerby* This is the place.

*First Passerby* What does he do?

*Second Passerby* He reads, he talks, he breathes, he sees, he hears, he walks up and down. Mornings he prays.

*First Passerby* Who to?

*Second Passerby* Nobody can tell. Maybe to the flowers. Or the bugs. Or the toads in the woods.

*First Passerby* He's an idiot! A fool! The sermons of a forest fool! What about cows? Does he at least keep a herd of cows?

*Second Passerby* Not so far. And look! See how clear the path is? There's not a blade of grass left growing anywhere around. People are constantly coming up here, see? They've beaten a path right to the cliff.

*First Passerby* He's weird! But let's listen, at least.

*Second Passerby* He's kind of cute. Almost feminine. But he won't last long.

*First Passerby* Why, is all this beginning to get to him?

*Second Passerby* Yes. (*People pass.*)

*Third Passerby* There he is up there, and down here below, all these people. What are they, some sort of spitoon for the spittle of his wisdom?

*First Passerby* Maybe they're all drowning in it. They swim around, they swallow and choke . . . .

*Second Passerby* That's one way to look at it. What's he supposed to be then, some kind of lifesaver?

*First Passerby* Exactly! A lifesaver thrown from the sky.

*First Passerby* And so here begins the wisdom of the forest fool.  
Teacher! Here we are! We're listening!

*Second Passerby* Wait a minute, what's this? A piece of Zangezi's writing  
by the root of this pine, stuck in a fieldmouse's hole. The hand-  
writing is very beautiful.

*First Passerby* Well? Read it! Read it out loud!

## PLANE FOUR

*Second Passerby (he reads)* "The Tables of Destiny! I carve you in letters  
of black night, you Tables of Destiny!

Three numbers! Just like myself in youth, myself in old age,  
myself in middle age. Let us follow the dusty road together.

$10^5 + 10^4 + 11^5 = 742$  years and 34 days. Read, eyes, the law  
of the downfall of empires:

Behold the equation:

$$x = k + n(10^5 + 10^4 + 11^5) - [10^2 - (2n - 1) 11] \text{ days.}$$

$k$  = the moment of reckoning in time, the rush of the Ro-  
mans into the East, the battle of Actium. Egypt yields to Rome.  
This occurred on September 2, 31 B.C.

If  $n = 1$ , the value of  $x$  in the equation of the downfall of  
nations will be as follows:  $x =$  July 21, A.D. 711, or the day of proud  
Spain's defeat at the hands of the Arabs.

Proud Spain has fallen!

If  $n = 2$ ,  $x =$  May 29, 1453.

The hour has struck: Constantinople is taken by the savage  
Turks. The city of the Caesars drowns in blood, and Turkish bag-  
pipes howl their savage delight. Osman rides roughshod over the  
corpse of the second Rome. The green cloak of the Prophet hangs  
in blue-eyed Sophia's sanctuary.

On big-bellied horses the victors ride, with bedsheets wound  
about their heads.

The song of the three wings of destiny: Kind to some, terrible  
to others! The integer one abandons the five and joins the ten,  
abandons the wing and joins the wheel, and the movements of the  
number in three frames ( $10^5$ ,  $10^4$ ,  $11^5$ ) are fixed by the equation.

Between the fall of Persia on October 1, 331 B.C. under the spear of Alexander the Great and the fall of Rome under the mighty blows of Alaric on August 24, 410, there elapsed a period of 741 years, or  $10^5 + 11^5 + 10^4 - [3^6 + 1]/2 - 2^3 \times 3^2$  days.

The Tables of Destiny! Read them, read them, you Passersby! Number-warriors will pass before you like projections filmed in different segments of time, in different planes of time, and the sum of all their bodies, their various ages added together, equals the block of time between the downfalls of empires that had once been mighty and threatening.”

*First Passerby* Obscure. None too comprehensible, either. And yet—the lion’s claw is visible in all of this! You can sense its presence somehow! A scrap of paper, and on it engraved the fates of nations for someone possessed of superior vision!

## PLANE FIVE: WORDS

[*Voices of the People*] Changara Zangezi has come! Speechmaker!  
Speak to us! We hear you. Our souls are a floor beneath your feet.  
Brave comer! We believe in you, we await you. Our eyes, our souls—we are a floor beneath your feet, Unknowable!

*An Oriole* Feco choo.

## PLANE SIX

*Zangezi* I have come like a butterfly  
into the hall of human life,  
and must spatter my dusty coat  
as signature across its bleak windows,  
as a prisoner scratches his name  
on fate’s unyielding windowpane.  
Human life is papered thick  
with grayness and boredom!  
The transparent *no* of its windows!  
Already I have worn away  
my bright blue glow, my pointillated patterns,

my wing's blue windstorm. The bright motes  
of my first freshness are gone, my wings waver,  
colorless and stiff. I droop despairing  
at the windows of the human world.

Numbers, eternal numbers, sound in the beyond;  
I hear their distant conversation. Number  
calls to number; number calls me home.

*Second Passerby* He wants to be a butterfly, he thinks he's so smart,  
that's what he wants to be.

*Third Passerby* A pretty poor prophet, if you ask me. A butterfly? He  
looks more like an old lady!

*Believers* Recite us some of your self-sounding poems! Tell us the story  
of *L*!

Speak to us in that beyonsense language of yours! Describe  
the horrors of our age in the words of Alphabet! So that never  
again will we have to see war between peoples, the sabers of Al-  
phabet; instead let us hear the crash of Alphabet's long spears, the  
fight of the hostile forces *R* and *L*, *K* and *G*!

The terror of the plumes in their helmets! The terror of their  
spears! The awful outlines of their faces: wild and wistful, full of  
sunburnt space! In those days the very skin of nations was eaten  
by the moths of civil war, and capital cities crumbled like stale  
bread. The dew of human kindness had vanished into air.

We have heard of *L*. We know it is the sudden halt of a falling  
point upon a broad transverse plane. We know about *R*; we know  
it is the point that penetrates, that cuts like a razor through the  
transverse plane. *R* rips and resonates, ravages boundaries, forms  
rivers and ravines.

Alphabet is the echo of space.

Tell us!

## PLANE SEVEN

*Zangezi* You tell me the Ruriks are dead, the Romanovs are dead,  
Kaledins and Krymovs, Kornilovs and Kolchaks have fallen—  
No! The landlords' defenders have clashed with their slaves,

Kiev has fallen twenty times over, twenty times taken  
and trampled to dust.  
The rich man wept and the poor man laughed  
when Kaledin put a bullet through his brain.  
The Constituent Assembly faltered.  
Darkness filled the empty stronghold—  
no, the “hold” is broken off in a howl,  
a dying breath, a choking forth, and the mouth grows cold.  
The hour of *K* has come!  
Upon a cloud of power, the cogs of *L*.  
Where is your age-old dishonor, *L*?  
*L*—underground hermit of all ages!  
Citizen of the mousehole, the typhoon of time  
rushes upon you—days, hours, months, years—in pilgrimage.  
The weather changes—*L* days are upon us!  
*L*, the sweet light of laziness, of love and languor!  
In “living multitudes” you lull us twice.  
All nations bowed before you  
when the great war ended.  
*R, Rab, Roh!* Tra-ra-ra!  
Rasp of rapaciousness, insatiable war’s ha-ha.  
Spinning your wheels, rushing on rails  
forged in the fires of Scandinavia,  
like shaken canvas you roared over Russia,  
carrying south  
the metallic clacket of wagon wheels.  
Overnights of obdurate snowfall, havering the heart.  
The mouse’s body racked by the claws of the cold.  
The rogue back of the wind-horse bore you across Russia.  
And villages over the countryside all called out:  
Come see us!  
Spinning your wheels!  
Destroying delight, you forgot about obstacle,  
and in the distance stood *G*, a rod broken in twain.  
*R* in the hands of *L*!  
Imagine an eagle, austere unfurling its angling wings,  
longing for *Lel*—for lull and loll,  
Then *R* flies off like a pea from the pod  
and abandons the word *Russia*.

Imagine a nation become like a stricken deer,  
imagine it raked and raw in the flanks,  
imagine it move like a deer  
whose wet black muzzle nudges at destiny's gates—  
it begs for lightness and laughter, for likemindedness,  
for *L*, for pure *L*, a tired body  
longing to be lulled by harmony.  
And its head is a dictionary  
of *L*-words only.  
Like a polecat alone in an alien place, looking for love . . . poor  
cat!  
Roistering *R*, sweep on,  
dulling the parquet's luster!  
Subtract the area of the path from your barriers.  
The murmur of folklore  
becomes the roar of an angry nation;  
the peasant's lumbering step  
becomes the rumble of revolt.  
*R*, you are air, forced air, you make trains move  
like a chain-linked team of blood molecules  
Through the veins of northern Siberia.  
You power palaces across the waves;  
your force makes the highroads fork, they flourish like  
sunflowers.  
Then *L* began, and *R* declined and fell.  
The nation drifts idly in a vessel of laziness:  
the battering ram becomes a sacrificial lamb,  
and the roar of the storm becomes a stale roll.  
Those are now sold who once took up the sword,  
raw life becomes once more a life of law—  
the serfowner possesses only his naked self.  
But *R* ignites fires in dusty, abandoned files,  
the saving wall is now rank with destroying war.  
No longer lavishes, but only ravishes!  
Routing light forever with the iron of its right,  
gallops its proud horse where the farmer has plowed  
to trample his field, to be everywhere feared,  
to reduce the self again to serf.

*R* is a presence echoes twice in *every prophet*,  
and turns poor players to their prayers.  
It pierces the darkness of the days  
when *K* resounded in *Kolchak*.  
*K* has knotted a whiplash  
of shackles, decrees, kicks, commands, and rocks—  
the prophets perished by means of these:  
They all contain killing and death at the stake.  
When you, *R*, raised a howl  
in the ears of these Northern calms,  
The wide ears of these watery Northern calms:  
“Take arms, brothers, take arms!”  
A hunt by a hut, and a white hound  
on the heels of a thunderstorm,  
And soldiers on the march once more,  
till nothing is left but the last ha-ha  
Of the skulls of the two last people  
on the platter of war.  
That was the time when *K* moved over the steppe  
with the heavy tread of a suicide,  
walking unsteadily toward *L* as a drunkard might walk,  
smearing his colors on the clouds of destiny,  
channeling a new course for the river of human deaths.  
With the final hand of the ruined gambler,  
pistol at his forehead, *K* walks, very pale.  
*R, Rab, Roh!*  
Hark, the Dog-bark—  
God of Russia, god of Ruin!  
Perun, your god, is giant-high—  
he knows no bounds, he wrecks, he rends, he rips, he ruins.  
Wrong to claim Kaledin is killed, and Kolchak,  
that a shot was heard.  
That was the silence of *K*, that was *K* recoiling,  
*K* collapsing to the ground.  
It is *L* who lulls the roar of terror, mends the riven tear—  
*L*, teller of the living tale.

*First Passerby* He’s kind of clever.

*Second Passerby* But he hasn't got the true poetic fire. It's all just raw material, his sermon. Just a lot of unworked stuff. A lot of green wood. Go dry out, thinker . . .

## PLANE EIGHT

*Zangezi* R, K, L, G—

Alphabet war-makers—  
they were the actors in the drama of those years,  
warrior-heroes of those days.  
The will of nations surrounded their forces,  
as wet water falls from the oars.  
He looks for a lifeboat, a leg up, a lift,  
a limb—who looks? Who falls into water,  
into a crevasse, an abyss, a ravine.  
A drowned man sits in the boat; he pulls on an oar.  
It's a broad-bottomed boat, it stays afloat,  
and languorously slows to a standstill.  
K in chains, in vain in chains,  
while G and R collide in combat.  
G falls, cut down by R,  
and R now lies at the feet of L!

Let the all-seeing sounds of a universal language whirl away the mists of time. That language is light. Now listen:

### *A Song in Star-Language*

Within a haze of green *KHA*, two figures,  
the *EL* of their clothes as they move,  
a *GO* of clouds above the games they play,  
the *VE* of a crowd that circles an unseen fire,  
the *LA* of labor and the *PE* of games and songs.  
The *CHE* of the young man is his bright blue shirt,  
the *ZO* of his shirt—its glow and its gleam.  
The *VE* of curls around his face,  
the *VE* of branches on the pinetree trunk,  
the *VE* of stars, the night-world turning overhead.



A *CHE* of girls—golden shirts,  
a *GO* of girls—garlands of wildflowers.

A *SO* of rays of happiness,  
*VE* of people in a ring  
with *ES* of springtime pleasure,  
*MO* of sadness, grief, and sorrow.

And the *PI* of happy voices,  
the *PE* of peals of laughter,  
the *VE* of branches when the wind blows—  
a brief *KA* of rest.

Maidens, men, more *PE!* More *PI!*

*KA* comes to us all in the grave!

*ES* of laughter, *DA* like a rope of hair,  
and the groves—the *KHA* of springtime rituals,  
the oak grove—*KHA* of the god's desires,  
eyebrows—*KHA* of springtime glances  
and braids—*KHA* of midnight faces.

And *MO* of long curling hair,  
and a *LA* of labor while all is in motion,  
and the *VE* of merrymaking, *PE* of happy talk,  
the *PA* of a white shirt sleeve,  
the *VE* of dark braids in coils,  
the *ZI* of eyes, golden *RO* of young man's hair.

*PI* of laughter! *PI* of horseshoes and the clink of sparks!

*MO* to torment and longing.

*MO* to yesterday's sorrow.

The *GO* of a rock high above them,  
the *VE* of river waves, the *VE* of wind and trees,  
*GO*—the night-world's constellation.

*TA* of a shadow in evening—a girl,  
and a *ZA-ZA* of delights—her eyes.

The *VE* of people circling an unseen fire.

The *PE* of singing  
and the *RO* of singing heard in silence,  
the *PI* of voices, calling out.

That is what star-language is like.

*Voices from the Crowd* Not bad, thinker! You're getting better all the  
time!

*Zangezi* These are star-songs, where the algebra of words is muddled with yardsticks and clocks. And this is only a first draft! Someday this language will unite us all, and that day may come soon.

*First Passerby* He's a divine liar. He lies like a night full of nightingales. Look up there—those flyers flying overhead. What do they say? (*reads the flyers as they pass overhead*):

“*V* means the revolution of one point around another (circular motion).

*L* is the cessation of fall, or motion generally by a plane lateral to a falling point.

*R* is a point that penetrates a transverse area.

*P* is the rapid movement of one point away from another, and hence of many points, a multitude of points, from a single point; the expansion of volume.

*M* is the dispersion of volume into infinitely smaller parts.

*S* is the movement of points out from one motionless point: radiation.

*K* is the encounter and hence the halt of many moving points in one motionless point. Hence the ultimate meaning of *K* is rest, immobilization.

*KH* is a surface that serves to shield one point from another point moving toward it.

*CH* is a hollow volume whose void contains a different body. Hence a bent or curved shield.

*Z* is the reflection of a ray from a mirror. The angle of incidence is equal to the angle of reflection (vision).

*G* is the movement of a point at right angles to the fundamental line of movement, away from it. Hence height.”

*First Listener* He's getting a little out of hand with these flyers of his, that *Zangezi*! What do you think of all this?

*Second Listener* He has me hooked. I'm a fish wriggling on the harpoon of his ideas.

*Zangezi* Have you heard me? Have you heard all I've said, heard my speech that frees you from the fetters of words? Speech is an edifice built out of blocks of space.

Particles of speech. Parts of movement. Words do not exist;

there are only movements in space and their parts—points and areas.

You are now set free from your ancestral chains. The hammer of my voice has shattered them; your frenzied struggle against those chains has ended.

Planes, the lines defining an area, the impact of points, the godlike circle, the angle of incidence, the fascicule of rays proceeding from a point or penetrating it—these are the secret building blocks of language. Scrape the surface of language, and you will behold interstellar space and the skin that encloses it.

## PLANE NINE: THOUGHT

Quiet! Quiet! He's about to speak!

*Zangezi* Sound the alarm, send the sound through the mind! Toll the big bell, the great tocsin of intelligence! All the inflections of the human brain will pass in review before you, all the permutations of *OOM!* Look up and see! Join us now, all of you, in song!

- I. *GO-OOM*  
*OUR-OOM*  
*OOW-OOM*  
*FAR-OOM*  
*WTH-OOM* of me  
and those I don't know  
*MO-OOM*  
*BO-OOM*  
*DAL-OOM*  
*CHE-OOM*  
*BOM!*  
*BIM!*  
*BAM!*
- II. *PRO-OOM*  
*PRA-OOM*  
*PREE-OOM*  
*EXCL-OOM*

*DEV-OOM*  
*OR-OOM*  
*ZA-OOM*  
*FREE-OOM*  
*VAV-OOM*  
*RE-OOM*  
*BY-OOM*  
*BOM!*

Help me, bellringers, I'm tired.

III. *DOD-OOM*  
*DAD-OOM*  
*MEE-OOM*  
*RAY-OOM*  
*ECHO-OOM*  
*KHA-OOM*

Sound the alarm, send the sound through the mind! Here is the bell  
and here is the bellrope.

*DULL-OOM*  
*FROM-OOM*  
*IN-OOM*  
*ON-OOM*  
*DVOO-OOM*  
*TRE-OOM*  
*DE-OOM*  
*BOM!*

IV. *OZ-OOM*  
*OK-OOM*  
*WITH-OOM*  
*OP-OOM*  
*AGL-OOM*  
*AR-OOM*  
*NO-OOM*  
*DAY-OOM*  
*FREE-OOM*  
*BOM!*  
*BOM! BOM, BOM!*

Toll the great tocsin of intelligence! The divine sounds descending, summoned by the voice of mankind! Beautiful is the sound of the mind! Beautiful are its pure crystal sounds. But look now! See where *M* appears and enters the range of *I-CAN*, the land of *MOG*, the hold of the strongword *MOGU*. Now listen to the word, listen to the mogospel, listen to the bellpull of power.

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[*What follows are Khlebnikov's notes to Plane Nine.*]

*FREE-OOM*. This is figurative. Of course rejecting what is old leads to free-oom.

*NO-OOM*. The hostile mind, leading to different conclusions, the mind that says no to any proposition.

*GO-OOM*. The mind that towers like those celestial trinkets unseen by day, the stars. When rulers fall, it picks up their fallen staff *GO*.

*LA-OOM*. Of great breadth, covering the greatest possible area, without banks or bounds, like a river in flood time.

*KO-OOM*. Tranquil, binding, establishing foundations, books, rules, and laws.

*LA-OOM* descends from the heights to speak to the masses. It describes to the plain what is visible from the mountaintop.

*CHE-OOM* raises the cup to an unknown future. Its dawns are che-sightings. Its rays are cherays. Its flames are cheflames. Its will is chewill. Its sorrow is chesorrow. Its delights are chedelights.

*OM-OOM*. The disastrous, shattering, destroying mind. It is foretold within the bounds of faith.

*DEV-OOM*. The mind of discipleship and true citizenship, of a spirit of devotion.

*OUR-OOM*. Abstract, observing everything around it, from the vantage point of a single thought.

*FROM-OOM*. A leap beyond the boundaries of the ordinary mind.

*DA-OOM*. Affirmative.

*NO-OOM*. Argumentative.

*DULL-OOM*. Half-wit.

*WTH-OOM*. Collaborative.

*DAY-OOM*. Commanding.

*ECHO-OOM*. The secret, hidden intelligence.

*BY-OOM*. Craving intelligence, called into being not by what is, but by what it desires.

*EXCL-OOM*. Negation.

*PRO-OOM*. Prevision, foresight.

*PRA-OOM*. The intellect of a distant land, the ancestor-mind.

*RE-OOM*. Heeding the voice of experience.

*VAV-OOM*. The nail of an idea, driven into the plank of stupidity.

*FREE-OOM*. Escaping from the bonds of stupidity.

*RAR-OOM*. Recognizing no limits or boundaries, a shining, radiant mind. Its speeches are rahorns.

*ZO-OOM*. The mind reflected.

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## PLANE TEN

Back, Bog! Move, Mog!  
March, Manmuscle!  
I am Maker, and might!  
I am Mover, and may! I am Matter, and might!  
I am the Mighty Mower! Moving, improving! Mow might,  
Michman!  
Magnet-eyed magus! Moving! Improving!  
Musclemarch!  
March, Michman! Hands! Arms!  
Mammering, mowring force-face, full of muchness!  
Matchering eyes, michering thoughts, muchering brows!  
See my face, my mighthead! My arms, my mighthood!

My hands, my arms!  
Might-maker, main-mantle, motor-matter,  
Motivated power-mower! Mogre!  
My force-face mamogrified!  
Many-mastering, Mog-mating muscle,  
you shake your hair like a mountain-mogre,  
a manifold maze, a nest of moglings, of muchlets and mainlings,  
of mightlings and masterkins, muchable mightlemames,  
where one migggle madlet still writhes  
in a mowering moggle of magistrity, a mag of might,  
a breeding herd of mightlings and muchlets.

The raven beats her wings, brings water in her beak.  
I must hurry so I won't be late!

See my face, Manmuscle! Magus of magnitudes!  
Master of muchness!  
Mickle miches! Major motion picture!  
I move like firepower, mogyman, monster of men's magination.  
Mickle miches in a little magoom.  
Move, Manmuscle!  
Mog's overmowering muchness! Mammerring Mog!  
Man's-marrow! Power-mirror!  
Magnify, mind, my magnimind! Hands, magnify! Arms, mogrify!  
Mutcher, Michman, magic Mogasm!  
Move!  
Magus of magnitudes! Master of muchness!  
Mooggle-eyes! Mog-mouth!  
Michness of muchnesses!

Now *M* has invaded the lands and the holdings of Bog, destroying all fear of Him, achieving our necessary victory. Now the infantry army of *M* has ground down the rock of the impossible impassible, the stone-age savage! Ground it into meal, into minute particles, matter for mites. They reduce a tree to moss and meadowgrass, an eagle to a moth, an elephant to a mouse and a mosquito. The one whole becomes the many, a mass of minute elements.

Now is the coming of *M*, mallet that mauls the great; omnivorous moth to mange the fur coats of centuries.

Now let us wake the sleeping gods of speech.

Shake the bastards by the beard! Wake up, you old ones! I am the Mogogur, the guru who gospels the name of *M*! Mightmaker of Might-makers! Our course lies toward *M*, humanity's North Star, our polar point, the pole that supports the haystacks of our beliefs. Toward *M* the barque of the centuries sails, toward *M* the dugout of humanity sails, a proud breath filling the sails of governments and states.

We have come from the land of the mind to the mighty domain of *MOG*.

*A Thousand Voices (muffled) MOG! (pause) MOG! (pause) MOG!* We are here! We are we!

*The Distant Mountains* MOGOOOO! MOGOOOO!

*Zangezi* Listen, the mountains acknowledge your declaration. Can you hear that proud flourish? "*MOGOOOO*," the mountains reply to your claim of possession! A thousand voices repeat it in the clamoring canyons! Can you hear the gods beating their wings, startled up by our shouting?

*The Crowd* The gods are flying away! The gods are flying away!

## PLANE ELEVEN

*(The gods fly beneath the clouds; the air is filled with the beating of their wings.)*

*The Gods* Hahahaha hehhehheh!  
Grakahata grororo  
Leelee eghee, lyap, lyap, *bem*.  
Leebeebabee neeraro  
Seenoahnno tsetseereets.  
Heeyu hmapa, heer zen, *chench*  
Zhooree keeka seen sonegha  
Hahoteeree ess esseh  
Yunchee, enchee, ook!  
Yunchee, enchee, peepoka.  
Klyam! Klyam! Eps!

*Voices in the Crowd* The power of our voices has terrified the gods! Is that good? Is that bad?



## PLANE TWELVE

*Zangezi* Ah! Now Alphabet advances! Now is the danger time! The roofbeams of *M* begin to reach above the clouds. Now hear the heavy step of *K*. Again the spears of *G* and *R* impale the corpses of clouds. Both fall dead, and then begins the rivalry of *L* and *K*—their negative doubles. *R* looks into the mirror of minus-one and sees *K*; *G* looks and sees *L*. Higher than the anthill of human hopes, the great foundation pile of battles crams the sky with its blocks and columns, like one enormous war built up out of pilings and beam angles.

But the wind has scattered it all.

The power of our voices has terrified the gods.

Have you ever seen *L* and *K*, and the clash of their swords?  
And the fist of *K*, a handful of foundation piles, stretching out toward the austere columns of the armor of *L*?

Ah, Kolchak, Kaledin, Kornilov—are they only cobwebs, traces of mildew still left on that fist? Who are these fighters locked in a struggle beyond the storm clouds? A free-for-all, the battle of *G* and *R*, *L* and *K*! Some have grown hoarse, three are corpses, *L* is alone. Silence.

## PLANE THIRTEEN

*Zangezi* They are the bright blue stilland,  
the sky full of bright blue eye-fall,  
never-never fleeing things  
whispering on irrelevant wings.  
Ledglings in flight, seeking their selfland,  
flocking through darkness to vanishment.  
A swelling of heavenly neverings,  
a swirling of wing-welling overings.  
They have flown, fading and groaning,  
forgetting their getting, their names,  
unwillingly lulled in their own unwantedings.  
Cryers and callers, all whirled into wasteland,  
earth's own backward, the everlasting everlost of heaven,  
into the goneness of here and the notness of now,

hovering haveless through star-frost and sea-spray  
toward elsewhere. Wayfarers on the evening air,  
thistening like thought-secrets, heaven's harriers,  
these nestlings of nowhere, a lattering flutter  
of wings in flight to some elsewhere,  
of ledglings in flight, seeking their selfland!  
Hover-home, breeder of streaming light,  
of strange unattainable flutter and fluxion!  
Wing-wavers white as drifting down,  
weary wizards of downward drift,  
wavering dowers of dawn.  
River of blue skystead,  
weary wings of the dreamstead,  
broad harmonies of the downstead.  
Barefooted in star clusters,  
there you died.  
Heaven hovers in their hair,  
heaven hovers in their voices!  
streaking the eastern stream of everland,  
they fly away into their neverland.  
With the nevering eyes of earthlings  
like notnesses of earth-law,  
Fleet flight to the blue of heaven,  
flight fleet into blue, hovering.  
Shrouded in all-knowing sorrow  
they fly to the source of pre-knowledge,  
winglings of no-where, mouths of now-here!  
Winglings of not-here, mouths of no-there!  
Heaven hovers in their faces:  
They are the dwellers in the blue places.  
High heaven's harriers, a flood of flame,  
the heavenly fire-river over us all.  
Their untamed eyes all vanishing vision,  
their untamed mouths saying: not-here.

*Disciples* Zangezi! We want something more down to earth! We've had enough of this sky stuff? Play us a tune we can dance to! You're supposed to be a thinker, think us up some entertainment. Every-

body here wants to be entertained. That's the way things are—we just had a good dinner and we want to relax!

## PLANE FOURTEEN

*Zangezi* Listen to me, you  
fair higherns of the gray mountains,  
you hurry, you flurry of water descending,  
stormfall of waterflow over the cliff face,  
gray tusks of waves.  
And you graylings of clouds,  
neverings of thunderheads hovering  
over a whirl-wave of grass.  
And the whorl-wave too of the gray current  
in the wide-spreading grayfulness of water.  
I am the God-Maker, Divificator,  
walker of edges, and here I stand  
like a stack.

Now the black mammoth of the almost-dark,  
a spill, an upset inkwell splashing  
the milk of the ravine,  
raises his tusks of white water  
threatening these leaves of divine grass,  
the orchard-grass, as his foot pilings  
trample the gooseweed,  
making the grasses groan: God, oh God!  
Threatening, then toppling into the abyss.  
Wind-song and wing-sound from the wild steppe,  
night's dark blue river of lull and loll,  
and springtime's nightly goodling freshens the higherns of  
grasses  
in the wind's amble, on the fire-shoals of the sky!  
Come younglings! Come lordlings!  
The will-wave lapses and the wind's sweet siring subsides.  
Fate-flow of fatality, whirl-waves of divinity, receding in ripples.  
And I am the God-Maker, Divificator,  
left all alone.

*Voices from the Crowd* What a mad muddle!  
This is all a lot of gabble!  
This is vain bibble-babble,  
Zangezi! What language are you trying to talk?

*Zangezi* I go on!  
You! It's you, you boot-eyed ladies,  
striding in shiny boots of night  
through the heaven of my poems!  
Scatter the coins and tokens of your eyes  
over all the highways!  
Draw the adder's coiling fang  
from your hushabye hair.  
Look through these cracks, through these fractures of hatred.  
I am the Fool-Maker, Duncificator, and here I sing and rave!  
Look at me jump up and down! Look at me dance  
here on the edge of a cliff!  
When I sing, the stars applaud me  
and I am worth every bit of it. Nothing can stand  
against me, here I stand. Stand!

Move ever onward, Planets of Earth!  
Thus by plural number does my greatness cast its spell.  
I am the Many-Maker, Multiplier of Planet Earth:  
Wobble yourself into hordes of earths,  
spin yourself, Earth, into swarms of mosquitos.  
I sit alone, with folded arms,  
singer of the grave-ground.

I am what is not.

I am the only son of who I am.

## PLANE FIFTEEN

*(And now here are some songs in SOUNDWRITING: the sounds are sometimes bright blue, sometimes dark blue, sometimes black and sometimes red.)*

VÉH-O-VEYA—the green of a tree,  
NEEZHEÓTY—the dark tree trunk,

MAM-E-ÁMEE—that's the sky,  
POÓCHE CHÁPI—a blackbird.  
MAM EE ÉMO—that's a cloud.

The odor of things is numerical.

Daylight in the garden!  
And here is your holiday, your Labor Day.

LÉLI-LÍLI—the snow of locust flowers shielding a rifle.  
CHEÉCHECHÁCHA—the shine of sabers,  
BEE-EH-ÉNZAI—the scarlet of banners,  
ZEE-EH-ÉGZOI—the words of an oath.  
BÓBO-BEÉBA—the stripe of scarlet,  
MEEPEEÓPEE—the gray-eyed glitter of the troops.  
CHÚCHU BEÉZA—the glitter of swear words.  
MEE-VEH-ÁH-A—the heavens.  
MEEPEEÓPEE—the glitter of eyes,  
VE-E-ÁH-VA—the green of the troops!  
MEEMOMÁYA—the dark blue of hussars,  
ZEEZOZÉYA—the sun's handwriting, a rye field of sun-eyed  
sabers.  
LÉLI-LÍLI—the snow of locust flowers,  
SOSÉSÁO—mountains of buildings . . . . .

*The Listeners* All right! That's enough! Please! Go suck a sour pickle,  
Zangezi! Give us something with substance! Something with  
some guts! Somebody light a fire under him! Look what kind of  
audience you've got! See? Even the rabbits have come out to listen!  
They sit there squinting and scratch their ears. Zangezi! Leave all  
this bunny business to the bunnies! Are we not men? Look how  
many of us have gathered here! Zangezi! You're putting us to  
sleep! That stuff sounds beautiful, but there's nothing to it! We  
want fire! We're cold! And this is lousy wood you've cut, it won't  
heat up our stoves!

## PLANE SIXTEEN: THE FALLING SICKNESS

What's the matter with him? Somebody grab him!

One, two . . . . . Mount up! One, two! Ready, *mount!*  
Ready . . . . .

Yeesh, you rat! Halt! Rarrh Rarrh . . . . .  
You White hoodlum! You'll never get away! You'll never get  
away!  
Halt, you bastard, stop it, calm down!  
I'll slit your throat . . . . . Halt, you rat!  
Halt, you rat! **ARRGH!**  
Grrr grrr . . . . .  
Rarrh!  
Rarrh . . . . .  
You'll never get away . . . . .  
You lie . . . . . Halt!  
Halt!  
Rarrrh Rarrrh . . . . .  
Grrr . . . . .  
Hurrah . . . . .  
**ARRGH!**  
**ARRGH! ARRGH!**  
You lie, you bastard!  
Sonofabitch!  
Jesus Christ!  
We don't spare heads  
For freedom for Reds!  
First Ossetian Cossack troop,  
**DRRRRAW** sabers!  
Forward! Follow me, men!  
Right side cut,  
Left side hack!  
Grrr grrr . . . . .  
You'll never get away!  
Listen buddy,  
Got a knife?  
I'll cut his . . . . . Money bastard,  
You lie! You'll never stop us now!  
**AIIEEEEE!** Got you! You lie!  
**ARRGH! ARRGH!**

*Zangezi* He's having a seizure. This is the falling sickness:  
War-fear has wounded his soul.  
War cuts our days like a throat.

This man has been seized—and he shows us  
that war exists, that it still exists.

## PLANE SEVENTEEN

*Trio (They start to go.)* Well, we gotta get going.  
Take it easy, *Zangeezi*.  
There's an awful lot of traffic.  
You've collected a crowd.  
Let's go across the river and into the trees.  
Hey, wait a minute, wait a minute. Where have  
all the gods gone?  
Yeah, who's gonna light my fire?  
Yeah, who's got a light?  
Who's got a cigarette?  
I can't find the matches we used to use.  
Come on, you guys, we can smoke on the way.  
Ok, so let's go.  
Think we'll ever get together again?  
Sure. We'll be best buddies in the sweet bye and bye.  
Oh, I got a little bottle of homemade booze,  
gonna get God drunk, get rid of his blues.  
So bring on the bimbos and let's have a party!  
Yeah, let's get high! Roll your own!  
Light up the sky! You get me my own and I'll roll her.  
Yahoo!  
Cockadoodle-doo!  
I'm gonna get to heaven and be right at home  
from three to six every afternoon!  
Onward, onward, only kids get scared,  
We're big boys now—and ain't that too damn bad!  
We'll do it our way, we'll drink the old way,  
We'll drink the saints in heaven blind,  
We'll drink to our Odessa-mama  
and the moon of Alabama, and  
we gotta dance! Boop-boop-dee-do!  
Then we'll all fall down like the Cossacks do!  
Hey, *Zangezi*!

You on our side, Zangezi?  
You got a match, Zangezi?

*Zangezi* Here, take these. These are the matches of Destiny.

*Trio* Yessir!

*(They go off.)*

## PLANE EIGHTEEN

*Zangezi* Nossir. The gathering storm is never an illusion.

Ardent, impassioned Ryleev  
demanded death from the royal House of Rurik  
(poison flows in the veins of every king)  
and he dangled in the gallows-dance.  
For Ryleev, Death was sweeter than chains.  
The naked storm rushes above us.  
The cause of freedom is afoot!  
Let them lie quiet in their graves.  
After two to the thirteenth—  
the year was eighteen-forty-eight—  
shepherds of hordes, red hordes.  
The wind of freedom,  
a day of universal storm!  
The Poles rose up in revolt  
disdaining the catcalls of destiny:  
destiny's cheeks puffed out, her twisted mouth in a whistle,  
the grim East frowned like the point of a gun, uncompromising,  
harsh as the sound of gunfire, the point of a rifle,  
frowned at the springtime of Poland's uprising.  
But after three to the fifth, or two hundred forty-three  
days had been scattered like coins of gold,  
a sudden fiery shot, like the idea of death  
on death row, a pistol bullet in the heart  
of Berg, the insurgents' fatal full stop:  
Pacifier of Poland, Viceroy of Poland,  
rude precursor of the clank of chains.  
See there—that chainlink glitters:



after three to the fifth, the moment of vengeance,  
a shot, and the sight of gunsmoke, curling upward.  
Consider the American president. Garfield elected!  
The ice of distrust is broken.  
Then, after three to the five, savagery stalks  
and Garfield lies dying, lies dead.  
Consider the streets of Rome,  
the pillaging hordes from the East  
who bound the white city in dark heavy chains,  
provided a meal for legions of crows.  
After two times three to the eleventh  
a mountain of skulls grew out of  
a battle, the field of Kulikovo—  
Moscow has written a clean copy  
of the rough draft of the first Rome's fate,  
with the ink of its initial victories.  
The machine-gun fire of the Eastern invasion grew silent.  
One unforgettable battle, it cleaned out  
the cartridge clip of the Eastern invasion.  
The miller of time  
has erected a skull-heap, a dam  
from the bones of Kulikovo.  
Across the steppe, the cry of "stop!"—  
Moscow stands guard.  
Hordes of nations galloped against the West,  
wave after wave:  
Goths and Huns, and then the Tatars.  
After two times three to the eleventh  
Moscow arose in her helmet of snowstorms  
and cried to the East: not one step more!  
The land grew sterile, it whitened beneath the Tartar yoke.  
For a long time their inundation glittered.  
Then Yermak with his daredevil laughter—  
setting his stern brow at an angle,  
testing the wind with his broad beard—  
sailed the beautiful rivers of Siberia  
to the far-off city of Kuchum.  
The tenderest thing in the world  
cannot stop him.

The die was cast and the victor's lot  
shown in the water's reflection;  
stars over Isker sparkled  
and Moscow acquired one half of the world.  
The snouts of bears sniffed at the oncoming Russians,  
bear cubs tumbled at play on the rock piles,  
the elk and its offspring migrated in hordes.  
Enticing prizes, the pelts of sables  
attracted the heavy boyars of the capital.  
Voevodas set out to discover new lands,  
they sailed through Northern oceans, through seas of ice.  
When the Tatar Troubles were finally over,  
it was Russia's turn to inherit the East.  
And then two times three to the tenth  
after the taking of Isker,  
after the stern eyes of Yermak  
reflected in Siberian rivers,  
came the day of the battle of Mukden  
when all that daring returned unto dust.  
That is always the way: after three to the *n*th power,  
comes the moment of shift, of reversal.  
Yermak becomes Stessel  
after three to the tenth days  
and as much again.  
What Kulikovo was for the Tatars  
the horror of Mukden became for the Russians.  
Like a prophet in eyeglasses  
at his writing desk, Vladimir Solovyov  
foresaw it all.  
If Stessel loved roast piglet—  
then he was Yermak after three to the tenth.  
And Bulgaria, when she had  
broken the chains of her overlord  
and risen up free after so many years  
by the vote of an international tribunal,  
Bulgaria, that valley of flowers,  
it was because of the time that had passed,  
three to the eleventh power,  
from the day of the battle of Trnovo.

When Kiev was taken by Tatars  
camels were stabled in cathedrals,  
the Russian capital was taken—  
but three to the tenth power passed  
and on the heights of Angora  
Tamerlane met Bajazet.  
Let Bajazet sit in his cage,  
the Mongols themselves were rebuffed  
after another power of three,  
the dawn of their power shifting toward darkness.  
Here, there, everywhere, the sword submits  
to the ancient power of odd and even.  
A watchtower is built of twos and threes  
and the abbot of time paces its summit.  
Where tattered military banners pecked the air  
and horses are stubbornly silent,  
only their echoing hoof resounds.  
The Dead! The Living! Alike, all discarded!  
These are the iron batons of time,  
the axes of events, armature for the straw man of the universe.  
The scarecrow of war is supported by rods  
like the iron rods that frame up a straw man.  
Number is the wire of the universe.  
What are these? Vessels of Truth?  
Or empty stories?  
The waves of the East and the West  
alternate by a power of three.  
The Greeks fought the Persians in gold-crested helmets,  
from cliffs they hurled the invader harshly into the sea.  
Marathon—and the defeated East  
ebbed away, burning its ships behind it.  
They pursued them and cut across the steppe.  
After four times  
three to the eleventh power—  
Constantinople waits for the battle axes!  
A tobacco spark ignites the temple-church,  
everything falls to the Turks.  
Your prince on his handsome horse  
will be swallowed up in the flames.

The trader tosses his profits  
overboard, for the Turks approach,  
and disaster comes with them.  
1917. The Tsar abdicates. The white mare of freedom!  
A wild gallop, a breakthrough.  
The two-headed eagle smashed in the square.  
The mare's dark eyes glitter  
with the image of a knife.  
The grip of autocracy  
can no longer rein her in.  
She gallops, her hooves swirl up the dust,  
galloping proud as a prophetess.  
Behind her the dead past  
breaks, it tears apart on the rocks.  
Where is she galloping? What does she want?  
You will never catch up!  
All this dust makes it hard to keep up.  
Fire and darkness burn in her eyes  
and that is  
because:  
two to the twelfth power days  
have passed  
since the day of bloody Presnia.  
Here the number two was the god of time  
and the tsars fell, still clutching the bridle;  
and the far-off wail that pursued them  
was a magic horn in the distance.  
The voices of cannons  
shook old Moscow's south embankment.  
Minin's monument bowed its cast-iron curls  
before the shells of Min descending everywhere.  
It was a celebration of Min's birthday.  
The laughter of guns from Sparrow Hills  
stunned the most beautiful icons,  
the Mothers of God of Moscow,  
in the depths of their chapels.  
It is Pushkin, who cuts the *n* from his name  
like a lock of his curly hair—canonical Pushkin

becomes canonical, blasting, pushing with the power of a  
misplaced *n*.

Min was victorious.

He declaimed an *Onegin* of steel and lead  
to the deaf ears of the crowd.

He intended to set himself up on the monument.

And after three to the fifth days  
the snow turned bloody.

No one recognized him,  
the crowds began to run,  
and Min fell dead. Konopliannikova killed him.

After three to the fifth, two hundred and forty-three days  
—precisely, more’s the pity—

vengeance came,

that wonder of remorselessness:

steel pounded hard on humanity’s bones,  
the cannons stopped only on Sunday,  
surrender seemed the only salvation.

The German sword above our heads  
was an order to calamity and silence.

Then at last a peace treaty, a monkey on our back,  
and after three to the fifth  
an SR assassinated Mirbach.

If a knife is concealed in a fist  
and revenge stares hard from the eyes,  
then it’s Time who howls: “I want!”—  
and “Yessir,” obedient Fate replies.

## PLANE NINETEEN

*(The people bring Zangezi a horse. He mounts.)*

*Zangezi* Nickery, flickery,  
little stewball!  
Coachery catchery,  
tortury mortury,  
matchery catchery, witchery watchery—  
Evens in heavens

as evening descends.  
Nickery, flickery,  
little stewball!  
The storm is a seance  
that I can see,  
signs of a science  
the eye can see.  
Hello, freedom,  
goodbye, force!  
Giddyap, giddyap,  
my good horse!

*(He begins to ride toward the city.)*

I have rivers for hair!  
See, Danube streams  
upon my shoulders!  
And this turbulent tousle  
is Dnieper's blue rapid.  
This is the Volga, the shining big-sea-water,  
and this long hair  
that I twist in my fingers,  
this is the Amur, where geishas gaze  
toward heaven, praying  
away the storm.

I am the master carpenter of time.  
I have deciphered the timepiece of humanity  
and set its hands accurately,  
added a clockface,  
reckoned the hours all over again,  
chiseled the lug nut into place.  
The destiny hand of this steel heaven  
moves. I have faced it with crystal:  
It ticks more quietly now, the way it used to.  
I wear the timepiece of humanity  
casually, like a wristwatch.  
The rachets and wheels of its works  
whisper their steel conversation.

I am a proud rider, a mender of brains.  
They move and work the way they did before.

Clumps of intelligence, stacks of sense,  
a wagon train of dead ideas,  
manure for God's eternal acres,  
their foreparts gods, and beasts behind,  
gather them like sheaves, and stack them up with laughter,  
grant them several gaits, and make them swift and playful

(These are things that furrow thinkers' foreheads,  
these songs of the holy book.  
Workers in the factory of thought!  
Work, produce, deliver!)

give them room to run, swiftness in maneuver,  
and restlessness and fire.  
Banish from their course  
all conflict and disaster,  
and let the stripling's curls  
fly the father's anger.  
Marshal them on trains, on swift, night-moving steamships,  
let them eat the grass of stars  
and follow humanity's highways  
in deep galactic spaces.  
Let the chill rush of every river  
entice them into open fields, persuade them to their rest.  
And let the clip-clop of my cadences  
lie colt-like on the new-mown hay  
and sleep like clumps of dreams  
worn out by springtime.

Planets of Earth! Forward, march!  
Just suppose somebody throws  
a net of numbers over the globe,  
does that mean he raises our minds?  
No, it means our mind is more alone.  
Once it meant slugs and snails—  
now it means living like eagles!

Rainbows growing every day!  
Hooray!  
Tomorrow the planet explodes  
with a network of overhead roads!  
Hooray!  
And if somebody says you are God,  
you rant and rave and say:  
It's a lie! God only comes up partway!  
He's only as high as my heel!  
Hooray!  
We'll fly our existence away!  
People are glaciers, about to flow!  
The more we fly, the higher we go!  
Everyone playing  
to beat the band,  
batting the Planet  
from hand to hand.

See the patterns of waves of sand  
and the curly hair of the sea—  
the beach, the branches, the debris.  
Pinetree branches move a hand  
and a book is written on the sand—  
The book of the pine, the shore, the sea.  
Sandy waves, a stand of pines,  
and someone nearby whistles,  
I can hear their breath move in and out.  
The sea by daylight  
chews on silence  
Like a thrown-away bone.  
Bluestorm sea beast, bluehair sea beast,  
the slap, slap of its pelt on the shore.  
A rock for a pillow,  
a bush for a bed,  
sea foam for bedsheets,  
and a swarm of stars for a comforter—  
for that hermit from himself,  
that dweller in the sea's fine mansions,  
the ordinary wind.



I discontent you, Ocean:  
You discontent me.  
You pour out these mile-long stretches  
of speckled basket foam.  
Pilings and pilings and pilings!  
On a scaffold of pilings something menacing  
crouches, something ripened in secret  
like armfuls of dusky rye.  
It's hard to make progress through waves of sand!  
Who's there? It's the flower-seller sea.  
Come down to the shore, sit next to me.

I'm an ordinary earthman, just like you!  
Call me humanity. I am teaching  
the suns of neighboring galaxies  
to salute me—by the numbers—one, two!  
Shouting at suns is a rough, uncompromising job.  
I am a warrior; Time is my rifle.  
These are my leggings:  
Rome in flames, charred and smoking,  
a smouldering plank from her temples,  
laced up with equations  
stretched tight,  
that's legging number one.  
And Constantinople, where a warrior  
perishes in flames,  
that's legging number two, and that works too.  
You see I can stride  
back and forth  
across the centuries.  
My leggings fit tight.  
Room, friends, to roam!

I hear the call of great capital cities:  
The great gods of sound  
shake the plates of Earth  
and heap up the dust of humanity,  
the dust of the family of man,  
humbled by each foundation stone,  
into huge capital cities,

into lakes of standing waves,  
burial mounds of thronging thousands.  
We breathe like a wind upon you,  
we whistle, our breath moves,  
we blow blizzards of nations,  
we cause waves, we bring ripples and waves,  
A measured groundswell that moves  
across the smooth face of centuries!  
We bring you war  
and the downfall of empires.  
We are the wild sounds!  
We are wild wild horses:  
Tame us.  
We will carry you off  
to other worlds,  
faithful to the wild  
rider  
of Sound.  
Trumpet the charge, humanity!  
Round up the herd of wild horses!  
Saddle and bridle the Cavalry of Sound!

*(Exit Zangezi.)*

## PLANE TWENTY: SORROW AND LAUGHTER

*(The mountains are empty. A sudden goat leap, and Laughter appears on the platform, leading Sorrow by the hand. Laughter is a heavy man, hatless, wearing a white shirt and an earring in one ear. His black trousers have one leg blue, the other gold. He has jolly, fleshy eyes. Sorrow is dressed completely in white; only her hat is black, with a broad low brim.)*

*Sorrow* Call me Sorrow. I know the headstone of  
heartaches, as sadness knows a princess.  
All my life is spent in longing—  
Wind, come tear my braids to tatters!  
I scratch my body with my nails,  
I squeeze my head between my hands.

Yet swallows sing sweetly of places  
where longing no longer exists.  
Sadness, universal sadness,  
fills me, like a reservoir in floodtime.  
I praise it with the curse of a woman  
deprived of a crust of bread.  
Then why do you, eyes of the dead,  
seem awash with the wings of your need?  
I flap like a fish in their fish trap,  
a mermaid of otherworld seas.

*Laughter* Witloose in the hills of reason,  
chamois-light and sure of foot,  
that's me. A happy heavy person.  
I believe in all the me there is.  
I wend my way like a walrus,  
lurching, making my dark flip-flop.  
My laughter blossoms like the bright  
steel rainbow of a knife.  
I put my hard hands on my hips  
and make my single earring jingle.  
With the logs of laughter's woodpiles  
I stoke up my sky-blue brain.  
With a wild ha-ha I let you know  
there's someone hiding behind this curtain.  
I loosen the pinching shoes of reason  
and hold out the old glad hand.  
You raise your arms like drain pipes  
toward heaven's eyes,  
and suck the rain of nighttime skies.  
But I'm not like you; I'm crazy.  
I'm a devil with fat-filled eyes.  
Burn up like the fires of heathen temples,  
burn like candles in chapels of sadness!  
Feel the laugh-fat here, on the back of my neck—  
Your arms have embraced it,  
your kisses have tasted it.  
I am the attic of a well-built roof,  
dry whatever the weather.

And you—you always see the deathsman, about  
to cut away your soul with knives.  
You are tied to a wheel like a saint,  
the torture chamber breaks you.  
You fence yourself off from the fun-fair  
as a comma sequesters a phrase.  
I draw out the curve of a smile  
as we stand here together.  
You twist on the cobweb of pain  
as I hand you a flower.  
We are two mistakes—one large, one small—  
in the meadows of a nighttime smile.  
I am Laughter, lightning rod  
for universal anger.  
You are a starry reservoir, our lady  
of universal sadness.  
You always make me laugh at fate:  
the more you cry,  
The brighter in the sky  
shines the universal finger  
of heaven, like a holy joke.  
Your soul is a heavy carpet  
where the feet of the stars feel at home.  
Yesterday I snatched away from heaven  
a collection of cheap jokes.  
You embrace the knees of universal sorrow  
and you weep, while I start fights,  
I fuss and argue, play the wise-ass,  
and it ain't easy. Even a clown  
has his work cut out for him.  
But people always look away  
from your otherworldly eyes.  
And if I get greasepaint in my mouth,  
that doesn't mean I like the taste.  
And still you let me keep  
your quiet kisses. You bring me love.  
You are drawn to me forever,  
I am a healing presence in your land.  
Like stalks of wheat in summer fields

you bend beneath your tender guilty burden.  
But I laugh my greasy laugh,  
laugh at my face and laugh at my fate,  
when all in one moment you become my darling,  
my obedient servant to command.

*Old Man* These brand new rubles for the latter day  
are slick—but the eye of God sees through 'em.  
I'll put 'em in the pockets of my nighttime pants  
just like the taxman's jingling coffin.  
Two hills in time are farther apart  
than your eyes and the back of your head.  
I talk all wrong, I talk awry,  
and these graves never knew any better.  
Precision's watchdog, I bring  
bookkeeping systems to swear words.  
There's Fortune's fools, and there's those  
who live high off the hog—  
proud men and gun-men,  
prophets and con-men.  
It's all one game of leap, frog:  
it's the number game, with cut-off dates  
in time. See my scissors? Hear their sinister click?  
Watch, I'll cut his breath with deadly nightshade  
and prune the wild babble of Laughter.  
I move among humans, passing out shares  
in graveyards. I send them envious funeral wreaths.  
And the man who sweats on his deathbed  
cannot take his eyes from mine.  
So carry on, Laughter! And Sorrow,  
continue, that's my good mouse!  
While I put on this skull and white armor  
and hang like a bogeyman over the house.  
I'll shake the dry bones of my arm  
like a death rattle right in your face!  
Oh, if only the curtain would rise  
again, only once, in the distance.  
And those that drown in Kitezh-town  
will sleep in the dark beneath Sorrow's eyelids.

Run, children, run!  
What happens in life we dare not dream.

*Laughter* I'm Laughter, I'm a lightning rod  
wherever thunder threatens.  
Sorrow, you're the reservoir  
into which all ancient waters flow.  
And the thunderstorm flies to its finish  
like the arrogant course of the corsair.  
I have always seen the truth  
in Sorrow's eyes, even drowned in mire.  
I am the word's wild highwayman—  
my words are the cudgel of the Volga!  
But the faucets of your sadness  
wash my hands in good behavior.

*Sorrow* Subtle gloom of evening!  
I feel the souls of hundreds here inside me.  
I am uncanny, and that makes you sad.  
Nets of tears tangle my eyelashes.  
I dance like Kshesinskaia before the grave,  
I sit here wordless, locked in thought,  
like Pototska in the castle of Girei.  
But I was a child once and loved sweet things,  
and delicate finches, those happy birds!  
They please the eye of the passerby.  
Bringers of berry-throated springtime,  
like dark red flowers  
budding on winter's wet, black bough.  
But it's no use. Life is a desert, and you  
can never fill this hollow up with life,  
or tear the headstone from your grave.  
One thing alone I see, always: the skull  
that grins beneath your grinning face,  
the hopeful, hankering worm that waits  
to make his dinner on your muscular thigh.  
My eye always brims  
with black tears,  
as a blue butterfly winks  
on a black stone.

*Laughter* What if our wills and our tongues  
and talk were one! Why not?  
When Laughter finally leaves,  
everyone grieves!  
A do-nothing day, an indolent hour!  
You are flint, and I am fire!  
But I must take old Laughter to the marketplace.  
Now, you happy crowd of spectators,  
you are about to witness in single combat  
the duel of the swordblade and the skull.  
Off with these clothes! Off with this shirt!  
The tortoise takes to the skull road, the race has begun!  
Tear this shirt, bare my shoulder—  
that steel hairline held in a hand  
threatens me like a swordblade, a wordblade,  
a voice from an ancient burial mound.  
Move your braid the way it always moves  
like waves of rich black earth.  
It's curve is a crescent moon of copper  
aimed at my heart.  
The shirt billows broad and wide  
and my muscles move freely.  
It is time for the homespun of serfdom  
to stop its eternal complaining.  
Like a born fighter, I blaze bold  
and hassle your sword from its scabbard.  
Cling upon clang, like the scream of a wren  
it cleaves the fish scale clean.  
Time the skull-man, odd and even!  
Now these iron lightning bolts  
suddenly bend and begin to oppose me!  
Strait is the gate, and the path above the abyss!  
Upon the snowfield of your shirtfront  
a scarlet hedgerose starts to grow.  
I am the marker of my own full stop.  
We are all the perpetrators of our lives.  
Begin then, begin! Slash away!  
What we count is what counts, not what we say!  
Remember the lightfoot month of May!

The choice we make will win the day!  
Let fist hold fast  
in the guard of a sword,  
in the heavy mesh of metal chain.  
A hundred biting bees attack  
and an accurate riposte beats them back—  
no one can even count their number.  
Wilder and higher,  
like sparks from a fire,  
like flames from a pyre!  
The movement of Time undoes us all.  
Oh, what a fall!

*(Laughter falls dead, clutching the red foam on his side.)*

## PLANE TWENTY-ONE: EPILOGUE— A CHEERFUL CAFÉ

*(Two people reading a newspaper.)*

What's this? Zangezi is dead!  
Not only that, but he did it himself, with a razor!  
What terrible news!  
What a sad story!  
All he left was a little note that said:  
"Razor, cut my throat!"  
A lotus flower of shining steel opened its petals,  
pushed through the water of his life,  
and now he's dead.  
The motive seems to have been the destruction  
of all his manuscripts by fiendish  
villains with big broad chins  
and lips that went smack-smack, chomp-chomp.

*(Zangezi enters.)*

*Zangezi* Zangezi lives!  
It was all just a simpleminded joke!

[1920–1922: T 473]



## Notes

### SELF-STATEMENT

Khlebnikov composed this *apologia pro litteris suis* as a preface to his Collected Works, which were to have been published in 1919 by a loose confederation of Moscow-based futurists and formalists headed by Vladimir Mayakovsky. Plans for the edition were abandoned for want of funds, but its various components survived, including a long introduction by Roman Jakobson that was published two years later as a separate book, *The New Russian Poetry: Approaches to Khlebnikov* (Prague, 1921). The neological title of the preface, “Svoiasi,” is based on the adverb *vosvoiasi*, literally “to one’s home.” It is Jakobson’s invention, but so appropriately Khlebnikovian in tone that it has consistently been reproduced as the official title of the piece.

*leuna*: A Polabian word meaning “moon.”

*Oroches*: A branch of the Tungus, a people of Mongolian descent who occupy the Amur River basin in eastern Siberia. Their mythology figures in several of Khlebnikov’s works, among them “Okó” and the first section of *Otter’s Children*.

*Egyptian Nights*: An unfinished story by Alexander Pushkin.

“*Nymph and Gnome*,” “*Crimea*,” “*The Grasshopper*,” “*Incantation by Laughter*,” “BO-BEH-O-BEE,” “*Turnaturn*”: Lyrics and narrative poems by Khlebnikov.

*Chin zvan mechem navznich*: In Cyrillic the line forms an almost perfect palindrome. Roughly translated, it means “Rank is called by sword backwards.” The poem from which Khlebnikov extracts this line consists entirely of palindromes.

*Pal, a norov khud i dukh vorona lap*: A second palindrome from the same poem, meaning “He fell, but foul is the custom and the spirit of the raven’s feet.”

*Zoo*: An early version of this poem is translated in *The King of Time* under the title “O Garden of Animals!”

### A SINNER’S SEDUCTION

This is Khlebnikov’s first published work, probably only a fragment—the original manuscript has not survived. The two main players in this proto-Slavic pastoral are Iastliud and Iastmir (here translated “Manvour” and “Worldevour”), birds of prey whose names are based on the Russian word for hawk,

*iastreb*. In the spirit of folk etymology Khlebnikov breaks the word down into two components, *iast-* and *-reb*, the first of which coincides with a verbal root meaning “to eat” (*est*) and the second with the object of the verb (cf. “maneater” or “bloodsucker” in English). The poet replaces the “meaningless” object *-reb* with either *mir* (world) or *liud* (folk, people). His analysis of *iastreb*, curiously enough, coincides with one of several proposed by etymologists and gives some idea of his profound sensitivity to language in its historical dimension.

## THE I-SINGER OF UNIVERSONG

Khlebnikov carefully brings together demigods of his own fancy and others drawn from Russian folklore, such as river mermaids and forest sprites. They are “related” linguistically, in that Khlebnikov uses the names of these creatures as linguistic models in naming his own pantheon.

*Belun*: A hearth god in Slavic folklore whose name is based on the word for “white” (*belyi*): he has a white beard, wears a white robe, and carries a white cane.

*Gorodetsky*: Sergei Gorodetsky (1884–1967) was Khlebnikov’s contemporary, a poet whose early verse, written in an ersatz folk style, made him very popular in the 1910s. Khlebnikov was particularly fond of the poet’s first collection, *Spring Crop (Iar)*, a veritable textbook of Slavic pseudo-mythology.

*Venger*: The Russian is *Meshchei*, a play on the name of Koshchei (or Kashchei) the Immortal, a fearsome figure from Russian fairy tales whose name is associated etymologically with the word for bones (*kosti*). Khlebnikov follows up on the folk etymology by substituting *mest’* (vengeance) for *kost’* in the first syllable.

## HOODER

The title plays on the ambiguity of the Russian *khovun*, a neologism based on the verbal root *khov-*, “to hide, secret, cover, bury,” and the suffix *-un*, which indicates instrument or agency (cf. the archaic meaning of “hoodwink”: to cover, conceal). Hooder is a literary nomad who reappears in a number of early experimental pieces, among them “A Schoolgirl’s Story” and the play *Snowwhite*.

The ellipsis near the conclusion of the piece represents a break in the printed versions where the editors probably could not decipher Khlebnikov’s handwriting. The location of the manuscript is unknown.

## A SCHOOLGIRL’S STORY

*Bekhterev and Lossky*: V. M. Bekhterev (1857–1927) was a professor of medicine at Kazan University and an expert in the field of neuropathology and psychopathology. At the time Khlebnikov wrote this piece, the idealist philosopher N. O. Lossky (1870–1965) was best known for his *Basic Principles of Psychology*

from the *Viewpoint of Voluntarism and The Foundation of Intuitivism* and for his translations of German philosophical works.

*oprishniki*: Members of Ivan the Terrible's private army who terrorized the people during the latter part of his reign.

## YOUNGMAN MECROCOSM

The Russian title of this piece is "Iunosha ia-mir," literally "The Youth I-World." "Mecrocosm" plays neologically on the odd Russian compound "ia-mir."

## EASTER DAY

The story is written in imitation of Nikolai Gogol's early romantic stories, which in turn borrow heavily from Ukrainian folk tales and customs and are infused with the local color of that region. Khlebnikov deliberately sprinkles his narrative with Ukrainianisms to give it the same ethnic cast. The meaning of most of them is self-evident from the context.

*khustka*: Scarf (Ukrainian).

*Igor and Yaroslavna*: Characters from Russia's oldest folk epic, *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*, dating from the twelfth century.

*A, tse take*: "So that's how it is?"

*I ne znaem tse take*: "And we don't know—so that's it?"

*Kautsky*: Karl Kautsky (1854–1938) was a leading German economist and historian, an important figure in the Social Democratic movement.

## OKÓ

*Oroches*: See notes to "Self-Statement." The theme of incest that occurs in Oroch mythology and folklore probably came to Khlebnikov's attention, as Baran has indicated, through V. P. Margaritov's book, *On the Oroches of the Imperial Harbor* (St. Petersburg, 1888).

*okó*: The word means "breast" in the language of the Oroches.

## "LUBNY IS A STRANGE, GODFORSAKEN TOWN"

Lubny, a small Ukrainian town lying between Kiev and Poltava, was the home of Khlebnikov's family for several months in 1909 and 1910. The poet was in Petersburg at the time, but probably visited Lubny on one or more occasions.

## "KOLYA WAS A HANDSOME BOY"

Kolya is Khlebnikov's cousin, Nikolai Riabchevsky. The two were about the same age and spent a good deal of time together when Khlebnikov was living with the Riabchevsky family in Kazan and later in Kiev and Odessa.

“*The Ant and the Grasshopper*”: The sailor would have been reciting Aesop’s fable as paraphrased in verse by Russia’s preeminent fabulist, Ivan Krylov.

## MOUNTAIN PEOPLE

The story was initially titled “Russian Maidens” and, like “Easter Day,” is a stylization in the spirit of Gogol’s early tales.

The ethos of the story is that of the Russian Old Believers, Orthodox Christians who broke away from the established church in the seventeenth century, refusing to accept the liturgical reforms of Patriarch Nikon. They were severely persecuted by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities, and many fled to the peripheries of the Muscovite state, including the Carpathian mountains, where this tale is set. Isolated more or less from the outside world, they continued to maintain a style of life and belief characteristic of their forebears. To the intelligentsia of the twentieth century they represented Russian culture in its purest form, uncontaminated by Western influences.

In describing the mountainous landscape Khlebnikov chooses as vehicles for his metaphors the Old Believers’ traditional way of dressing: the snow on the mountains resembles the white scarves that Old Believer women are required to wear, and the ravines are like “old men in poddyovkas,” traditional black or dark blue caftans. The other topical references are designed in like measure to project a quintessentially Russian ethos.

*Kuchum*: A sixteenth-century Siberian khan who fought vigorously but in vain against the colonization of his territory by Cossack forces loyal to Ivan the Terrible.

*Ostranitsa*: A Russian Cossack chieftain who waged war against the Poles in the seventeenth century.

*Grünwald*: Site of a major battle in 1410 between the joint forces of Poland and Lithuania, on the one hand, and the Teutonic knights on the other. It resulted in a major victory for the Slavic forces and the elimination of the Teutons as a threat to both Poland and Russia.

*Kosovo*: Balkan battleground where Serbian forces were routed by the Turks in 1389.

*Upravda*: According to a legend promoted by the Slavs of the Balkan peninsula, the Byzantine emperor Justinian was of Slavic origin and his given name was Upravda.

*Kulikovo*: Site of the first major victory of the Russians against their Mongol overlords in 1380.

*Legin*: Boy, lad (Ukrainian).

## A HEART OF STEEL

Khlebnikov published this story under a pseudonym in *Slavianin*, a journal devoted to propagandizing the pan-Slavic cause. The dialogue borrows heavily from the Montenegrin dialect of Serbo-Croatian, which Khlebnikov russified to make it more or less comprehensible to his readers. He did not himself know

the language, but borrowed heavily from ethnographic materials contained in P. A. Rovinsky's *Montenegro in the Past and Present* (St. Petersburg, 1888–1909).

## NIKOLAI

The story is at least partly autobiographical—the hypothetical photograph of Nikolai that Khlebnikov refers to offhandedly has been preserved among the poet's papers. The setting of Nikolai's exploits is the area around the mouth of the Volga River.

*Melnikov*: Andrei Melnikov-Pechersky was a nineteenth-century novelist and essayist. He served as a government functionary charged with investigating religious dissidence in imperial Russia, and composed a number of studies on the Old Believers. The two novels mentioned by Khlebnikov both deal with the life of the Old Believers along the eastern reaches of the Volga, presenting them for the most part in a positive light.

*Perun*: The ancient Slavic god of thunder.

## USA-GALI

As his name suggests, Usa-Gali is non-Russian. At the close of the story the narrator picks up his native Turkic dialect, referring to the infidel Russians as “Uruss.”

## KA

Two cultural matrices, one historical and the other mythological, provide the story with its basic premises. The former is the Egypt of Amenhotpe IV in the fourteenth century B.C. During his eighteen-year reign he attempted to replace polytheism with the worship of Aton, the sun god, changing his own name to Akhnaton (also Ikhhnaton), literally “the sun's glory,” to symbolize this radical shift toward monotheism. Khlebnikov regarded the event as one of singular importance in man's spiritual quest. The mythological matrix is the ancient Egyptian belief in the Ka, that part of a person's essence which represents his life force, survives his physical existence, and determines his fate. Khlebnikov's Ka provides him with the medium for traveling through time and space while remaining simultaneously within his own temporal and spatial dimensions.

*days of White Kathay*: A period corresponding to the age of the future Buddha, Maitreya, in Buddhist mythology. He is associated with Mitra, the sun god of the ancient Persians.

*Andrée's air balloon*: S. A. Andrée (1854–1897) was a Swiss explorer who perished when his balloon went down during an Arctic expedition.

*Masr*: The ancient Hebrew designation for Egypt.

*ASTSU*: This acronym has not yet been fully deciphered. Elsewhere Khlebnikov's uses it in reference to the vision of a utopian state uniting the cultures of Asia and Europe.

*Ay, Shurura, Nafertiti*: Ay was the chief priest of the Sun God Aton, Shurura was Amenhotep's swordbearer, and Nafertiti his wife.

*Noferkheperura*: Another name for Amenhotep/Akhnaton.

*Sukh, Mnevis, Bennu*: Egyptian gods depicted in the form of a snake, a black bull, and a heron respectively.

*Akbar*: Akbar the Great (1548–1605), greatest of the Mogul emperors of India, who succeeded in imposing peace and order on the diverse nations over which he ruled.

*Asoka*: An Indian ruler of the third century B.C. who played a major role in promoting Buddhism on the Indian subcontinent; he was renowned for the justness of his rule and his defense of equality.

*one artist*: Pavel Filonov (1883–1941), a major figure in the Russian avant-garde who illustrated Khlebnikov's works. The painting referred to is probably Filonov's *Feast of Kings*.

*Vijaya*: A legendary Indian prince who became the first king of Ceylon in the fifth century B.C.

*al-Masih al Dajjal*: In Islamic eschatology, a false messiah, equivalent to the Antichrist, who is to appear at the end of time.

*Fatima Menneda*: The Persian princess who, according to legend, was drowned by the Russian peasant rebel, Stenka Razin.

*Layla*: The tragic heroine of the Persian poet Nizami's "Layla and Majnun," which later in the story Khlebnikov calls "the greatest story of the Aramaic peoples."

*Exclamation mark, question mark, three dots*: An instance of parodic self-quotation. Khlebnikov once recited a poem consisting exclusively of punctuation marks at a gathering of the Acmeist Poetry Workshop in early 1914.

*Izanagi*: One of a pair of gods in Japanese mythology responsible for the creation of the earth and the lesser gods.

*Tamara and Gudal*: Figures from the poem "The Demon" by the Russian romantic poet Mikhail Lermontov.

*harp of blood*: An oblique reference to the anonymous cycle of ancient Egyptian liturgical songs associated with the cult of the dead.

*incidence of co's*: Coincidences. In the Russian Khlebnikov breaks up the word *sovpadenie* (coincidence) into two parts and reverses the order, resulting in the phrase "padenie sov" (owl-fall).

*Roc bird*: A gigantic bird encountered in *The Thousand and One Nights*, capable of carrying off elephants.

*Hanno*: Carthaginian statesman, fleet commander and opponent of Hannibal.

*The White One*: Khlebnikov is referring here to Layla.

*"Uthlofan, lauftings"*: A quotation from one of Khlebnikov's earliest and most notorious poems, "Incantation by Laughter" (see *The King of Time*, p. 20).

*Tutu, Aziri, Shurura*: Members of Amenhotep's entourage.

*Ankhsenpaaton*: Amenhotep's daughter.

*Hut Aton*: The name given by Amenhotpe to his capital city, literally “Horizon of the Sun.”

*shawabty*: A small statue that stands in for the deceased in the world beyond the grave.

*rometu*: People.

*Hathor*: Egyptian goddess of the heavens, who gave birth to the sun god.

*Sobek*: Egyptian god of water and flood, usually depicted with a crocodile head.

*rabisu*: Deputy.

*The sky is clear . . . sorrow*: Garbled citations from Pushkin’s poems “Poltava” and “The Singer.”

*On the log wall hang guns (Chekhov)*: Satiric reference to Chekhov’s dictum that a gun set on stage in the first act of a play should go off before the curtain falls.

*To the frozen path between stars*: A poem written earlier by Khlebnikov commemorating the death of a fellow poet, V. Ignatiev, who slit his throat with a razor.

*Didova Khata*: A village in the territory occupied by the ancient Scythians.

## NOTES FROM THE PAST

Largely autobiographical in nature, the “Notes” are closely related in tone and substance to a series of sketches, organized in the form of a diary, which Khlebnikov composed in 1915–16. He was living in Petrograd and vacationing at the Finnish resort town of Kuokkala (now the Soviet Repino).

*Polubotok*: Pavel Leontevich Polubotok was a Belorussian Cossack colonel who opposed attempts by Peter the Great to curtail Belorussian political autonomy; he was imprisoned and died in captivity (1724).

*Stenka Razin*: The famous peasant rebel of the late seventeenth century who is a central figure in Khlebnikov’s mythopoeic system.

*Evreinov*: Nikolai Evreinov (1879–1953) was a playwright and colleague of the poet.

*Vera B.*: Vera Budberg, daughter of Baron and Baroness Alexander Budberg, to whom Khlebnikov was introduced by a common friend, Mikhail Matiushin, and with whom he fell in love.

## “I WENT TO ASOKA”

*Asoka, Layla*: See notes to “Ka.”

## “WE CLIMBED ABOARD”

Here, as in many other works, Khlebnikov uses the mathematical symbol for imaginary numbers  $\sqrt{-1}$  as a symbol for any instrument or mode of percep-

tion that is “beyondsensual,” permitting one to transcend the limitations that space and time place on the human psyche.

*Tracksubplane*: The Russian neologism is *khodnyrlyot*, a compound based on the roots of three verbs meaning “to walk” (*khod-*), “to dive” (*nyr-*), and “to fly” (*let-*).

## DREAM

The story defines its own temporal context quite precisely. The exhibition described by the poet would have been organized in the first half of 1915, during the Gallipoli campaign, when the Allies attempted unsuccessfully to wrest the Dardanelles from Turkish control. This accounts for the headline on the newspaper that the poet uses to cover the Turkish nude, and also his dream of battles being fought in the Dardanelles.

*ahankara*: In Buddhist philosophy “the sense of a separate self or personality; the ‘I am I’ feeling” (G. A. Gaskell, *Dictionary of Scripture and Myth*, New York, 1988).

*Tenedos*: Aegean island under Turkish sovereignty at the mouth of the Dardanelles.

## “ONCE AGAIN I FOLLOWED THE YELLOW PATHS”

Written after the opening of hostilities between Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the work reflects Khlebnikov’s growing revulsion to war.

*zipun*: The traditional, coarsely woven outer dress of peasants, similar to a caftan.

## THE SCYTHIAN HEADDRESS

The story contains many of the motifs introduced in “Ka,” including the central figure of the poet’s double leading him across the barriers of time and space. The text is conjectural and defective. Some passages were restored on the basis of careless transcriptions of manuscripts now lost; lacunas are marked by [ . . . ].

*“My children,” said the priest*: The passage is modeled on the dialogue between an Egyptian priest and Solon in Plato’s *Timaues*.

*Zaporozhian Cossacks*: Concentrated in the southeast Ukraine, the Zaporozhian Cossacks engaged in occasional piracy along the Black Sea coast, bringing back both goods and women.

*Numbergod*: The god’s name in Russian is a neologism, “Chislobog,” modeled on the name of Stribog, a genuine god in the Russian pantheon whose name also appears in the story. Khlebnikov’s Numbergod is one of the forms assumed by his Ka.

*Lada*: Goddess of fertility and spring growth in the ancient Slavic pantheon.

*Podaga*: Ancient Slavic deity among the Baltic Slavs. Her image here borrows much from the description of Vera Budberg in “Notes from the Past.”



*The King of Time*: Elsewhere Khlebnikov applies the term to his own person; he was officially “elected” king of time by his fellow poets and artists during a gathering in Petrograd in December 1915.

### “DOES A STORY HAVE TO START WITH CHILDHOOD?”

In his autobiographical tale Khlebnikov personalizes the tale of the Zaporozhian Cossacks described in “The Scythian Headdress.” He took considerable pride in the fact that his maternal ancestors were part Cossack.

*my people . . . once sailed up to Constantinople*: An allusion to the raid on Constantinople by the legendary Prince Oleg of Kiev in 907. His most original military maneuver was to set his ships on wheels and approach the city walls overland.

*the great steppe*: The steppe land around Astrakhan and the Caspian Sea where Khlebnikov was born and raised. He refers to it as a “Chinese sea” because it was the ancient homeland of the Kalmyks, a Mongolian Buddhist people.

*Min*: See notes to *Zangezi*, Plane Eighteen (*Mimin’s monument*).

*hural*: A Buddhist temple or monastery.

### YASIR

Khlebnikov borrowed the plot of this story from A. N. Shtylko’s ethnographic studies of the Astrakhan region. The story is set in the late seventeenth century, when Astrakhan and its environs were already under Russian sovereignty. As a port city and frontier town, it was cosmopolitan in the extreme: Khlebnikov speaks of it elsewhere as a meeting point of three worlds (Aryan, Indian, and Caspian) and three religions (Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity).

*Yasir*: The word means “slave” in Arabic.

*Kulaly*: A long and narrow, barren island situated in the northeastern Caspian. The only industry it has traditionally supported is seal hunting.

*budarka*: A dugout.

*the city that resounded . . . with the fame of Stenka Razin*: The city of Astrakhan; see notes to “Razin: Two Trinities.”

*Kutum*: One of the Volga River outlets near Astrakhan.

*chemak*: An oxcart driver, in particular one responsible for the transportation of fish and salt.

*zipun*: A peasant caftan.

*The name of Razin . . .*: The copy-text is defective at this point; the concluding phrase has been lost.

*Sivaji*: Sivaji (1627–1680) was a native Indian chieftain of the Maratha people. Intensely devoted to Hinduism, he led a successful rebellion against the Islamic Mogul ruler, Aurangzeb. Nanak (1469–1539) was the founder of the Sikh movement, which opposed the caste system and stressed the equality of all men. The poet Kabir (1440–1518) introduced many of the same ideas in his verse. Teg

Bahadur was ninth in the line of gurus acknowledged by the Sikhs; he was executed by Aurangzeb in 1675. “Govind” refers either to Hargovind, the sixth head of the sect (1606–1645), or to Govind Singh, the last of the original ten Sikh gurus.

*Chiang sian-chun*: Leader of a peasant rebellion in China that lasted from 1628 to 1645.

*Galagalayam*: Probably Yama, the first to die and king of the dead in Hindu mythology.

*burka*: A Caucasian felt cloak.

*streltsy*: Part of the standing army of the Muscovite state. The Zazharsky regiment was garrisoned in Astrakhan. Stenka Razin conquered the city in 1670 with their connivance.

*dukhan*: An inn.

*rusalka*: A river mermaid in Russia folklore.

*rites of Iarilo or Lalia*: Semipagan fertility rites associated with these gods in the Slavic pantheon.

*reminders that*: A gap in the manuscript here.

*Tat Savitur*: The Brahman is reciting a hymn to the sun god, Savitur, from the Rig Veda.

## OCTOBER ON THE NEVA

The story was commissioned by S. F. Budantsev, editor of the Astrakhan newspaper *Krasnyi voïn*, to commemorate the first anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution. It is almost wholly autobiographical, describing Khlebnikov’s arrival in Petrograd after his discharge from the imperial army and his adventures during the coup that brought about the downfall of Kerensky and his Provisional Government.

*We alone . . .*: Khlebnikov is quoting from a manifesto he had penned in April 1917, announcing the establishment of the Government of Planet Earth.

*Evreinov, Zenkevich*, etc.: Here and in other passages Khlebnikov lists the principal representatives of the Russian avant-garde in painting, literature, and literary criticism whom he had appointed “Presidents of Planet Earth,” the governing board of his utopian society.

*Arts Festival on May 25th*: The festival was held in honor of the publication of *Let’s Grab Freedom!*, a single-issue newspaper containing among other works the antiwar poem that Khlebnikov cites here (“Yesterday I whispered”). The poem was later incorporated into the supersaga *War in a Mousetrap*.

*Petrovsky*: Dmitry Petrovsky (1892–1955), a futurist poet particularly close to Khlebnikov during the revolutionary period. He is described at considerable length in the tale “The Scarlet Saber.”

*Alexandra Fyodorovna Kerenskaia*: Khlebnikov deliberately feminizes Kerensky’s name as a sign of his contempt.

*Qurrat al-Ain*: A disciple of Mirza Ali Mohammed Bab, founder of the Bahai faith, who was martyred for her beliefs in 1852 by the shah of Iran, Nasir .ad-Din.

*lines of relatives by Lomonosov Park:* The park lies in front of Moscow University; the bodies of those who had been killed during the street fighting in Moscow were brought to the university's morgue.

## THE HUNT

Khlebnikov wrote this fable at the request of a psychiatrist, Dr. V. Ia. Anfimov, while undergoing observation at a hospital outside Kharkov. He hoped to be declared unfit for mobilization by the White forces occupying the city at the time.

## THE SCARLET SABER

The setting of the story is an estate belonging to the Siniakov family outside Kharkov. It served as a kind of retreat for the futurists, and Khlebnikov visited the estate several times between 1917 and 1920. Its principal occupants were the Siniakov sisters, three of whom make their appearance in the story. Here Khlebnikov describes a visit by "P" (Dmitry Petrovsky—see notes to "October on the Neva") in the spring of 1920. The background is the Civil War, which had been fought with particular ferocity and cruelty in the Kharkov area and was only now drawing to a close.

*zipun:* A peasant caftan.

*pani:* Girls, ladies. Here and elsewhere Petrovsky uses words and expressions that bespeak his Ukrainian background.

*khloptsi:* Boys, guys.

*zhupan:* A kind of jerkin worn in the western Ukraine.

*Well, hello there, Miss Death!:* Petrovsky is alluding to Khlebnikov's play *Miss Death Makes a Mistake*.

*esaul:* A Cossack captain.

*Petliura's men:* Symon Petliura (1877–1926), a Ukrainian Social Democrat who assumed leadership of the anti-Bolshevik Ukrainian nationalist movement after the revolution.

*Spartacists:* Members of the revolutionary Spartacist League within the German Social Democratic Party.

*burka:* A Caucasian felt cloak.

*sermiaga:* A coarsely woven caftan.

## "WHOSE IDEA WAS IT ANYWAY?"

The premise underlying this fragment is one of Khlebnikov's own utopian proposals, to "decorate Mount Blanc with the head of Hiawatha . . . The fundamental rule for these monuments is to be as follows: the individual's birthplace and his monument must be at opposite poles of the earth" (*Letters and Theoretical Writings*, p. 359).

## RAZIN: TWO TRINITIES

This unfinished story represents the culmination of Khlebnikov's preoccupation with Stenka Razin, the seventeenth-century Don Cossack who led a peasant rebellion against Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich and who was immortalized in folk song and legend for his exploits. Razin's life serves as a mirror for the narrator's. In his early youth Razin made a pilgrimage to the Solovets Monastery in the far north, a focal point of Old Believer resistance to the reforms imposed by Tsar Alexei and Patriarch Nikon. Initially engaging in raw brigandage up and down the Volga and along the Caspian coast, he eventually led a rebellion that encompassed the entire river basin from the Kalmyk steppe to Saratov. In the end he was betrayed, brought to Moscow, and publicly executed in 1671.

In the Russian Orthodox tradition the feasts of Pentecost and of the Holy Trinity are not distinguished (they are a week apart in the Western churches). The "two Trinities" of the title refers to the Pentecost Sundays of 1905 and 1921: on the first Khlebnikov was in the Ural Mountains on an ornithological expedition (*Letters and Theoretical Writings*, p. 168), and on the second he was in the Persian village of Khalkhal. The movement from the northern to the southern Trinity mirrors in reverse the south-to-north orientation of Razin's life, providing Khlebnikov with the basic matrix of his story.

*Zhiguli Gates*: The easternmost reaches of the Volga River, before it winds south toward the Caspian Sea.

*brodni, porshi*: Types of footgear for climbers.

*krosbni*: Bast baskets strapped to one's back.

## THE WILLOW TWIG

Palm Sunday is referred to as Willow Sunday in the Russian Orthodox Church. On that day willow branches are brought to church, blessed, and distributed to believers. In 1922, the year of composition, Willow Sunday fell on April 9. Like "Razin: Two Trinities," this piece is essentially autobiographical, reflecting the poet's experiences after he returned to Moscow at the end of 1921.

*Zheleznovodsk*: Before returning to Moscow, Khlebnikov had spent several weeks in the Caucasus resort towns of Zheleznovodsk, Kislovodsk, and Piatigorsk.

*Kuchuk-khan*: Aga-Mirza Kuchuk-khan (1880–1921) was the leader of an uprising against the shah of Iran in the northern Iranian province of Gilan. The rebellion provided the necessary occasion for the new Soviet republic to send troops in support of the indigenous revolutionary forces; Khlebnikov was a member of this expeditionary force. In September 1921, after the Red Army had returned home, Kuchuk-khan betrayed the revolutionary Gilan leadership; his forces were eventually routed by the shah.

*tuman*: A Persian gold coin.

*Miturich*: The artist Peter Miturich (1887–1956) was a close friend of the poet during the last months of his life. The cheesecake sculpture was a traditional

pyramid of sweet cheese prepared for the Easter meal. On each of the four sides Miturich had inscribed a symbol of faith: the cross, the crescent moon, the Buddha's footprint, and a wreath of twos and threes symbolizing Khlebnikov's Laws of Time.

## SNOWHITE

Khlebnikov thought initially of subtitled the play "A Christmas Tale in Imitation of Ostrovsky." The prototype is Nikolai Ostrovsky's *The Snow Maiden: A Vernal Tale in Four Acts* (1873), a play based on folk motifs and fairy tales, mediated by Rimsky-Korsakov's opera of the same name (1881). Many of the demigods in Khlebnikov's play are of his own invention, and neologisms with a strong folk coloring appear throughout the work.

*Kautsky*: See notes to "Lubny is a strange, godforsaken town."

*Blackshirt vigilantes*: The so-called Black Hundreds were armed, antirevolutionary groups of vigilantes active in Russia immediately after the 1905 revolution. They saw themselves as defenders of national honor and ethnic purity, and Hooder views them in this light as well. These remarks were censored out of the first printed version of the text (NP).

## THE GIRL-GOD

The play is set during the reign of Prince Vladimir (956–1015), the golden age of the Kievan state, and represents Khlebnikov's second major attempt to create a "pre-Western" Slavic ambiance, this time in the context of legend rather than popular folk culture. The title "Girl-God" (*Devii bog* in Russian) is not intended to impute any special femininity in the play's chief protagonist, but to signify the god's sphere of influence—the maidens of the city. The names Khlebnikov assigns to his characters—Gordiata, Dobroslava, Molva, Zorka, Tikha, Bystrava, Strakh, Uzhas—are based on epithets (Proud, of Good Repute, Bright, Silent, Swift, Talkative, Fearful, Terrifying) in the spirit of pre-Christian custom.

*Leuna*: The moon (Polabian).

## THE LITTLE DEVIL

Khlebnikov's vaudeville, as the subtitle indicates, celebrates the birth of the journal *Apollo*. It was founded in 1909 by the art historian and critic Sergei Makovsky and served as an important forum for the symbolists and their successors. Its literary profile was initially defined by Viacheslav Ivanov's Academy of Poets, reorganized in 1909 as the Society of the Lovers of the Poetic Word, whose executive committee included Mikhail Kuzmin, Nikolai Gumilev, Innokenty Annensky, Aleksander Blok, and Makovsky. Khlebnikov was for a time associated with the group, and at least one of his works—"O Garden of Animals!"—was to have been published in *Apollo*. His association with both the academy and the journal was shortlived, however, for he was already being

drawn into the more accommodating world of the cubo-futurists. His vaudeville on the birth of *Apollo* was soon to give way to a full-blown parody in *The Marquise des S*.

*this huge stack of books*: The antagonistic attitude toward academic learning here and throughout the vaudeville is echoed in other works of the period as well, including the narrative poem “Malusha’s Granddaughter.” The Faustian subtext of the play makes the attitude particularly ironic.

*Perun*: The god of thunder in East Slavic mythology.

*okhaben*: A traditional Russian long-sleeved outer garment.

*murmolka*: A traditional Russian fur or velvet hat with a flat top.

*Solovyov*: Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900), an idealist philosopher whose works had a profound impact on the Russian symbolists. In the passage the Devil plays in Russian on the etymology of the name, which is derived from the word for nightingale (*solovei*).

*Princess Dashkova’s house*: The eighteenth-century building that now houses the Russian Academy of Arts in Petersburg. In the speech that follows, the Devil addresses a statue of Hercules that stands in the portico of the academy entrance overlooking the Neva.

*My dear Hercules*: “Hercules” was a common prerevolutionary brand of oatmeal; the brand name is still in use.

*Sphinxes*: As he speaks, the Devil moves away from the Academy of Arts down to the Neva embankment; here he encounters two sphinxes, original statues brought from Egypt in the 1830s.

*Hera*: Her appearance may be motivated by a second statue that stands in the academy portico, that of the goddess Flora. Khlebnikov probably confused the two in bringing the statue to life here.

## THE MARQUISE DES S.

According to Roman Jakobson, Khlebnikov wrote this play in conscious imitation of Alexander Griboedov’s *Woe from Wit*, employing aphoristic verse in an elegant *pièce à clef*. The piece is a parody on the journal *Apollo* (see notes to *The Little Devil*), its staff and contributors. Some of them are directly identified or easily recognized: the Man in Charge is Sergei Makovsky, editor of the journal, and the Poet is Maximilian Voloshin. The editors of *Tsvetnitsa* speculate that the Marquise’s name is associated with that of Huysman’s Des Esseintes in the novel *A Rebours*.

The play is remarkable for its linguistic play, particularly its use of puns. The one that recurs frequently enough to become a genuine motif is *smert’* (death) and *smert’te* (measure, in the imperative form). In its various contexts it underscores the dichotomy between faith and fact, spirit and science. Paronomastically related equivalents (dog/god, do/die, etc.) are used to replace Khlebnikov’s puns.

*a duelist with a heap of cherries in his hand*: An allusion to Pushkin’s tale “The Shot.” The hero’s mortal enemy reveals his nonchalance during a duel by eating cherries as he waits for the hero to fire.

*Lel*: Pseudo-mythological deity held to be the god of love in West Slavic mythology.

*a woman wrapped in sun*: The image recurs in the works of the second generation of Russian symbolists, especially Alexander Blok and Andrei Biely.

*Mayer*: Perhaps the philosopher and publicist A. A. Meier (1874–1939) or the stage director Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874–1940).

*Pugachev*: See notes to *Otter's Children*.

*Perun*: See notes to *The Little Devil*.

## ASPARUH

The name of the hero would be *Asparukh* according to the transliteration system used in this book, but we have rendered it *Asparuh* in order to approximate more closely its sound for English-speaking playreaders.

The plot of the play, as Henryk Baran has indicated, is borrowed from book 4 of Herodotus' *History*, though Khlebnikov has reworked it considerably. In Herodotus the hero is a Scythian king named Scyles, who ruled in the fifth century B.C. Khlebnikov's play is set more than a millennium later. Asparuh, whose name is registered only in Byzantine histories, was leader of the Turkic Bulgars situated in the territory north of the Black Sea between the Dnieper and the Dniester. In the late seventh century they crossed the Danube and, with the Slavic tribes already in the area, laid the foundations of the first Bulgarian kingdom. The name Asparuh means "tamer of horses" in Turkic. Khlebnikov plays on this etymology in the opening scene, where Asparuh destroys his horse; the event foreshadows his own death at the end of the play.

*Borysthenes*: An anachronism; the Greek city, situated at the estuary of the Dnieper, is the same one in which King Scyles had a residence, according to Herodotus, but it no longer existed in Asparuh's day.

## "LAUGHING-EYES"

This dramatic fragment is based on Maurice Maeterlinck's *La Vie des abeilles* (1901). Khlebnikov never finished the play but he did describe the plot in schematic form: "Bee drama. Hive. Females, workers, drones. Life of labor. Appearance of a skull. Self-sacrifice. Immuration. Bee. Killing. Dying" (NP 455).

## MRS. LANEEN

The play, as Nikolai Khardzhiev has pointed out, is a kind of hyperbolization of Maurice Maeterlinck's *Les Aveugles* (The Blind), where the action is confined to the sphere of sound. Here all the senses are represented, but isolated and confined to individual dramatis personae. As Khlebnikov himself asserts in his "Self-Statement," "In *Mrs. Laneen* I wanted to discover the 'infinitesimals' of artistic language."

## BACKWORLDS

In a letter to his futurist colleague and friend Alexei Kruchonykh, Khlebnikov wrote the following about the play: “There is a theory about a single law that embraces all of life (the so-called Kant–La Place mind). If we insert negative values into this expression, then everything begins to flow in reverse: first people die, then they live and are born. First they have grown-up children, then they get married and fall in love. I don’t know whether you share this opinion, but for a Futurian *Backworlds* [*The World in Reverse*] is like an idea suggested by life for someone with a sense of humor, since first of all the frequently comic aspect of the fates can never be understood unless you look at them from the way they end, and secondly, people so far have looked at them only from the way they begin” (*Letters and Theoretical Writings*, p. 74).

## MISS DEATH MAKES A MISTAKE

Vladimir Markov has characterized the play as an anachronism, a symbolist drama written after symbolist drama was out of vogue. Others call it a parody on a number of works, in particular Alexander Blok’s *The Little Fair Booth* and *The Stranger*. The parodic element, however, is ultimately less significant than the central theme, which Khlebnikov describes in his diary as the “victory over death.” The play can be read as an inversion of Pushkin’s *Feast During the Plague*, the work’s most obvious progenitor.

*Miss Death Makes a Mistake* is the only one of Khlebnikov’s plays produced in his lifetime. It was staged in 1917 at a theater in Rostov-on-Don by Vladimir Tatlin, with Khlebnikov himself helping to organize the production.

*Life is the square root of minus one*: See Khlebnikov’s comments on imaginary numbers in “The Scythian Headdress.”

## “A STREET OF THE FUTURE”

This fragment has a good deal in common with the tale “Ka” in its preoccupation with the transmigration of souls. Thematically it also coincides with Khlebnikov’s earliest utopian sketches, in particular “Ourselves and Our Buildings,” where he describes residents of the future dressed in “suits of armor made from black or white linen,” like the protagonists of this play (see *Letters and Theoretical Writings*, p. 348).

*your elegant research*: One’s remark makes it clear that the absent-minded Two is Khlebnikov’s alter ego, indefatigable in his quest for the true Laws of Time.

## THE GODS

The play is the only work by Khlebnikov written in a language that can properly be called nonsensical. A kind of semiosis is guaranteed, however, by the various structures and organizational principles at work. The dramatis personae, deities representing all the world’s major mythologies, lend not only an



ethnic coloration to what they say but also the meaning that may be derived from their specific roles as gods and goddesses. Their speeches, in other words, can be read as aural distillations of what they represent: love (which predominates), death, thunder, wind, and so on. The fact that their “words” are presented in a dramatic, as opposed to narrative, context, is of the utmost importance. As in similar passages in *Zangezi*, the utterances contain italics to indicate the rhythmic stress, and hence the basic intonational curve, of each line. Occasional reversions to conventional language underscore semantic continuity. One senses in these utterances an underground stream of meaning that occasionally springs to the surface of speech. The gods who appear are identified in the notes to *Azia Unbound*.

## OTTER’S CHILDREN

The first of Khlebnikov’s supersagas, *Otter’s Children* is perhaps the least cohesive example of the genre. This may have as much to do with purely textual problems as with the experimental nature of the work. When it was originally printed in 1914, the stanzas and other verse segments were placed in the wrong order. Unfortunately the manuscript has not survived, and any reading must be regarded as provisional.

### *Canvas Panel One*

The entire first part is based on myths of the Oroches (see notes to “Self-Statement”). Khlebnikov had access to a number of contemporary ethnographic studies that provided him with a basic outline of their mythology. In Oroch cosmogony man emerges from the animal world through the good offices of the otter. The first two parts of the panel describe a primal myth that accounts for the emergence of life on earth. A radical time shift takes place between the second part and the third, where Otter’s children, or perhaps more properly Otter’s grandchildren, merge with the modern world, and the mythological past is relegated to the stage.

### *Canvas Panel Two*

*Boscovich*: Ruggiero Boscovich (1711–1787), Croatian-Italian astronomer, mathematician, and specialist in geodesy, figures in this passage because of his research on the nature of atomic structures. His is probably the person identified as a contemporary of Mikhail Lomonosov (1711–1765). The latter, Russia’s preeminent scientist, poet, and scholar of the eighteenth century, also studied the structure of atoms.

“*Andra moi ennepe, Mousa*”: The opening words of the *Odyssey*.

### *Canvas Panel Three*

The material in this section is based on legends and historical tales from V. V. Grigoriev’s *Russia and Asia* (Petersburg, 1876) concerning contacts between the progenitors of the Russians and the Asian population along the western shores

of the Caspian. Prince Igor of Kiev passed through this area in the tenth century.

*Nushanbey*: Ruler of the west Caspian area in the fifth century A.D., from the capital city of Berdaia. The Russians overran this territory in the tenth century.

*river thief*: According to the Arab historian Ibn Faldan, Russian adventurers engaged in piracy along the Caspian and were usually hanged if caught.

*Al-Mas'udi*: A tenth-century Arab historian and traveler.

*He plots his poem*: Khlebnikov is speaking about the twelfth-century Persian poet Yusuf Nizami (1141–1209). The hero, Iskander, is the Persian “recension” of Alexander the Great.

*sails on wagons, ships on wheels*: See notes to “Does a story have to start with childhood?”

*Ibn Faldan recites Iskander-Name*: An anachronism: Nizami’s work was written two centuries after the Arab historian’s death.

*Zorevenda*: In Nizami’s tale, one of Iskander’s military commanders.

*Kental*: In *Iskander-Name* Kental is the leader of the Russian forces. He does not fall, as in Khlebnikov’s version, but is subdued and made to acknowledge the sovereignty of Iskander/Alexander.

*Keremet*: The god who personifies evil in the mythology of various peoples of the lower Volga.

#### *Canvas Panel Four*

The scene shifts radically here to Russia during the reign of Catherine the Great. The scene is an encampment of the Zaporozhian Cossacks in the south-east Ukraine. Khlebnikov drew from a broad variety of sources for the story, including Gogol’s story “Taras Bulba” and a major study of Cossack life by A. Skalkovsky.

*Palivoda*: The Cossack’s name is borrowed from “Taras Bulba.”

*Nechosa and the Old Lady*: “Nechosa” is the name the Cossacks gave to Prince Grigory Potemkin, the leading statesman and favorite of the Old Lady, Catherine the Great.

#### *Canvas Panel Five*

More than the others, this section suffers from various typographical distortions that are difficult to correct in the absence of a holograph. The two sets of ellipses mark breaks where the editors of *Tvoreniiia* suspect some form of textual displacement or distortion. In translating the text, certain subtitles have been rearranged to correspond more logically to the contents of the passages they head.

Khlebnikov originally titled this section “The Titanic,” an obviously appropriate scene for discussing the issue of fate. The ship went down on April 15, 1912, a tragedy that had a profound impact on the poet.

#### *Canvas Panel Six*

Among the more illustrious members of the party that has gathered to discuss the theories of Marx and Darwin are several native Russian souls. They include:

*Sviatoslav*: Prince of Kiev who ruled from 962 to 972. His image in the Russian Primary Chronicle is that of a brave and simple warrior, very much like the idealized image of the Cossack in later Russian history. He was killed in an ambush by the Pechenegs, a Turkic tribe situated on the southern borders of the Kievan state. According to tradition, the leader of the Pechenegs had a drinking cup made out of Sviatoslav's skull.

*Pugachev*: Emilian Pugachev was a Don Cossack who led a rebellion against Catherine in 1773–74.

*Samko*: I. S. Samko was a colonel in the Pereiaslav Cossack regiment during the Ukrainian war of liberation in the seventeenth century. After the Ukraine's declaration of allegiance to Moscow, he succeeded Bogdan Khmel'nitsky as hetman of the Cossacks in 1660, but three years later was accused of treason and executed.

*Volynsky*: A. P. Volynsky (1689–1740) was the first governor of Astrakhan. During the reign of Empress Anne he opposed the influence of the "German party" at court, in particular that of the empress' favorite, Ernst-Johann Biron. As a result he was accused of sedition and executed.

## WAR IN A MOUSETRAP

This supersaga consists of poems composed and published for the most part between 1915 and 1918. Khlebnikov brought them together to form a cycle in 1919, changing and adding lines in the interest of cohesion. He did not live to see it published in its composite form.

1. The image in the opening lines is based on a mundane allusion: a popular brand of shoe polish with the picture of a bear on the can. Khlebnikov transforms the image into the *Ursa minor* (Little Dipper) constellation.

2. *These triangles*: An allusion to the geometrical figures in cubist paintings.

*Bouvet*: A French warship that was sunk by the Germans in 1916, resulting in the death of 600 men. Khlebnikov also mentions the incident in his story "Dream."

3. *Maliavin, Korovin*: F. A. Maliavin (1869–1940) and K. A. Korovin (1861–1939) were painters much admired by Khlebnikov.

*battle by the Kalka*: in 1223 the Kievan state of Rus' suffered its first major defeat at the hands of the Tatars on the Kalka River.

4. Written sometime in April 1916, the poem represents Khlebnikov's response to the news that he was to be drafted for service in the imperial army.

*365 × 317 regular heartbeats a day*: Khlebnikov determined that a typical infantryman would take this number of steps in a twenty-four-hour period; it corresponds, in his early theory of historical cycles, to the number of days that separate events of political and military significance.

*government of twenty-two-year-olds*: An allusion to Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem "A Cloud in Trousers," where he writes, "here I come, / a handsome twenty-two-year-old."

7. "*Last Deer Songs*": Probably an allusion to a book by the artist Pavel Fi-

lonov entitled *Prophesalvos of a Branching Universe*, containing among its illustrations the picture of a deer that caught Khlebnikov's eye.

8. The Nieman River runs between Russia and eastern Prussia. It was one of the earliest theaters of the First World War and the scene of a disastrous defeat for the Russians.

12. In all probability the hero of the poem is the Norwegian explorer, Fridtjof Nansen, whose polar expeditions excited Russia's imagination in these years.

22. *Jan Sobieski*: King of Poland (1674–1696) who led his army to victory over the Turks near Vienna in 1683.

*Minkowski*: Hermann Minkowski (1864–1909) was a German mathematician who first postulated the idea of a four-dimensional universe in which the fourth dimension is time.

25. *Swanland*: In Russian, "Lebediia," the ancient (9th-10th c. A.D.) name given to the southern region of Russia watered by the Dnieper and the Don.

*Horse Kingdom*: The Kalmyk steppes around the Caspian, where Khlebnikov spent his childhood. The Kalmyks were expert horsemen, and it was probably due in part to their influence that Khlebnikov speaks so reverently about horses in his poetry.

## AZIA UNBOUND

The title of the supersaga in Russian is "Azy iz uzy," literally "Ts from chain." It is typical of Khlebnikov's paronomastic wordplay, suggesting the liberation of both the "T" and Asia from bondage. The association of "T" and "Asia" is underscored by the very word "Azia" in Russian, which breaks down syllabically into "Az-i-ia." The first syllable means "T" in Church Slavic and the third means "T" in modern Russian; they are united by the conjunction "i," and. The formula that emerges reads verbally, "Asia = I + I," which suggests that the liberation of the "T" and of Asia as a whole is possible only when the separate "T"s of Asia come together to form an integral whole.

*Qurrat al-Ain*: See notes to "October on the Neva."

*a king's son praised poverty*: A reference to the Buddha, who was of royal lineage.

*Hsi and Ho*: Two legendary Chinese astronomers.

*Medina-Sidonia*: Commander of the Spanish Armada destroyed by the English in 1588. Khlebnikov is drawing a parallel between this event and the debacles of Mukden and Tsushima during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05); the battle of Tsushima resulted in the destruction of the Russian fleet under Z. Rozhstvensky's command.

*Izanagi*: See notes to "Ka."

*Monagatori*: Any one of several prose collections of romantic or fantastic tales (such as *Ise-monagatori* or *Takstori-monagatori*) in early medieval Japanese literature.

*Shang-ti*: Yu-hüang-shang-ti, literally August Supreme Emperor of Jade, the Father-Heaven of Taoist mythology.

*Perun*: The Slavic god of thunder.

*Maa Emu*: The earth goddess in Estonian mythology.

*T'ien*: T'ien Kwan, the agent of heaven in Taoist mythology.

*Indra*: God of battle in ancient Indian mythology; Khlebnikov transforms him into a goddess here.

*Tsintekuatl*: Probably a faulty rendering of Quetzalcoatl, Aztec god of the sun and air.

*Unkulunkulu*: A Zulu god, the progenitor of mankind, identified by Khlebnikov elsewhere as a thunder god.

*The Present Day*: The scene of the poem is Kharkov during the Civil War. During the year Khlebnikov spent there, the city passed alternately into the hands of the Reds, the Whites, and the Reds again.

*Kruchonykh's editions*: Khlebnikov's fellow futurist, Alexei Kruchonykh, put out numerous books (his own and those of others) in handwritten, lithographed editions.

*Ay*: The name for May in Russian folklore.

*Maha-vira*: A contemporary of the Buddha and founder of Jainism.

*Sivaji*: A native Indian chieftan of the Maratha people who led a successful rebellion against the Mogul rulers of India in the seventeenth century.

*"Birds of the Kharkov Region" by Sushkin*: P. P. Sushkin was a well-known ornithologist of the day, but authored no such work—hence Khlebnikov's deliberate tentativeness.

*now I turn to you*: The poem's addressee is Vera Demianovna Siniakova, a cousin of the famous Siniakov sisters. She was married to a Soviet bureaucrat in Kharkov and at the same time was the mistress of A. Andrievsky. The latter, a young mathematician and inventor who worked as an interrogator for the Red Army military tribunals (Khlebnikov suspected him of working for the Cheka, as the poem indicates), took a strong interest in Khlebnikov and his works. Khlebnikov, in turn, fell in love with Vera. In the poem he describes her liaison with Andrievsky. He is likening his own dangerous infatuation to that of Cleopatra's suitors in Pushkin's story "Egyptian Nights": they must pay with their lives for one night of bliss with the queen.

## ZANGEZI

The name of Khlebnikov's alter ego is based on a complex synthesis of sound associations. The most obvious are the names of two rivers, the Zambezi and the Ganges, which are mentioned together in the opening of *Azia Unbound*. They symbolize the African and Asian orientation of the poet's world view. In Khlebnikov's "Alphabet of the Intellect" the letter *z* signifies reflection and reflected light and is associated with words that signify sight, mirrors, eyes, stars, and even the earth itself (*zemlia* in Russian). Zangezi, in short, is a seer.

The image of Zangezi as an itinerant prophet is based in part on the poet's own life of wandering, but also on the life of the great ninth-century sage, Sankara (788–820), who traveled throughout India, preaching and gathering disciples for his reformed sect of Hinduism.

*Plane One*

An avid ornithologist, Khlebnikov conveys the songs of individual birds with great precision. He goes so far as to mark the stresses of each bird's utterance to make certain that the intonation—and thereby the emotional content—is adequately conveyed.

*Plane Two*

The gods mentioned here are identified in the commentary to *Azia Unbound*. Note as well the careful marking of the god's beyonsensical utterances to produce a regular trochaic rhythm.

*Plane Four*

*The Tables of Destiny*: The series of essays Khlebnikov composed to outline his discovery of the Laws of Time. Three were published posthumously; the remaining five have not yet appeared in print. See *The King of Time*, pp. 169–186, for a translation of the first in the series.

*Plane Five*

*Changara Zangezi*: Based on the name of Sankara, “Changara” becomes an honorific as applied to Zangezi.

*Planes Seven, Eight, and Twelve*

The principal demonstrations of the meaning Zangezi attaches to individual phonemes are based on historical examples. Here they are all drawn from the period of the 1917 revolution and civil war. *R*, the phoneme that “rips and resonates and ravages,” represent the Riuriks and the Romanovs, Russia's ruling families. All those whose names begin with *K*, the letter that signifies stasis and death, are servants of these families and therefore agents of death. They include General A. M. Kaledin, leader of the Orenburg Cossacks who supported the White opposition and committed suicide in 1918; General Kornilov, an officer in the imperial army who led a mutiny against Kerensky's Provisional Government, joined the White forces, and died in action in 1918; General A. M. Krymov, head of Kornilov's cavalry, who committed suicide in 1917 when the mutiny failed; and Admiral A. V. Kolchak, who commanded the tsarist Black Sea fleet, led the White forces in Siberia after the revolution, and was executed by the Bolsheviks in 1920.

The “sweet days of L” refers both to the days of Lenin and the days of lethargy (*len'*) that followed the victory of the revolution. In Plane Eight the phoneme *G* comes into play as a symbol for Germany, the last of the four parties involved in the military struggles of the revolutionary years.

*Plane Nine*

The word *oom* has dual significance. On the one hand it means “mind” or “intelligence” in Russian and is combined with a variety of prepositions, conjunctions, particles, and pseudo-morphemes to produce the meanings that Khlebnikov outlines in his notes. It also corresponds to the well-known Indian

mantra, and its repetition here as part of a series of compounds seems designed to produce a comparable effect.

#### *Plane Ten*

In Russian most of the neologisms in this section are based on the root *mog-*, meaning “power” or “might.” Many of them also involve the replacement of the letter *b* with *m* in words whose root is *bog-*, meaning “god” or “divinity.”

#### *Plane Twelve*

R looks into the mirror of minus one: See Khlebnikov’s comments on the significance of negative integers in “The Scythian Headdress.”

#### *Plane Fourteen*

*I am what is not. / I am the only son of who I am:* Zangezi’s words echo the famous Upanishad text, “Tat tvam asi” (That thou art). They reflect a central doctrine of Sankarian metaphysics, namely, that the self is identical to the power underlying the cosmos and all reality.

#### *Plane Fifteen*

This soundpainting finds its principal antecedent in Mallarmé’s theory of correspondences between sound and color, a fact that Khlebnikov openly acknowledged.

#### *Plane Sixteen*

The recreation of a struggle between a man suffering an epileptic seizure and those attempting to constrain him is based on a real incident. In December 1921 Khlebnikov traveled from Piatigorsk to Moscow in a hospital train filled with epileptics, some of whom threatened to douse him with kerosene and set him on fire.

#### *Plane Eighteen*

Khlebnikov demonstrates here what might be termed the law of negative return, according to which events running counter to each other occur within an interval of  $3^n$  days. These events may involve entire nations and peoples or single individuals.

*Ryleev:* A poet and participant in the Decembrist revolt against the tsarist regime in 1825, Kondraty Ryleev was hanged in 1826.

*The Poles rose up in revolt:* The Polish insurrection of 1863–64. Some 243 days after the beginning of the uprising, an attempt was made on the life of the Russian viceroy of Poland, Count Theodore Berg. As Khlebnikov explains in *The Tables of Destiny*, “Judgment Day, the day of vengeance, took place  $3^5$  after the event that called for that vengeance” (see *The King of Time*, p. 176).

*American President:* The assassination of James Garfield occurred on July 2, 1881; he was elected president 243 days earlier, on November 2, 1880. Khlebnikov includes in his calculation both the day of the election and of the assassination; Garfield did not actually die until September 19.

*hordes from the East:* Rome was sacked by Alaric, king of the Visigoths, in 410. After  $2 \times 3^{11}$  days, in 1380, the forces of the West in the person of Prince Dmitry of Moscow defeated the Tatars at the battle of Kulikovo.

*Yermak, Kuchum:* During the reign of Ivan the Terrible the Cossack explorer Yermak Timofeevich pushed the frontiers of Muscovite power east into Siberia at the expense of the Siberian khan, Kuchum. He captured the Siberian capital of Isker (also called Sibir') in 1581.

*Mukden:* On February 26, 1905, the Russian forces at Mukden (Shenyang) were defeated by the Japanese, marking the end of Russia's easterly expansion.

*Stessel:* A. M. Stessel was the Russian commander who surrendered Port Arthur to the Japanese in December 1904.

*Vladimir Solovyov:* The Russian idealist philosopher (1853–1900) foresaw the possibility of “retribution from the East” in his eschatological studies.

*international tribune:* In 1878 the Congress of Berlin confirmed the treaty ending the Russo-Turkish War and granting autonomy to Bulgaria. This event occurred  $3^{11}$  days, or approximately 485 years, after the battle of Trnovo (1393), in which the Turks defeated Bulgaria and established their hegemony in the area.

*Kiev:* The city was overrun and destroyed by the forces of Batu Khan in 1240.  $3^{10}$  days, or approximately 161 years later, the Tatars under Tamerlane engaged Sultan Bajazet's forces near Ankara, a battle that essentially marked the end of Tamerlane's westerly expansion.

*Marathon:* The battle of Marathon, the triumph of the Greek West over the Persian East, took place in 487 B.C. (according to Khlebnikov's calculations in *The Tables of Destiny*—most sources give 490 as the date);  $4 \times 3^{11}$  days (1,940 years) later, in 1453, the Byzantine capital of Constantinople fell to the Turks.

*The Tsar abdicates, bloody Presnia:* A workers' rebellion broke out in the Presnia region of Moscow in 1905; Tsar Nicholas abdicated a little over eleven years ( $2^{12}$  days) later. Here Khlebnikov is speaking of like or complementary events, which take place at intervals of  $2^n$  days.

*Minin's monument:* A monument to two national heroes, Kuzma Minin and Prince Dmitry Pozharsky, stands on Red Square in front of St. Basil's Cathedral. G. A. Min, the military commander who crushed a worker's uprising in Moscow on December 26, 1905, was assassinated  $3^5$  (243) days later, on August 26, 1906, by Z. V. Konopliannikova, a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party.

*Pushkin who cuts the n from his name:* Here and in the following lines Khlebnikov is punning on Pushkin's name. Pushkin without the *n* is *pushki*, “cannons” in Russian. Pushkin's most important work, *Eugene Onegin*, is made a metaphor for the “steel and lead” shot from the cannons.

*peace treaty:* Logically this would have to be the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed on March 3 and ratified by the Soviets on March 15, 1918, which ended hostilities between Russia and Germany. Count Wilhelm Mirbach-Harff, the German envoy to Moscow, was assassinated on July 6 of the same year. Far fewer than Khlebnikov's requisite  $3^5$  days passed between these two events. It



is possible that he had in mind not Brest-Litovsk, but the original peace proposals put forward by the Bolsheviks immediately upon seizing power in November 1917.

*Plane Twenty*

*Kshesinskaia*: M. F. Kshesinskaia was a famous ballerina and mistress of Nicholas II.

*Pototska in the castle of Girei*: Characters from Pushkin's narrative poem "The Fountain of Bakhchisarai."

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