

Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov

volume III

Selected Poems



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translated by Paul Schmidt

edited by Ronald Vroon

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Frontispiece: Velimir Khlebnikov, 1916

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Translator's Preface

This volume includes 192 of Velimir Khlebnikov's poems, of which eleven are "longer poems" (*poemy* in Russian). This figure does not include some fifty lyrics included in the various plays and supersagas, already translated in the second volume of this edition, published in 1989.

It is difficult to arrive at a total number of Khlebnikov's poems. Approximately 650 texts contained in the original Russian editions of the collected and unpublished works (1928–1933 and 1940), as well as in *Works* (1986) and various periodicals and anthologies, can be considered separate texts, but this number includes many different versions of previously published poems. More than a third of this number are rough drafts and fragments, some no more than four lines long, but in these cases as well, many are simply variants of others. Khlebnikov had the habit of revising previously published poems, he had inconsistent views on their readiness for publication, and even his fairest manuscripts are quite raw. Given all this, a precise canonical figure is impossible to come by. Even the very notion of "canonicity" seems questionable.

The present selection is drawn from all the available texts, and is intended to provide a broad sampling of Khlebnikov's styles, themes, and subjects. Khlebnikov is known to English and American readers mostly for his early work as an experimenter with new forms, so I have tried to include here a sizable selection of those later poems—by far the majority—that are somewhat more conventional in form, and that also illuminate many episodes in the poet's life.

Khlebnikov (1885–1922) ranks with Mallarmé, Joyce, Pound, and Stein among the great innovators of literary modernism. He blurred the distinction between verse and prose and between one literary genre and another. His experiments helped to break the hold of traditional verse patterns in Russian—although he made extensive use of them himself. But in general 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 the area of language that the Anglo-American tradition tends to belittle as “play”—neologisms, palindromes, riddles, puns.

Khlebnikov's writing displays a perpetual 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, and yielding what Khlebnikov and his contemporaries called “beyond-sense” (*zaum* in Russian). For Khlebnikov, the shift in sound that produces a shift in meaning was a shift in the structure of the universe. That *sword* becomes *word* when a consonant vanished gave him a vertiginous sense of the power of language to influence the natural world. The shift of a consonant was all that distinguished *inventors* from *investors* or *explorers* from *exploiters*—and suddenly there appears the image of a struggle between *N* and *S*, between *R* and *T*. The movement of consonants becomes 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 upon Russian, and see what kinds of texts resulted. This approach helped me to avoid fetishizing the text of the original; it had the advantage of seeing translation as *transaction*, as a cultural and temporal response to the original text. The translation thus becomes a self-sufficient text, a product of response in its own time and place.

When a poet translates a familiar poet into American English—Baudelaire, for instance—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. But when the work of a poet is offered for the first time to an audience almost totally unfamiliar with it, as is the case with Khlebnikov, the translator is less free. Rather than assimilate the writer to himself, he must assimilate himself to the writer. The translator must perform the part of the poet in somewhat the same

way that an actor prepares, through a similar language act, to create a character on the stage.

When I began translating, some forty years ago, I was much enamored of “theories of translation,” and of various methodologies. I have since come to believe that for the act of translation—the translation of poems, anyway—there really is no useful theory, and “methods” are only occasionally helpful. Every poem here poses unique problems, and each is translated in a way that offers a solution to those problems. Each translation is a record of a fresh encounter between two languages, two worlds. Inspiration as well plays a large part, and the muse of translation is as willful as the muse of poetry.

Some of the translations in this volume are very free—variations, if you will, on the theme of the original. “We chant and enchant,” for instance, expands Khlebnikov’s ten lines to nineteen. But in general I have translated line for line. Some translations—“Venus and the Shaman,” for example—follow the metrical and rhyme patterns of the original as closely as possible, when these seemed to me to be the basic determinants of the poem in question. For some poems—such as “Harsh hush bends bow” and “The Tangled Wood”—I have made a conscious attempt to use the alliterations and syntactic patternings of our older Anglo-Saxon tradition, since these seem to me somehow to reflect Khlebnikov’s attempt to reach the ur-forms of poetry, “to find—without breaking the circle of roots—the magic touchstone of all Slavic words, the magic that transforms one into another . . .” The cadences of our own Walt Whitman, Khlebnikov’s “old Walt,” find occasional echoes here. And of course Khlebnikov’s invention of neologisms posed delightful challenges. The plural of *mouse* is *mice*? Then surely, somewhere in the backwoods of language, the plural of *house* is *hice*.

All this is of course very subjective. My final standard for each of the translations in this volume is that it be a poem in American English.

The single most important source for the texts translated here is *Tvoreniia* (Works, 1986) textually the most accurate volume published to date. For poems not contained in this volume, I turned to the original *Sobranie proizvedenii* (Collected Works, 1928–1933) and the supplementary *Neizdannnye proizvedeniia* (Unpublished Works, 1940). These collections also served as the principal source for annotations. *Tvoreniia* in particular contains a wealth of background material illuminating difficult and obscure passages in Khlebnikov’s oeuvre.

This volume also contains Khlebnikov’s own variants of many of

the poems from the supersagas “War in a Mousetrap” and “Asia Unbound,” translated in volume II of the Harvard *Collected Works (Prose, Plays, and Supersagas, 1989)*. The source texts were drawn from the miscellanies and collections in which Khlebnikov’s works originally appeared. Ronald Vroon also chose a number of works, including the long narrative poem “Chairman of the Cheka,” which have appeared only in periodicals. Some of these pieces could not have been published in Russia prior to the momentous political changes of the past decade. Though their place in the Khlebnikov canon has yet to be determined, they are of extraordinary interest for the light they shed on the poet’s attitude toward the Revolution and Civil War.

The date and source for the original Russian text are indicated at the end of each translation. Transliteration throughout follows the U.S. Library of Congress system slightly simplified. In the text we have used the normal spelling for proper names where English common usage has been established—the Russian *-skii* ending for example, has been rendered *-sky*. Places in the text marked “[Illegible]” are so marked in the Soviet editions. The reader should be aware that the translations of texts previously published in *The King of Time* have been revised, sometimes significantly.

A concise biography of Khlebnikov can 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 bibliography appended to volume III of Velimir Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochenenii* (Munich: W. Fink, 1968–1972) and the bibliographies in three recent studies of Khlebnikov’s works: Raymond Cooke, *Velimir Khlebnikov: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Viktor Petrovich Grigoriev, *Slovotvorchestvo i smezhnye problemy iazyka poeta* (Word Creation and Other Problems Relating to the Poet’s Language; Moscow: Nauka, 1987); and Ronald Vroon, *Velimir Xlebnikov’s Shorter Poems: A Key to the Coinages* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Michigan Slavic Studies, 1983).

This is the final volume of Khlebnikov’s *Collected Works* in English, a project that was conceived and consistently supported by the Dia Art Foundation, New York. Ronald Vroon and I would like to express our special thanks to Heiner and Philippa Friedrich and to the directors of Dia for their vision and commitment. Our work on this volume was also supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Our deepest gratitude is due Thomas P. Whitney: at a difficult moment

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Finally we wish to thank Maria Ascher for editorial help with this volume; and Joyce Backman, the original editor of the series, for her patience, her stamina, her sense of humor, and her friendship during all the years of working together.

Abbreviations

- BM *Bez muz: Al'manakh*. Nizhny Novgorod, 1918.
- D Velimir Khlebnikov. *Stikhotvoreniia: Poemy, Dramy, Proza*. Ed. R. V. Duganov. Moscow, 1985.
- DP R. V. Duganov. "Velimir Khlebnikov, 1885–1922." in *Den' poezii, 1985*. Moscow, 1986, 216–217.
- LO A. E. Parnis. "Velimir Khlebnikov: Iz neizdannogo." *Literaturnoe obozrenie* 7 (1988), 109–112.
- NM A. E. Parnis. "Velimir Khlebnikov: 'Predsedatel' Cheki'—Novoe o poete." *Novyi mir* 10 (1988), 149–152.
- NP Velimir Khlebnikov. *Neizdannye proizvedeniia*. Ed. N. Khardzhiev and T. Grits. Moscow, 1940.
- Numerals Volume (roman) and page (arabic) of *Sobranie proizvedenii*. Ed. Nikolai Stepanov and Iury Tynianov. Leningrad, 1928–1933.
- OS Velimir Khlebnikov. *Oshibka smerti*. Moscow [Kharkov], 1917.
- T Velimir Khlebnikov. *Tvoreniia*. Ed. V. P. Grigor'ev and A. E. Parnis. Moscow, 1986.
- TS *Vtoroi sbornik tsentrifugi*. Moscow, 1916.
- VR₁ Ronald Vroon. *Velimir Xlebnikov's "Krysa": A Commentary*. Stanford, 1989.
- VR₂ Ronald Vroon. *Velimir Xlebnikov's Shorter Poems: A Key to the Coinages*. Ann Arbor, 1983.
- VR₃ Ronald Vroon. "Velimir Khlebnikov's 'I esli v 'Khar'kovskie ptitsy' . . .': Manuscript Sources and Subtexts." *Russian Review* 42 (1983), 249–270.
- VR₄ Ronald Vroon. "The Calendar Poems of Velimir Xlebnikov." In *Velimir Chlebnikov: Myth and Reality*. Ed. Willem Weststeijn. Amsterdam, 1986.

Selected Poems

The Poet and His Voices

Ronald Vroon

You still have not understood that my word
Is a god howling in a cage.

—*Velimir Khlebnikov* (1885–1922)

Velimir Khlebnikov's biography is surely one of the most seductive in the history of Russian letters. At virtually every stage he seems to fulfill one or more of the archetypal roles that modern culture assigns its poets. If we were to reduce his life to a series of tableaux, we would see him first as a naive young man from the remote provinces of southern Russia coming to St. Petersburg with visions of glory, a sheaf of half-finished manuscripts in hand. Drawn into the literary life of the capital, this lanky, stammering youth is lionized by his colleagues and finds himself in the forefront of the most radical poetic movement of the day. Accepting their adulation with a disingenuousness bordering on the absurd, he produces poems of extraordinary strangeness and beauty. At the same time, he cultivates a wide variety of eccentric interests, publishing articles on ornithology, Pan-Slavism, language universals, and the periodicity of historical events. He spends days at a time in the public library checking on dates and working out their correlation in complex mathematical formulas. These odd preoccupations, together with his remarkable gift for manipulating words, lead his Futurist colleagues to proclaim him a genius and the "King of Time."

The next tableau finds Khlebnikov swept into the maelstrom of political and military conflict. Following the outbreak of World War I, he is conscripted into the Imperial Army; we see him languishing in an army camp outside Tsaritsyn, suffering the typical indignities of a sensitive intellectual in a crowd of boors and philistines. To a Petrograd colleague he writes, "I am a dervish, a Yogi, a Martian, anything you want, but I am not a private in a reserve infantry regiment." Freed from military service by the timely outbreak of the Revolution, he pursues a nomadic way of life, traveling the length and breadth of

Russia, publishing poems in obscure newspapers and miscellanies, falling into the hands of both the Red and White armies when the front lines happen to intersect with the axes of his wanderings. All the while he continues to pursue various utopian projects, developing his theories of a universal language and his laws of time in essays that, for the most part, accumulate haphazardly in notebooks and scraps of paper he carries around with him.

Toward the end of the civil war, at the end of October 1920, we see him approaching the Caspian port city of Baku. In the words of a recent biographer, he is “dressed in a quilted jacket with long lacings instead of buttons, carrying in his hand a sack that contains a crust of bread and a large ledger [*Grossbuch*], which the poet used as his notebook.” In the closing months of the year, working feverishly on his historico-mathematical calculations, he makes his most important discoveries about the laws of time. Meanwhile a revolution has broken out on the southern coast of the Caspian, in the Iranian province of Gilan. The poet insinuates himself into the service of an expeditionary force sent by the Bolsheviks to aid their Iranian confreres; his sole purpose is to book passage to Asia, thereby fulfilling his life-long dream of experiencing first-hand the oriental wellsprings of Russian culture.

Arriving in the port city of Enzeli, the poet now assumes the guise of a Russian Rimbaud. He has escaped the bonds of philistine European civilization and comes face to face with Islamic Persia. His responsibilities are minimal, and he is more or less free to wander about at will. His hair has grown long, as has his beard. He is dressed in tatters. The locals call him a Russian dervish because of his unkempt appearance and otherworldly manner. Wandering along the Caspian coast, he continues to make entries in his notebooks, reconstructing lost poems, writing sketches for new works, and elaborating the historico-mathematical theories first articulated in Baku. Evacuated back to Russia in August following the collapse of the revolutionary movement in Iran, he makes his way across the Caucasus to the resort towns of Zheleznovodsk and Piatigorsk. His sojourn there coincides with the horrific Volga Basin famine of 1921. Working as a watchman at the local propaganda offices of the Russian Telegraph Agency, he subsists largely on bread and tea, working through the long autumn nights on his poems and treatises.

The concluding tableaux are the most tragic. He returns to Moscow in late December on a train filled with epileptics, entering a hungry,

snowbound city that is just beginning to emerge from the horrors of revolution and civil war. With the help of friends, he finds lodging in a student dormitory and is once again drawn into the literary life of the new capital. He spends most of his time preparing fair copies of his works and searching for publishing outlets. The years of wandering and deprivation have taken their toll, however; weakened by malnutrition, typhus, recurring bouts of malaria, and symptoms associated with advanced syphilis, he determines to return to his family home in Astrakhan to rest and regain his strength. The avant-garde artist Pyotr Miturich, his patron and closest friend, persuades him to leave the city and spend a few weeks with him in a small village in Novgorod province, where food is more plentiful and he can work undisturbed. Several days after his arrival, his health takes a sudden turn for the worse: paralysis sets in and he becomes progressively more edematous. Cut off from the world and deprived of adequate medical attention, Khlebnikov eventually sinks into a coma and dies in his sleep on June 28, 1922.

Such a life, as Vladimir Markov has noted, could not fail to generate a legend, one that has permanently entered Russia's cultural consciousness. Its uses, however, are decidedly ambiguous. The earliest purveyors were Khlebnikov's own Futurist colleagues. As early as 1914, when the poet was still virtually unknown, his friends David Burliuk and Vasily Kamensky contributed prefaces to his first book of poems in which they declared him to be a veritable Leonardo: "He is a mathematician, a philologist, an ornithologist. All forms of literature are accessible to him," writes Burliuk, adding in bold script, "Khlebnikov is our epoch." Members of Vladimir Mayakovsky's Left Front of the Arts took similar advantage of the poet shortly after his death, promoting him as the founding father of modern Russian literature, feeding the legend by publishing Dmitry Petrovsky's extensive—and faulty—memoirs, and making him out to be a standard-bearer of the Left Front cause *avant la lettre*.

But the legend could also be used against Khlebnikov. As early as 1922 a perfectly honorable critic like Ivan Aksenov could diagnose the poet as suffering delusions of grandeur and/or paranoia, or at the very least feeble-mindedness, and dismiss his work on that basis. Within two years Georgy Vinokur, secretary of the famous Moscow Linguistic Circle, would write: "The landscape of ancient cultures to which Khlebnikov was so highly sensitive, his unique linguistic metaphysics which

serves as the background for his sometimes extraordinary neologistic conjectures, the diary of Maria Bashkirtseva and the quasi-mathematical calculations about the fate of humanity, the Trumpet of the Martians and the Presidency of Planet Earth, beyonsense and prophecy—in all this Khlebnikov's personality ran like some puzzling ink spot, like some sickly shadow, and lost its contours. Here is a landscape without a horizon, a face with no profile." Such views would be amplified in later years through the loudspeakers of official ideology. In 1948, to cite the most painful example, the orthodox Soviet critic Boris Iakovlev hacked out a misanthropic essay entitled "A Poet for Aesthetes: Notes on Velimir Khlebnikov and Formalism in Poetry," in which he tried to turn the tables on those responsible for the Khlebnikov legend. What his admirers took to be signs of his genius—his neology, for example, or his utopianism—are taken by the critic as signs of snobbism, mysticism, and sick fantasizing. "We know now why it was necessary to create the legend of Khlebnikov," he says. "The legend was needed by Formalist poets to justify their own sterile tricks and . . . to inculcate young writers with . . . the traditions of reactionary bourgeois art."

No wonder, then, that many admirers of Khlebnikov's works tried to divert attention from the biography and the legend it had generated, hoping thereby to protect both the poet's memory and his legacy. Nikolai Stepanov, his editor, warns us that "just as Khlebnikov's experimental pieces have overshadowed his central works, so too the anecdotal aureole that has been created around his personality, the image of an 'eccentric' and a 'dervish' often replaces the study of his work and ideological development." The Formalist critic Iury Tynianov writes in the same vein: "No matter how strange and striking the life of this wanderer and poet, no matter how terrible the circumstances of his death, his biography should not overwhelm his poetry. We should not be satisfied with the study of a man's biography. In Russian literature there are many such cases. Venevitinov, a curious and complex poet, died at the age of twenty-two, and ever since people remember only one thing about him—that he died at the age of twenty-two."

This view has been seconded by most succeeding Khlebnikov scholars, but on more theoretical grounds. The Dutch scholar Willem Weststeijn, for example, disputes the presumption that Khlebnikov's poetic "I" "can be identified with the concrete poet who exists outside the text," insisting that in certain poems "a connection between the author and the lyrical 'I' exists, but only in the sense that an autobio-

graphical element is projected in the lyrical ‘I.’” Barbara Herrnstein Smith has provided perhaps the most ingenious defense of this neo-New Critical view in an essay entitled “Poetry as Fiction” (*On the Margins of Discourse*, 1978), where she suggests that poetic utterances are *representations* of discourse rather than real, historical utterances. In other words, they are not real speech events, but imitations of what a particular sort of person might say under a particular set of circumstances. As applied to Khlebnikov, this approach would oblige us to acknowledge that the lyrical “I” of his poems refers not to the real Khlebnikov but to a “potential” Khlebnikov, or any figure who might fit into the pronominal shell of the poet’s “I.”

The decision to read a text as a fiction rather than a historical utterance neatly solves the problem of the Khlebnikov legend by setting it in its proper fictive domain, but the link between the legend and the biography can subvert this critical strategy. Consider, for example, the message Khlebnikov inscribed on a postcard and mailed to his friend Dmitry Petrovsky shortly after being drafted. He wrote: “The king is out of luck, the king is under lock and key. Infantry Regiment 93 will be the death of the child in me. Address: Viktor Vladimirovich Khlebnikov, Co. 2, 93rd Inf. Reg. (Res.)” If we choose to read these lines as a poem, we automatically activate a particular set of literary conventions: we mark out a quatrain by virtue of the meter and rhyme, ignore everything from the word “Address” on, and posit a finished lyrical miniature replete with allusions to the imprisoned king of fairy tales and to a variety of literary texts. The poem is rich enough to create the contexts we need, not only to make sense of the poem but to make the poem satisfy us aesthetically. There is no need, in other words, to identify the lyrical “I” with the historical Khlebnikov outside the text. On the other hand, a nonfictive or “historical” reading is equally plausible. Petrovsky writes in his memoirs that when he received the postcard he gasped with surprise and ran off to his friends to see what could be done to get Khlebnikov discharged as soon as possible. Clearly he read the poem as nonfictive discourse, taking the poem’s lyrical subject to be a real person with a serious problem on his hands. His was undoubtedly an impoverished reading of the text, but not without merit.

Normally the decision to read a text fictively or nonfictively does not even arise, because in accepting a text as a poem we naturally accept the conventions of fictiveness that this attitude implies. Yet the text

itself may be structured in such a way that a fictive reading becomes problematic. This, I believe, is a central issue we must face when we read Khlebnikov's poems. Here one can distinguish a series of lyrical "I"'s that correspond in very direct ways to the personae of the Khlebnikov legend, culminating, I believe, in a group of texts that seriously compromise the reader's ability to read fictively. Knowing how and why this happens may help us in coming to terms with a poet who, for all his notoriety, remains one of the most difficult and enigmatic in the pantheon of twentieth-century poetry.

Even the most casual reader is bound to be taken aback by the multiplicity of personae encountered in Khlebnikov's verse. Probably no other twentieth-century poet can match him in this regard. Among the poems in the *Collected Works* the lyrical subject assumes the identity of a megalomaniac, a shy lover, an infantry commander, a preacher of pacifist homilies, Cleopatra's paramour, a Promethean demigod, and a host of other personae. All of these lyrical "I"'s are presented without the benefit of an explicit dramatic context, something that would allow us to fix the historical or mythical identity of the speaker as one might, say, in Browning's dramatic monologues. And this diversity of personae only hints at the true complexity of the picture, for in addition to the poems in which the lyrical "I" is nominally present, we find almost as many in which it is merely implicit, or disguised as a plural "we," or encased in the shell of *dramatis personae* ranging from Carthaginian war heroes to Galatian witches to the very letters of the alphabet.

This multiplicity of voices and the identity of the "implied poet" who adopts them are both a function of the worlds Khlebnikov chooses to address in his verse. By "worlds" I mean not simply themes or objects of discourse, but those cultural matrices by which we model the universe around us—the matrices of language, time, and cosmos. To delineate them so baldly is to risk a kind of reductionism, but it is an exercise uniquely appropriate for Khlebnikov, as we can see from the large body of nonfictional works he left as glosses on his own works. A poet who could engage in abstract discourse on topics like "The Word as Such," "The Head of the Universe: Time in Space," and "The Tables of Destiny" could equally well set his verse in dialogue with the word, time, and the cosmos. Each of these matrices demanded a particular voice, a subject ideally suited to the discourse at hand. These voices sometimes blend with each other, as do the matrices themselves,

but at certain periods one voice or group of voices is likely to assert itself over others.

In his earliest lyrics Khlebnikov seems to be most preoccupied with the matrix of language. This is not surprising for the leading representative of Cubo-Futurism, a movement that, in Vladimir Markov's formulation, focused on the word, laying bare its inner structure and making its texture felt. What is surprising is that this preoccupation does not appear to be related specifically to the influence of the Symbolist school which dominated Russian poetry at the time, or to the influence of the Western literary avant-garde. Indeed, it does not even appear to be primarily a literary preoccupation. Rather, it seems to be an outgrowth of scientific curiosity and reveals Khlebnikov's typically analytic and classificatory approach to the world—a consequence, perhaps, of his upbringing in the home of a naturalist and ornithologist.

Paging through Khlebnikov's early notebooks and drafts, one finds scores of verbal experiments organized in the following manner: a headword is set down, followed by several neologisms based on the form of the word and created according to a particular paradigm—adding a prefix, for example, or replacing one morpheme with another. These word lists in turn give rise to short poems that provide just enough context to illustrate the meanings of a particular neologism. Such experiments seem to have a dual purpose. The first is to explore the “hidden” meaning of phonemes, morphemes, and lexemes, meanings that Khlebnikov believes to have been lost during centuries of use and misuse. The second is to test how the mechanisms at work in the generation of words can be applied in the creation of new texts.

Beyond what appears to be a disinterested, scientific attitude toward the structure of language, however, lurk teleologies of another order. In a seminal early essay entitled “The Burial Mound of Sviatogor,” Khlebnikov gives several reasons for engaging in this sort of exploration. He speaks of “the land within us” that cries out for a voice. He sees Russia's mouth “bewitched by the evil will of neighboring islands” and hails the coming of “the first Russian who dares to speak Russian,” one who will break the spells of the West, to which even Aleksandr Pushkin fell prey. He likens the corrupted, conventional language of the people to Euclid's geometry, and the product of neological discourse to that of Lobachevsky, with its potential for remodeling the world. Adopting a Nietzschean tone, Khlebnikov suggests that in realizing the secret powers of language “we now extend

our law over the abyss; we no longer distinguish ourselves from God; even the creation of worlds is within our power.”

In his introduction to *Creations* (1914), Khlebnikov’s first collection of poems, Vasily Kamensky underscores the nationalistic impulse underlying Khlebnikov’s verbal experiments. He claims that they open the way for a poetry that could most adequately reflect what was unique in the Russian—and, more broadly, the Slavic—character. Khlebnikov himself indicated as much in his retrospective “Self-Statement,” declaring that his first approach to the problem of language was to find the “magic touchstone of all Slavic words, the magic that transforms one into another, and so freely to fuse all Slavic words together.” The poet’s scientific impulse, his Slavic orientation, and his keen awareness of the supranational power of language to remodel reality within human consciousness combine to project a strong extra-aesthetic dimension in his verse, which in turn helps to explain its etiology.

The extra-aesthetic dimension makes us aware, above all, how programmatic much of the early verse is: these lyrics, regardless of their denotative value, are meant to be *demonstrations* of discoveries Khlebnikov has made about his own language. Though translations tend to disguise this particular aspect of his poetry, they do not render it entirely opaque. For example, in “Neward, we praise thee” the appearance of “wizard” in the last line reveals the neological model and the primary motivation for the poem. Less transparent, but similarly decipherable, is Khlebnikov’s lovely little quatrain about a “fly”—not the insect, but the word itself:

Fly! Little three-letter wordlet
busily washing your winglet,
what could be sweeter or better
than watching you swallow my letter?

The key to the fly’s bath lies in the structure of the Russian word for fly—*mukha*—which Khlebnikov links through a process of false etymology to the very word for washing or bathing (*myt’*). In the English translation an analogous act of paronomastic play associates the *let*-ters of the word with the diminutive suffix in *world-let* and *wing-let*.

What sort of poetic voice is appropriate for poems that are so preoccupied with language as such? In some instances, it is safe to say, no voice at all, or rather, no voice identifiable with a particular persona. In poems of this sort the poet’s “I” simply disappears altogether, or

functions as a convenient pronoun on which to hang the poem. "I am futurity's silent ebb, / I am silentium's future flow," says the poet, reducing his identity to the ebb and flow of the very words he uses. Inevitably, however, an image of the "I" occasionally emerges that identifies the speaker specifically as a neologizer, a wizard of the word. In this role he can assume either of two identities. One is that of primitive man in his Edenic environment, creating language in a dynamic response to the world he encounters. This is the "I" (or "we") that we encounter in many of the early primitivist poems, the "I" who discovers that migratory birds spell the passage of time ("Where the winking waxwings whistle"), and that the "benefolent" woods are sometimes indistinguishable from the green creatures who inhabit them ("A goblin grabbles in the greeny forest"). It is also the "I" of the man turned shaman: he has discovered that words properly formed and conjoined can influence the human psyche, and exercises this power to induce laughter ("Incantation by Laughter"), to enchant ("We chant and enchant"), or to address deities and demigods ("Neward, we praise thee").

The other identity is that of the shaman displaced in time, the modern Futurian and wordwright; recognizing the relationship between language and power, he is convinced that his nation is emasculated because its language is held prisoner by the conventions of the past—many of them Western in origin—and sees himself as an insurrectionist battling for the restoration of his language's, and therefore his nation's, natural rights. This is the voice that addresses us in such poetico-political tracts as "We want to get close to the stars" or "I swam across the Sudak Gulf." To a Western ear it may sound chauvinistic, and rightly so, but the chauvinism will not be a cause of offense if we recognize that the ultimate goal of the persona addressing us is not simply the renovation of Russian poetry or the Russian language; it is to show the way for the liberation of language itself from the death of convention. This is the Khlebnikov that David Burliuk had in mind when he said, "Khlebnikov has created works like no one has ever written in Russian or any other poetry . . . He is the distillation of every contemporary literary idea."

The persona of the revolutionary wordwright is, of course, projected not only by the poetry but also by the public relations surrounding its publication and promulgation. The Russian Futurists were eager to use Khlebnikov to demonstrate that they, not the Italians, were the

first to liberate the word from its bonds to tradition, and their primary evidence was incontrovertible: Khlebnikov had, indeed, begun his radical verbal experiments before the Italians Futurists were known or discussed in Russia. But the creation of a literary persona as an act of public relations was bound to have an effect on the poet's image of himself. Let us imagine him reading the introduction to his own *Creations*, where he encounters the following panegyric: "Khlebnikov is the most remarkable of personalities who, in his otherworldly isolation, achieves a kind of legendary sanctity and who, in his brilliant immediacy has managed, with convincing simplicity and rigor, to re-create all of Russian poetry in the name of contemporary art." It is difficult to measure the effect this sort of idolization had on Khlebnikov, but we cannot ignore the fact that the literary myth created around him gradually became part of the persona he projected in his verse and—as we shall see—was eventually merged with that of the historical figure of the poet.

Khlebnikov's interest in the matrix of time and history dates back at least to 1905, when, according to his own testimony, he heard that Russia's naval forces had been decimated by the Japanese in the Straits of Tsushima and vowed that he would unlock the mysteries of time itself so that such disasters might be averted in the future. He took his vow seriously and, judging from his correspondence and the testimony of contemporaries, was constantly engaged in pursuing this utopian goal. "I spend all my time working on dates and on the fates of nations as dependent variables of numbers," he wrote to Mikhail Matiushin in 1911. His first published book was a little brochure entitled *Teacher and Student*, which presents some preliminary hypotheses concerning the hidden order of human history. The utter seriousness of this project is conveyed in a letter to his father, who thoroughly disapproved of his son's utopian enterprise. "I am convinced the day will come when you will be proud of me," he writes, "for I will have spread out a magic tablecloth upon which will appear a spiritual feast for the whole of humanity."

Khlebnikov's theories of time as set forth in his *Tables of Destiny* and other essays are incorporated verbatim into only a few of his poems, and their importance for an understanding of his oeuvre is not universally acknowledged. Nikolai Stepanov insists that his "historical and philosophical hypotheses are not only the themes of his longer poems,

but also the semantic skeleton supporting all their images and themes . . . One must have a general idea of his theoretical hypotheses in order to understand the meaning of his works.” Certainly this is the case with such pieces as *Zangezi*, where whole sections are devoted to an elaboration of the Laws of Time. One could also argue that longer poems like “Night Raid” and “The Stone Woman” cannot be adequately appreciated without a knowledge of their idiosyncratic socio-philosophical underpinnings. In the former, for example, the events described are consciously plotted to validate Khlebnikov’s theories of historical retribution. In the latter the intersecting axes of the ancient past and present-day reality, the macrocosmos of the heavens and the microcosm of the earth, provide coordinates for the poet’s theory of temporal progression.

But perhaps the main issue is not the significance of such theories as organizing principles in Khlebnikov’s poetry. We can, after all, read “The Stone Woman” as a fantasy and “Night Raid” as a dramatized meditation on the horrors of civil war, rather than as exempla for arcane hypotheses about the structure of time. Of greater consequence, ultimately, is the effect that Khlebnikov’s interest in such matters had on personae he projected—not only in those pieces with an explicit theoretical underlay, but in all the poems that deal in some way with the representation of historical realia.

By “historical realia” I mean not just “canonical” history—events deemed of sufficient consequence to become part of a textbook record—but also current events whose “historical” significance is immediately apparent to contemporary observers. In this sense, no period was more “historical” for Russia than the first two decades of the twentieth century. The members of the intelligentsia perceived themselves as actors in a drama of universal dimensions. The present was a period of *catastasis* leading inexorably to the double catastrophe of revolution and civil war. Khlebnikov, like many of his confreres among the *avant-garde*, also felt that he was witnessing and chronicling events of a magnitude equal to that of the great events of history. This is why, in his historico-mathematical tables, he equates the defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War with that of the Spanish Armada, the battle of Mukden with the decimation of Attila the Hun’s forces, or the actions of the Petrograd Soviet with those of the Paris Commune.

The perception of history in such dramatic terms finds its correlative in the adoption of *dramatis personae*. One of the most striking

aspects of Khlebnikov's "historical" poems (in the sense indicated above) is that, in Robert Browning's words, they are "dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons." One of the earliest of these is a sailor who has perished with Rozhdestvensky's fleet in the Straits of Tsushima ("Things were much too blue"). Several are encountered in the sixth section of "Otter's Children": Scipio and Hannibal; Jan Hus; Russia's two great peasant rebel leaders, Stepan Razin and Emilian Pugachev; and other figures representing opposition to the established imperial order. The voice of the imperial order, in turn, is heard in "The people raise the rod of sovereign power," a monologue of Tsar Nicholas II following his abdication.

What most of these figures have in common is that they are hostages of history, victims of the historical process. This is also true of the imaginary personae who take over the poet's voice in "Night Raid"—the marines and their captives. It also characterizes the voice of the poet, who seems to be speaking in his own person as he confronts the real world of war and revolution. In "Bad News, April 8, 1916" he presents himself in several of his already legendary guises: the ornithologist "tangled in the brightest of birdsong," the prophet in possession of "visions of our ancestors," the dreamer "Who wrote all these poems, / their lines a ladder / to the silver moon." "I'm bitter," he says, "I'm the hostage of crazed elder statesmen: / I'm only a scared rabbit they want to tame / and not at all the King of Time." He is, of course, the King of Time—he has not abdicated—but "The King is out of luck, / the King is under lock and key," subject to "An unknown fate, an unknown fight / where bow-strung trees obscure the light."

This same persona, however, takes on other characteristics that relate directly to the Khlebnikov legend. In most of the poems where the speaker addresses the issue of his own victimization, he also takes on the role of a spokesman for his generation and the leader of a rebellion against the established order. This attitude necessarily requires a more highly rhetorical stance that tends to manifest itself in apostrophic form. Beginning around 1915 we see a marked increase in poems written in the second person addressing either the poet's own comrades or those against whom they are rebelling. To the former he cries, "Let's muzzle the universe, keep it / from biting us, who are young" ("Herd of hoofsteps, ingots of elephants"). To the latter he says, "Woe to you, you dwellers in plenty, / sunk deep in wrinkles of wholesale murder" ("Young girls, young men, remember!").

This apostrophic moment marks the beginning of a transformation

in the lyric subject that will complicate our fictive perception of the text. It is clear that the poet has begun to assign his persona a special role, one that involves the transformation of the wordwright into a warrior. In fact, the two roles may merge into one, as they do in one of the poet's loveliest quatrains:

I'm going out again today
Into life, into the marketplace,
To lead a regiments of songs
Against the roar of rat and race.

As long as the warrior is leading a regiment of songs we can deal with him comfortably as a Bard—that is, as a figure whose conventionality is assured by the metaphor he employs for himself. But eventually he comes to see himself as more than just a songster. He is a fomenter and leader of rebellion. Usually he identifies himself as part of an unidentified brotherhood, calling on us to advance in his company to free both men and gods from the tyranny of physical and metaphysical oppression. Occasionally, however, he singles out his own persona and begins to make extravagant claims about himself and his own constitution. In “Wind whose song” he is “the people’s guide”; in “My elbow brushed” he presents himself as a combatant ready to smother the Amazon called Death.

These sorts of impersonations are more difficult to accommodate because there is no obvious prototype with which we can associate the speaker. Mayakovsky’s hyperbolic “I” comes to mind, and perhaps Severianin’s Universal Ego, but they are ultimately too self-conscious to serve as antecedents. This “I” takes himself far more seriously, forcing us to ponder his identity and that of his company. The “we” remains, for the most part, anonymous, but it is named, for example, in “Lightland,” were we read:

We have followed the path of rebellion,
and our losses at last are but little.
The Presidents of Planet Earth
advance in a group, ready for anything.
For thirteen years we Futurians have kept
alive, at heart, in sight, before our eyes,
in our retreat at Krasnaia Poliana,
the burning spark of Nosar’s revolution.

It is in the name of the “Presidents of Planet Earth” and the brotherhood of Futurians that Khlebnikov urges us, his readers, to “Bury the

remains of time / and drink from the starry glass of freedom.” Outside the corpus of the poems we find, of course, real Futurians and a real utopian society known as the Presidents of Planet Earth. It is not a ludic organization like the Flat Earth Society, nor is it an esoteric lodge, nor, most decidedly, is it a fiction: it is a group of men whom Khlebnikov believed to be true visionaries capable of guiding the Planet into a new world and a new age. The leader of such a society is the historical analogue of the person who addresses us in such poems as “Liberty,” “When Freedom comes, she comes naked,” “Beast + Number” and scores of other poems written in 1915 and after.

The first real breach in the line dividing fictive from nonfictive discourse occurs in the text “An Appeal by the Presidents of Planet Earth.” As the title suggests, it is clearly a manifesto, and was conceived as such according to the testimony of Khlebnikov’s friend and poetical ally Dmitry Petrovsky. The first draft was composed in prose, as befits a serious political manifesto. Nonetheless, it was ultimately reworked and published in verse form. The concluding lines read:

And so the gauntlet is thrown down
in these words: The Government of Planet Earth.
Ripped by red lightnings
the blue banner of unrule,
the banner of windswept dawns and morning suns,
is raised and waves across the face of earth.
Here it is, my friends!
The Government of Planet Earth.

The reader is left to ponder whether the text should be taken at face value, as the manifesto of some new revolutionary group, or as a poem written from a very idiosyncratic point of view. This ambiguity is symptomatic of a tendency that will become more and more pronounced in the late poetry.

At the beginning of January 1921, while still in Baku, Khlebnikov wrote to his sister:

This year will be the year of a great and final battle with the serpent.
Everything my consciousness contains—black nighttime windows, the hissing of the breathless firewood as it hastens to cinder—I raise it all to salute my victory over the dragon. These past days I have forged a spear for my combat with him: the ability to foresee the future. I possess equations for the stars, equations for voices, equations for

thoughts, equations of birth and death. I am the first to set foot on a new continent—a place that commands Time.

The letter is remarkable for a number of reasons. Written only a few weeks after Khlebnikov had discovered those equations that he believed described the periodicity of historic events, it reveals the breadth of his exploratory studies in other areas relating to the structure of the cosmos. It was possible, he believed, to find comparable equations for the motions of the planets and for the shifting moods of an individual. Human biology as well as human culture bore the imprint of the Laws of Time. It was no coincidence that Petrarch wrote 317 sonnets in honor of Laura or that the human body has 317 pairs of muscles, because this number was itself implicated in the periodicity of historical events. Similarly, one might expect that the ratio of the circumference of a drop of blood to that of Planet Earth would reflect the mathematical relationship between a day and a year, because the cosmos itself is a kind of living organism whose parts are rationally conjoined. These “discoveries” or, more precisely, the spirit that informs them, can be traced in a large number of works, most obviously “The City of the Future,” “Lightland,” and other utopian pieces that convey the poet’s sense of the “harmony of the spheres” and how it might be realized in the realm of human culture.

Aside from its mention of actual discoveries, the letter is remarkable for providing a self-portrait of the discoverer. Here, in private communication with his sister, Khlebnikov unabashedly presents himself in two roles: as a modern Saint George engaged in combat with the dragon of fate and as a twentieth-century Christopher Columbus. These are not idle hyperboles. They represent two of the many roles Khlebnikov projected in real life, and Mayakovsky acknowledged both of them when, in his eulogy, he called Khlebnikov “a Columbus of new poetical continents” and “the most magnificent and noblest knight in our poetical combat.” Later in the letter, Khlebnikov mentions two other roles that he played in Baku: in presenting his findings to a university audience, he says, he introduced himself as “Marx squared” and as a successor to Mohammed.

Both the discoveries and the discoverer are relevant for our understanding of Khlebnikov’s postrevolutionary personae. The discoveries speak of an extraordinary connection between the microcosm of the individual and the macrocosm of the universe, and their correlation can

bring about very strange transformations in the speaker who represents that microcosm. It allows him, for example, to impersonate the universe itself, as he does in “You whose mind flowed,” where he wears Planet Earth like a signet ring on his little finger. He can undergo a variety of physical transformations, as in “I am a wave,” where he is a bundle of water molecules that complete a full ecological cycle and eventually ascend to a distant star. In “A Vague Memory” he is a demigod in the guise of a mad poet who can crush and refashion the universe simply by virtue of his control over words. “The One, the Only Book” starts out innocently enough with a neutral “I” who tells us how “the black Vedas, the Koran and the Gospels and the book of the Mongols” have all given way to a grander book, the book of nature. The elaboration of this Renaissance conceit, however, soon evolves into a rhetorical diatribe in which the speaker addresses all of humankind:

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
idly, 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.

Most remarkable here, as Willem Weststeijn has pointed out, is that the speaker defines himself not as another reader, or as an interpreter of the book of nature, but as the book’s *author*. The logic of the conceit is such that the poet takes on the role of God himself.

This kind of impersonation, notable particularly in Khlebnikov’s late verse, is built into the poetic vision that grew out of his extrapoetic discoveries. But there is another kind of manipulation of the lyrical subject that is far more common, and far more disquieting. In the post-civil war period, we encounter a disproportionately large number of texts which, because of certain historical and personal references, call attention to the correspondence between the lyrical “I” and the real “I” of the poet. This autobiographical “I” occurs earlier, of course, but it is far less common in the prerevolutionary years. Now we see it frequently: in “Easter in Enzeli,” “A Stream of Icy Water,” “Night in Persia,” “The Chairman of the Cheka,” “The Gul-Mullah’s Trumpet”

and many others. In some of them Khlebnikov unapologetically introduces his own name in the poem.

The fact that most of these texts were written in the last year and a half of Khlebnikov's life suggests that the adoption of such a lyrical subject was precipitated by an evolution in his poetic and philosophical *Weltanschauung*, something that would have had a profound effect on his vision of himself. This phenomenon is discussed at some length by Boris Tomashevsky in a seminal essay, "Literature and Biography," written in 1923. Tomashevsky points out that there are certain authors who, at some point in their development, tend to make literary use of their biographies, cultivating a particular image of themselves, both in life and in literature, that will ultimately enter into the structure of their works. Pushkin, for example, during the period of the "southern poems," "poetically fostered certain facts of his life" to create the "image of a young exile with a hidden and unrequited love," because that was the subject most appropriate for the Romantic works he was composing. Aleksandr Blok is another poet who modeled his life to coincide with the image he had begun to project, and which his readership had come to expect, in his verse.

The same is true for Khlebnikov. This tendency became more and more pronounced after he had achieved those goals which, as his letter to his sister indicates, he believed made him worthy of legendary status. Like Blok or Pushkin, Khlebnikov was intent on projecting an image of his own life and self that would provide his readers with a model for the lyrical subject of these verses. The image grew equally out of his writings and his personal behavior. The publication of his poems alternated regularly with the publication of essays and brochures on the laws of historical progression, the structure of a potentially universal language, and the organization of utopian societies; they contributed to the composite image of a radical poetic experimenter, political visionary, and scientific revolutionary. His eccentric life style contributed to the legend of the poet-philosopher who had forsaken the bourgeois pleasures of the world in pursuit of a loftier calling. As Kornely Zelinsky notes, "The impression created by the personality of the poet and the circumstances of his life . . . played a significant role in establishing the Khlebnikov cult. A dreamer, a visionary monomaniac importunately pondering the destiny of poetry and the universe, Velimir Khlebnikov created in his essays, proclamations, letters, and verses a whole world of poetic mythology."

None of this would be problematic if, as in the case of Blok or Pushkin, we were dealing only with a “world of poetic mythology.” In many of the late autobiographical poems, however, Khlebnikov gives us to understand that we are not to read his “I” as a “mythological” Khlebnikov but as the real thing—that is, when he treats the legend of himself literally. The farther we move chronologically into the poems of 1921 and 1922, the more this shift becomes apparent. In several key poems of the late period, including “Suppose I make a timepiece of humanity,” “To You All,” “You feel my summons,” “Russia, I give you my divine / white brain,” “Who is he, the Voronikhin of the centuries,” “I’m not just some carnival devil,” and numerous others, I believe, Khlebnikov engineers our crossing the boundary from fictive into nonfictive discourse, despite the fact that they bear such traditional markings of poetic speech as line and rhyme and regular rhythm. He is asking us to believe that the voice in these poems is not merely one that speaks as a prophet might speak under comparable circumstances, but the voice of the singular historical figure who, in December 1920, in Baku, discovered a series of truths about time and space and chose to express those truths in verse form.

The evidence that Khlebnikov did indeed view these works as something more than poetry is quite striking. There is, in the first place, the close correspondence between them and a variety of explicitly nonfictive texts. The Persian poems and personal letters, for example, constantly paraphrase each other. Large sections of *Zangezi*, “Minin of Nizhny Novgorod,” and other poems present the same historical data and mathematical theories as the *Tables of Destiny*. There is absolutely no difference in the point of view of the speaking subject: in both cases he is the discoverer of the Laws of Time who is attempting to convince his readers that his vision is true and salvific.

The fictive/nonfictive distinction is even more seriously compromised by the authoritative voice of these poems, which frequently resembles that of prophetic texts. I am referring here not simply to Khlebnikov’s self-characterization as a prophet in such poems as “The Gul-Mullah’s Trumpet” or “I saw the young man, the young prophet,” but to his attempts at reifying that role by making claims one typically associates with sacred texts. For example, in a long, unfinished poem entitled “Who is he, the Voronikhin of the centuries,” he presents and concludes a mysterious parable in a manner typical of the Gospels:

I remember the duel of the centuries,
their faces behind a net of blue numbers,
as though they were bitten up by bees,
where Voronikhin erected centuries
like a tower at the Khitrovo Market,
and read them by their powers.

You do not understand these words
and their secret sense.

One is reminded here of nothing so much as Christ's manner of addressing his audience and his postscriptive remark, "I speak in parables so that, though seeing, they may not see, though hearing they may not understand" (Matthew 13:13). Not coincidentally, the words of Christ that Khlebnikov chooses to paraphrase are themselves the reiteration of words uttered by the prophet Isaiah.

The role of the prophet is also reified in the kind of claims the speaker makes in these poems, claims about his own powers, his mission, and his knowledge of the future. He speaks of his own uniqueness ("I was the only one to notice that time until today / was a vassal to space") and his own ability to tell the future. Like all prophets, he is without honor in his own country. He warns his followers of impending catastrophe if they do not heed his message, and promises them that his words will direct them to a promised land free of war and want:

. . . I tell you, the future is
coming, and upon it my superhuman dreams.

.

The force of my thoughts will inundate
the structure of existing states—
I'll reveal the drowned city of Kitezh, risen by magic,
to serfs blinded by the old stupidities.

Such claims, like those made by the nonfictive speaker of the *Tables of Destiny* and the letters, are based on the discoveries of Khlebnikov himself, and there can be little doubt that he wishes us to acknowledge their validity.

Khlebnikov, I think, was not unaware of the discomfort his audience faced in confronting such claims. He had tried out many of these ideas on his contemporaries and had met with expressions of incredulity. As

he wrote to his sister, “Those whose self-esteem goes no further than getting a pair of boots for loyalty and good behavior have drawn away from me and now watch me with terrified eyes.” To another friend he added, “If people don’t want to learn my art of predicting the future (and that has already happened in Baku, among local thinkers), I shall teach it to horses.” Khlebnikov was also, I suspect, a sensitive enough poet to realize that he could not break down the barrier between fictive and nonfictive discourse without risking the impoverishment of his own poetry.

His response to this dilemma was to create doubles of himself who could act as his spokesmen—Zangezi, for example, or the Son in “Cracking the Universe.” He placed these doubles in dramatic frames, creating a closed imaginary world around them. It is a *dramatis persona*, not the poet, who says:

I established white temples of Time,
filled them with poetry and the life of young men,
temples chiseled from the dead sea.
I discovered truths, majestic and straightforward,
and like divinities they entered my temples,
greeted me with outstretched open arms,
and filled the empty white temples with their breath.

And it is a fictive listener, not a historical reader, who exclaims, “Our souls are a floor beneath your feet. Brave comer! We believe you! We await you!”

This is the same sort of framing we see in Plato’s dialogues and Nietzsche’s *Also sprach Zarathustra*, both of which Khlebnikov imitated in his early work. The difference is that Khlebnikov’s spokesmen not only take on the same ideological position as their creator, but assume concrete elements of his biography. Zangezi, for example, is presented as a wandering sage and the author of Khlebnikov’s own *Tables of Destiny*. The Son in “Cracking the Universe” claims, as did Khlebnikov in the *Tables*, that he vowed to discover the Laws of Time upon learning of the Tsushima debacle.

The creation of doubles would thus seem to be a transparent subterfuge, but it has a very important function: to protect the real speaker from the dangers implicit in historical discourse. The creation of a dramatic frame is equally important, because it generates a fictive audience to stand in for the historical reader. Zangezi can excoriate his

audience, and his audience can throw eggs at Zangezi, without injuring either Khlebnikov or his real audience. The Son can argue with his teacher and set out on a mission to save his people without the poet's being laughed out of the auditorium where he is reciting his poem.

Khlebnikov's vision, however, is too expansive to be entirely contained by such dramatic structures. Beyond the *mise-en-scène* of Zangezi, he continues to demand a direct confrontation with his readers. More often than not, he proceeds on the assumption of an adversary relationship, ordering, cajoling, entreating, scolding, and reproving his listeners for their obstinacy. The poet presumes that we know the legend he has made of his life and, by resorting to direct address, puts us in the role of his historical audience, compelling us read the texts as real entreaties. Nowhere is this strategy employed more effectively than in "Once more, once more," among Khlebnikov's last and most moving poems:

Once more, once more
I am
your star.
Woe to the sailor with level
and compass
whose angle is false.
He will wreck on rocks
and hidden shoals.
Woe to you without love
or compassion
who angled me false.
You will wreck on rocks
and the rocks will laugh
at you
the way you did
at me.

This is dangerous poetry. If we accept the invitation to read it as a real, historical utterance in the guise of verse, we lose the safety net of poetic convention and find ourselves face to face with the figure of Khlebnikov; we must then decide whether he is mad, or feeble-minded, or merely a misguided genius. It is a decision not many readers feel comfortable making. The alternative is to interpret the voice as an impersonation, making the speaker a *type* for the disillusioned poet

confronting an insensitive world. By choosing this alternative, however, we confirm what the speaker has said about us—that we are blind to the truths he has proclaimed. Khlebnikov thus forces us to confront either his person or his vision of ourselves. No matter what our choice, we are never wholly free to contemplate his work as art alone.

Lyrics

Harsh hush bends bow
against the clamor-call of dawn.
Night nests in dark souls,
scatters shouts of "Burn!"

Clamor-call began to shudder,
took up silence as a shield;
stalking into dark to slaughter—
hundred-hacker, hundred-head.

Bow falls, felled from hands—
stillness speaks of what will be,
and through clash of power-welter
flies away.

[1908: T 42]

Where the winking waxwings whistle
in the shadows of the cedars,
where the branches shake and shiver
the mockingbird minutes fly away;

In the shadows of the cedars
a flock of flickers flutter,
where the branches shake and shiver
the swallows turn to seasons
as they fly away.

In the tatters of the shadows,
in the darkest deep of day,
there they wheel above and whistle
like a flock of floating hours
that, fleeting, fly away.

You are sun and song and siren
and you touch our souls with sound,
make our hearts a wave of wonder,
little singers of all seasons,
and you fly away.

[1908: T 42]

Here I praise the brutal flight
of those wings, they carried me into distances,
to Freedom's signifying blue dimension
domed by the sun with rings of light,
high, high, to that absolute height—
the snowy egret of song eternally.

[1908: T 44]

Came a rush of whistling,
birds descended from the sky.
Like rustling leaves
they would not fly.

And like a giant wing above me
I watched the swan-storm grow.
The cloud was some enormous bird
that trailed twilight on the place below.

Mysterious feathery shadows
drifting in the wing's wide arc.
I fled the science of hypocrisy
and hurried headlong into the dark.

[1908: II 41]

The echoing gull planes over empty water.
I am futurity's silent ebb,
I am silentium's future flow.
The reeds are unsteady, unsteady.
The small boats fly.
The fishermen cry.

[1908: NP 94]

The streams of time
on stone dreams,
the rush of streams
on time's stones.
Rustling sedge
at the lake's edge—
reverent hush,
reverberant rush.

[1908: T 44]

Cloudarias floated all forlorn
over the far high hills away,
Cloudarias cast their canopied shadows
over the desolate far away.
Cloudarias tumbled their canopied shadows
over the desolate far away . . .
Cloudarias floated all forlorn
over the high far hills away.

[1908: NP 115]

Snowfellow, tallfellow, bright beacon,
what has become of your mother?
Snowfellow, tallfellow, bright beacon,
Where have they buried your mother?

[1908: NP 111]

You are my song, my dark-blue dream
of doves, of winter's drowsy drone,
and sleighs that slow and golden go
through gray-blue shadows on the snow.

[1908: II 227]

Languor-wing flies in the middle of fable,
made breathless by a girl's charms;
tangled in nets of golden wool
Let me die here in your arms.

[1908: NP 103]

His sweet lids close and shut away
the moan of my young moon song.

My darling, my dying, my light, my sight,
my night my whole day long.

[1908: NP 96]

The freezing weather of debauchery
has killed the languor-wing of dawn.
The innocent age's light goes out
and the firebirds freeze and fall.

[1908: NP 108]

Woe-mind, Slow-mind, and No-mind, three sisters, girls
in bridal veils, danced together with wild wails.
They circle, bend, and bind, with arms and legs entwined,
and dissolve in a puddle of maniac curls.

[1908: II 264]

Wo-man and Wo-man.
We're all alone in the drowsy woods.
We're in love with each other.
No lady-friends, no wives!
We're in leaf with each other.
Who cares if we're losers as long as we're lovers!
We haven't married wives!
We share each other's lives!
We're all alone in a world of green.

[1908: NP 99]

My bag breaks
and everything falls to the floor.
It occurs to me
the world is a grin that flickers
on a hanged man's face.

[1908: T 44]

The death-dole
 of an old
 skull,
flickering with slippery mice.
And the dole
 of an old delirium,

to be wed
above the roofs of the hicc.
That's all.

[1908: II 276–277]

The bowl is banished from the long tables—
someone has drunk the liquor of the gods.
Divine wine is a beast-feast also—
the oxen raise their blue-gray horns.

[1908: NP 131]

A herd of horses shod with hours
jangling like thunder, wheel in a field.
Their rugged bodies are rank with time,
their flashing eyes ablaze with days.

[1908: NP 119]

Snow is a dream of earth,
snow is winter's dream;
drowse of seed-sprout in the tomb,
arouse of seed-sprout in the womb.

[1908: II 282]

No now. I'm like everybody!
Much pain. Such
bitter seed.
Who cares for cue?
Am I loved you?
Not no. You are.
Star.
No skies
never ever well.
Laughter sounds still.

[1908: NP 127]

The Dostoyology of racing clouds!
Pushkincandescence of noon!
Night resembles Tiutchev,
filling the unfathomable full of the unknown.

[1908–1909: T 54]

Incantation by Laughter

Hlaha! Uthlofan, lauffling!
Hlaha! Ufhlofan, lauffling!
Who lawghen with lafe, who hlaehen lewchly,
Hlaha! Ufhlofan hlouly!
Hlaha! Hloufish lauffling lafe uf beloght lauchalorum!
Hlaha! Loufenish lauffling lafe, hlohan utlauffy!
Lawfen, lawfen,
Hloh, hlouh, hlou! Luifekin, luifekin,
Hlofeningum, hlofeningum.
Hlaha! Uthlofan, lauffling!
Hlaha! Ufhlofan, lauffling!

[1908–1909: T 54]

Bo-beh-óh-bee is the lipsong
Veb-eb-óh-mee is the eyesong
Pee-eh-éh-oh is the eyebrowsong
Lee-eh-éh-ay is the looksong
Gzee-gzee-gzéh-oh is the chainsong
On the canvas of such correspondences
somewhere beyond all dimensions
the face has a life of its own.

[1908–1909: T 54]

Who wants to hear a story
about a little lady who lived very grand,
oh, not a big-time lady really,
just a sort of fat froggie:
she was short and she waddled and she wore a dress,
and had lots of significant friendships
with pine trees, all of them princes.
She goes visiting in springtime
and you know which way she paddles
by the bright reflecting puddles in her wake—
that silly little lady of the lake.

[1908–1909: T 55]

Grasshopper

Glitter-letter wing-winker
gossamer grasshopper
packs his belly-basket
with credo-meadow grass.
Zin! Zin! Zin! sings
the raucous racket-bird!
Swan-white wonder!
Brighter, brighter, bright!

[1908–1909 T 54]

Enormous arboreal monster, hanging
high with rump of shocking size,
grips a girl who fetched a pail of water,
rolling at him her cajoling eyes.
Diddled for a moment, she's an apple
on the branches of his shaggy arms.
Enormous monster—rather awful,
really—lolls back and laps. Life has its charms.

[1908–1909: T 56]

On the island of Ezeli
we got along easily.
I went to Kamchatka
where you were a hat-check girl.
From the heights of Altai
I smiled and said, “Hi!”
On the shores of Amur,
l'amour.

[1908: II 38]

Neward, we praise thee!
Youngard, we praise thee!
Joyard, we praise thee!
Knoward, we praise thee!
Grayard, we praise thee!
Mightard, we praise thee!
Wizard, we praise thee!

[1908: II 271]

We chant and enchant,
oh charming enchantment!
No raving, no ranting,
no canting enchantment!
This ranting enchantress
has cast her enchantment—
we see what her chant meant!
Here rant! There cant!
You charming enchanter,
cast out her enchantment,
uncast it, uncant it,
discount it, discant it,
descant: Decant! Recant!
He can't. She can't.
Why can't she recant?
Why can't he uncant?
Ranting chanting,
no recanting.
Discant, descant.

[1908: II 42]

A Foppish Proposal

I find the weather absolutely enchanting—
and give me leave—your darling little hand,
to help transpose an accent—elegantly does it,
So! Like this, then: death in a basket! *En basquette!*
There by the roadside: what whiteness, looming
in the gloaming? Is that a tree? Or merely my caprice?
Ah, permit me. Please. The word is so well-bred.
I approach with an elegant step
to present my affair. I bow and begin. “Assuming
you too are attracted by love,
you must join us. An elegant evening.
Ladies, of course—and the glass they hand me
will be bubbly. You do understand me?”
The wind's fast grab at a cloud-curve slips,
and she slaps his face! Was that meant for me?
A message comes through from this dazzle I see,

this glimmer of glow-worms: contact, they
say, with the afterlife is effortless.

[1909?: T 39]

Brooding, dark, and elegant—
Stranger, aren't you the man
who frightened the children yesterday?
"Mama!" they shouted, "he's wicked!" and ran.

You went to visit my sweetheart
where she took the evening air,
said: "Permit me to introduce myself . . ."
And laughed: ". . . how beautiful you are . . ."

She twisted the ring on her finger,
smiled like any coquette, and said:
"Sir, I've heard of your wicked adventures—
but why is your glove stained red?"

"Believe me, Lady,
those stories aren't true—
Do I look like an evil adventurer?
I'm only as old as you."

"Oh sir, I can hardly believe that . . .
you have such melancholy eyes!"
Strands of spider-glitter drifted
in the water-mirrored skies.

Two figures were seen on the pathway,
the little boat was gone . . .
And a long embrace of water
silenced my sweetheart's moan.

[1908–1912: II 28]

OK, Graylegs, time to set the plow
aside. Rainstorm lashes our faces.
Time to turn back to the barn,
to dinner, dreams, and darkness.

[1909–1912: T 63]

I swam across the Sudak Gulf,

I rode a wild horse.

I shouted:

“Russia has perished, is no more,
partitioned now like Poland!”

And people stared in horror.

I said:

“The heart of a modern Russian hangs like a bat.”

And people repented.

I said:

“Hlaha! Uthlofan, lauffling!
Hlaha! Ufhlofan, lauffling!”

I said:

“Down with the Hapsburgs! Bridle the Hohenzollerns!”

And I wrote with an eagle feather. Golden, silky, it swirled above the
sturdy quill.

I walked by the shores of a beautiful lake,
in bast-bound shoes and a sky-blue shirt.

And I was beautiful too.

I had an old bronze bludgeon with a rugged round head.

I once had a double-reed panpipe and a sawed-off horn.

I had my picture taken with a skull in my hand.

I saw sea serpents at Petrovsk.

I went to the Urals with water from the Caspian,
and poured it into the Kara Sea.

I called the snows of high Kazbek eternal, but I prefer
the soft brocades of autumn in the Urals.

On the Greben Mountains I found the teeth of a manta ray
and silver scallop shells large as the wheel of Pharaoh's chariot.

[1909–1910: T 61]

The Tangled Wood

The tangled wood was full of sound
the forest screamed, the forest groaned
with fear
to see the spear-man beast his spear.

Why does hart's horn hang heavy
with the moving mark of love?
Arrow's flash of metal hits a haunch,
and reckons right. Now beast is broken

to his knees, beaten to the ground.
His eyes look deep at death.
The horses clatter, snort, and chatter:
"We bring the Tall Ones. Useless to run."

Useless only your exquisite motion,
your almost feminine face. No action
can save you. You fly from rack and ruin,
and searching spear-man follows fast.

Panting horses always closer,
branching antlers always lower,
twangling bowstrings over and over,
nor help nor hart from hurt and hazard.

But he rears abruptly, bristles, roars—
and shows a lion's cruel claws.
With lazy ease he touches, teases—
teaches the trick of terror.

Acquiescent and still,
they fall to fill their graves.
He rises rampant. Regal roar.
And around him everywhere lay beaten slaves.

[1910?: T 63]

We want to be familiars of the stars—
we've been too distant long enough.
We've found the fun of acting tough.
Be big, be bold, be like Baklanov,
or Platov, or Ostranitsa—
stop bending over backward
before Mohammedan majesty!
Let politicians sputter—
spit in their eye!

Be like Morozhenko—
stand and testify!
Sviatoslav shall be our model:
“Here I come!” he cried
to his enemies. You northern lions,
give us back our tarnished pride.
See Yermak, see Osliablia,
our ancestors follow us—see!
Flutter, flutter, Russian banner,
lead us over land and sea!
Restore our fathers’ spirit
to this dreary, doubtful land.
Be bad as big Vladimir
or Dobrynia’s fighting band.

[1910?: T 69]

I see them: Crab, Ram, Bull,
and all the world is only shell
whose pearl and opalescence
is my impotence.
A knock, a chirr, container of whistle and rustle,
and I realize then that waves and thought are kin.
Here, there, in milky ways, women rise
through darkness drunk on drowsy prose.
On such a night, no grave is grim . . .
and evening women, evening wine
become a single diadem
whose baby boy I am.

[1909–1912: II 30]

Rutting elephants, battering ivory tusks
that seemed white stone
beneath an artist’s hand.
Stags in rut, with antlers intertwined:
they seem embraced in ancient intercourse,
in tugging ardors and adulteries.
Rivers rushed each other into the sea:
It seemed the hand of one strangled the neck of another.

[1910–1911: T 72]

People in love, casting
long looks, long sighs.
Beasts in love, raising
dregs in their eyes,
choked on their bits of foam.
Suns in love, covering
night with a weft of earth,
dancing to meet, to mate.
Gods in love, forming
the trembling universe
into verse,
like Pushkin his passion
for Volkonskaia's maid.

[1911?: T 72]

The eyes of the Black
Sea into the distance.

[1911-1912: T 74]

A goblin grabs in the greeny forest—
Wood-willy, slurping his mouth-organ—
where a clump of aspens quivers
and benefolent spruces cascade.

A smear of pungent forest honey
licky on the tongue-tip of daylight;
Oh! His grasping arms were icy:
I was completely taken in.

I couldn't stand his eyes' unblinking
point-blank confrontation—
his look, full of pleading promises,
the icicle anguish in his eyes.

Lawn-rake fingers crabbing at me
from a shaky clump of catkins;
he had dark blue sighters
and a body all mush-flesh and flow.

I had missed a turn or two, tearing
along in a juveny frenzy. Slying,
the wood-wart winked and jostled
me: "Which way where? And why?"

[1912?: T 75]

Let us all be heads of lettuce;
let us not let knives upset us.

[1911?: T 74]

I saw a tiger, he crouched by a wood
and filled a bamboo flute with his sighs;
his ferine forces contracted in waves,
and mocking fires burned in his eyes.
Beside him an elegant maid discoursed
with an elegant tilt to her head:
"Tigers and lions, as everyone knows,
cannot carry a tune," she said.

[1912, 1922: III 46]

When horses die, they sigh
When grasses die, they shrivel
When suns die, they flare and expire
When people die, they sing songs

[1912: T 75]

The law of the seesaw argues
that your shoes will be loose or tight,
that the hours will be day or night,
and the ruler of earth the rhinoceros
or us.

[1912: T 76]

The naked staghorn rising in the woods
may seem a dead tree.
When a heart of darkness bares itself in words
they scream: he's mad.

[1912: T 76]

Qua-People

A bird who wants to go higher
flies into the blue.
A lady who wants to go higher
wears a high-heeled shoe.
When I don't have any shoes
I go to the market and buy some.
Someone who's missing a nose
can go get a false one.
When a nation discovers it has no soul,
it goes to the neighbors
and buys one! Sold!
. . . and unsouled!

[1912: T 76]

Numbers

I see right through you, Numbers.
I see you dressed in animals, their skins,
coolly propped against uprooted oaks.
You offer us a gift: unity between the snaky movement
of the backbone of the universe and Libra dancing
overhead. You help us to see centuries as a flash
of laughing teeth. See my wisdom-wizened eyes
opening to recognize
what my I
will be
when its dividend is one.

[1912: T 79]

The night is full of constellations.
What advent, what intelligence
of freedom or restraint
shines in your wide pages, book
above me, what fate must I make out
in the wide midnight sky?

[1912: T 83]

I don't need much!
A crust of bread,
a cup of milk,
the sky above
and these clouds!

[1912, 1922: T 83]

The sticky sky smells blue-gray, it's the odor of udder.
Show me some loving, be good to me!
I am bleeding. You are my fatality.
I am nailed up to die on an old empty tree.

[1912: T 61]

The moon begins to flow—
reveals herself,
conceals herself,
then somebody squeals: oh!
and disintegrates the sky.
Gloss-face drapes herself
in a chorus of clouds.
Bread's set out on the table. Soup's on.
They say a naked woman
is beautiful by moonlight.
Rough voices, red faces
munching mushrooms; they
drink, dribble, bolt about.
I can't get away from you, ever.
The sky takes scraps of blue, black, gray,
quietly quilts them into evening.
And they're busy gobbling the caviar.

[1912: NP 147]

Reflections of a Profligate

But your glance is pale, horse-eye pale,
silvered with a bluish streak.
Your hair is all tangled. Shadows of vice
weave a dazzling design.

Oh, young men! Happy the man
who has never known passion's fire,
for he knows stars unseen by you
in the dark blue steep of the sky.

[1912: NP 142]

In periwinkle potion,
you earthworms, kindle
two watery rocks
in a black thread.
I'm a charred log
of obscure reputation;
it's not that I'm empty
or especially awful—
I'm just worn out,
I'm not hot anymore.
I sit here. Warm me.
Keep my face from moving
on the cliff of my shoulders,
but let the speech of someone's singing hands
awake my own hands' hearing.
For with this periwinkle water
I will find out at last—
did her scarf cut me off cold,
like winter leaving the land?

[1913: T 84]

I am borne on the back of an elephant
formed by the bodies of maidens.
Everyone everywhere loves me—I am Vishnu
anew, weaving this wintry vision.

You elephant sinews, surely they show you
in fairy-tale hunting processions
to observe that gentle flow to the ground,
that falling form, that amiable trunk.

You black-shadowed visions in white,
whiter, much whiter than blossoms,

your bodies tremble beneath me
slender as nocturnal tendrils.

I am the Bodhisattva on a white elephant:
as always, pensive and slender.
Seeing me, one of these maidens replied
with the fire of a grateful smile.

Remember, to embody a mighty elephant
is nowhere in no way dishonorable.
You virgins, enchanted by dreams,
weave yourselves warmly together.

It is hard to repeat the wave of a tusk,
to shape the form of a massive foot.
The avowal of flutes, of garlanded songs proclaims:
He is with us, upon us, the blue-eyed god!

[1913?: T 87]

The Song of One Come to Confusion

I saw black pine-needles
on a canvas of stone;
her hand, I thought, thin as bone—
then it knocks at my very vitals.

So soon? So strange, now to stand
beside you in the evening, a skeleton;
to stretch out a long thin hand
and conjure constellations into your room.

[1913: T 90]

Rue

A Fable

You know the herb they use for doses;
it grows at the edge of filthy places.
This is a tale of ancient princes:
Russia fought the Mongols here

in the lighter days of a younger year.
With a rough sack of sour complaints
the New Year took the old one's place,
with all his horde of helpmates hustling
after joking, jostling, whistling
lewdly into their country pipes
and puffing out their piggy cheeks.
But that same land no longer laughs
since the swan-song sounded overhead,
and the bones, the bones—"Rue," they madly cry
beneath their shroud of spring-green rye.
And the bones, they wail forevermore:
"We will always remember war."

[1913: T 84]

Fly! Little three-letter wordlet
busily washing your winglet,
what could be sweeter or better
than watching you swallow my letter?

[1913: NP 152]

I'm going out again today
into life, into the marketplace,
to lead a regiment of songs
against the roar of rat and race.

[1914: T 93]

A bunch of yellow buttercups.
Lightning's evil eye.
A woman drops a flower, and walks on by.
And soon the eyes of the window bang
beneath the hurly-burly hanging over our heads.
The yellow-backed book gets soaking wet.
The rumbling clouds are blue and black.
In the kingdom of hearing two castles collapse
and out jumps that powerful female cat,
the thunderstorm! . . . who glowers
at the drooping flowers.

[1915: NP 167]

Black king dance out front of the crowd,
and witch-doctors batter the tom-tom.
Big black women laugh bawdy and loud,
Pelelé stain their mouths, and burn.
The dirty cauldron bubble:
some bird bones, and a child.
Our Elder Father Helper Sun
he hurt us unaware.
Seven times the light go by,
seven times to earth from sun.
We look and see the dark turn cold.
We look and we see Requiem.
Black king dance out front of the crowd,
and witch-doctors batter the tom-tom.

[1914–1915: II 214]

Genghis Khan me, you midnight plantation!
Dark blue birch trees, sound in my ear!
Zarathuse me, you twilight horizons!
Mozarticulate me, dark-blue sky!
Goya, gloaming, glooming!
Rops, you midnight clouds!
But the storm of smiles vanishes
in cackling and the shock of claws
and leaves me to outface the hangman,
to brave the stillness of the night.
I summoned up you barefaced insolents,
from rivers made the drowned girls rise.
“Rosemary, stronger than remembrance!”
I shouted to the sails of night.
Again earth’s axis splashes round,
brings on the overwhelming evening.
I dreamed I saw a salmon-girl
beneath a midnight waterfall.
Let storms turn pines to Mamai-monsters
beneath the Batu-beating clouds;
words come on, like Cains of silences,
and all these sacred speeches die.

And to stone entertainment with heavy footfall
comes heaven-blue Hasdrubal, henchmen and all.

[1915: T 99]

A quiet perfume from the orchard,
apple blossoms and acacia.
The boyarina is fasting
and afraid that she might fall.
Dead men float.
Last night. It was glorious, ecstatic.
Dead men pull the oars.
Cold glances above a white veil
burn and sparkle,
and sepulchral shadows hush
the sweet salt savor of a kiss.
As soon as midnight waters
lap the descending steps,
the vision slips away.
They whisper simply, "*Allah bismullah . . .*"
they slip their skulls beneath the surface
and vanish in the murmur of the waves.
White snow and tenderness descending
everywhere, like the hand of Yaroslavna
on the painted Pecheneg.

[1915: II 219]

These tenuous Japanese shadows,
murmuring Indian maidens—
nothing sounds so mournful
as words at a last supper.
Death—but first a flash of life
again: unknown, unlike, immediate.
This rule is the only rhythm
for the dance of death and attainment.

[1915: T 99]

Tell your kitten not to bite,
I'll angelize you when I die.

Hokusai will paint your mouth,
Murillo paint your virgin eye.

[1915, 1922: VRi 64]

Nations, faces, ages pass,
pass as in a dream,
an ever-flowing stream.
In Nature's shifting glimmer-glass
stars are nets, we their haul,
gods are shadows on a wall.

[1915: T 94]

Beast + Number

When the blue shimmer of the damsel-fly
shines through the smoke of villages,
A Thing appears, some new conception,
and shipwrecks intellect on Number's shore.

"Children, children!" the priest exclaimed,
when he heard the Athenian envoy speak.
About the austere neck of Number
mind and matter hang like a cloak.

When mortal minds tire pondering
some equation—wine-dark, foam-born—
their goal, remember, is to tower
until they touch the sky.

Replace the stake, the block, the cross!
Think of Number as an iron device.
Even the whirlwind slackens,
confronting Number face to face.

I write these lines in ink: Believe me,
the day is near that glorifies us all!
And the rough beast slouches in silence,
a pair of virgin ciphers in his paw!

But when he hears the tender tumult
of these voices and these days,
he will fall down as if struck
upon the rocks, upon the rocks.

[1915: T 100]

Autumn this year is a rabbit affair
and no eye can distinguish
the shivering season from the shaking beast.
Shifty, all yellow,
autumn-color dweller.
Dead leaves and stubble
on hillside and swamp-stump
everywhere, and even the eye
blinks blindly, not knowing
one quick shiver of fear
from another.

[1915: VRt 76]

A Vague Memory

Remember?

I ordered the shoeshine boy
to scrape the Little Bear
from off my shoes;
I tossed a coin to the universe,
then 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. 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?

[1915, 1922: VR1 36]

Herd of hoofsteps, ingots 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.
Let us outsmart the wolf, *ur*-scribe of the Russian land,
and praise extinct incisors, murderous combat.
Let's break the necks of dialects like baby geese.
We are bored to death by their honking.
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 buttercups with blood from our fragile 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 generations.

[1915–1916: OS 9–10]

My elbow brushed
a warm breast:
Awake, daughter of diversions!
The bridge reached its claw
into the fleeing footsoldier.
The bridge was built of drowned men's bodies.
Death sat combing
her virulent hair

and like swarms of gnats, expendable lives
did what they could to attack her.
Their thick cloud
wreathed the gravestone pilings.
Almighty Amazon!
Your hair grows heavier, heavier.
I'll collect your combings, make me a pillow,
and someday I'll smother you.

[1915, 1922: VR1 73]

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!
Men are dished up for you
on platters 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—
supplying graveyard worms 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 flaunts the corpses in her clothes,
let's shout, as men did once before:
"Monster of Death, beware my 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.

I firmly believe the day will come
when Allah scrawls "Stop!" on a shovel of stars. [1915, 1922: VR1 82]

"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!

"Come get your young men, your dead men,"
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 beside a silver rabbit pelt,
trussed up by the knees, in the larder
next to the meat and eggs and cream!

Consolidated's up and 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? [1915: VR1 75]

Bad News, April 8, 1916

Who, me? Me too? This triumph of torpidity?
This anti-Onegin?
Me, offended that people are the way they are?
Me, who watched the *R* depart from Russia,
Me, reared up by all that is best in Russia,
 brightest and best,

Me, tangled in the brightest of bird-song?
I've got witnesses!
You thrushes, swans, and cranes!
Me, who dreamed my life away?

Me too? You mean I'll have to grab a gun
(a dumb thing, heavier
than handwriting)
and go marching down some highway,
beating out 365×317 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?
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 from our fingers
the prophetic visions of our ancestors.
Though we have learned to fly.

I'm bitter, I haven't got words to describe
one I loved, who betrayed me.
No, 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.

[1916, 1922: VRJ 61]

The King is out of luck;
The King is under lock

and key.
Infantry Regiment Ninety-three
Will be the death of the child in me. [1916: NP 410]

I am in Tsaritsyn, where
rivers run like maiden hair.
An unknown fate, an unknown fight
where bow-strung trees obscure the light . . .
Infantry Regiment Ninety-three
will be the death of the child in me. [1916: T 104]

The too-often reviewed book of my face:
white, white pages, two smudged moons.
Behind me, like a dirty peewee,
bed-sheet Moscow moans. [1916: T 103]

Palm Sunday

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.
The drying palms 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;
in the nacreous shell of my heart
I bear the spiteful hiss of my whistle.
Chains and bolts on ancient gates,
a beggar, and a crooked stick.
And the power of human shoulders
shines beneath rags, O knowing astrologer!

[1915–1917: OS 13–14]

Cloaked in schools of flying fish,
harsh, the fish-god frowns.
Blast, boom, groan, moan,
helter-skelter—and it's gone.
Beyond red sheets in flames,
men's bodies twist and blacken.
The pounding 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, weave your seaweed 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,
steel to cut blue smoke to pieces.
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 would not watch an iron wheel
run over the eyes of a sparrow

stares at the muzzle of a bestial snout
that shoots with the strength of 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.

[1916–1917: OS 15–16]

Battle in the Comics

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. Her shell of steel
now flies through the air, and a 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
looks up from his glass of beer,
threatening us with destiny and shame
as he shakes away the foam.

[1916: TS 19]

Someday I’ll forget about Swanland,
and the love 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 yahooing 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 and beat 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 stride 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,
encircling Planet Earth 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! Stud, steed!

(See the cruel prophecies of language.)

We share a single destiny. That yoke
on us lies easy, like our middle names.

[1916: TS 19]

Oh, if only Asia could dry my face
in her hair—her warm golden towel—
after my swim in this cold stream!
See me now, an awkward shepherd,
braiding the Rhine, the Ganges, and Huang-Ho.
And a cow's horn here beside me—
a sawed-off horn and a piercing reed.

[1916: T 103]

Tatlin! Poet of propellers,
austere oracle of airflow!
One of the Sun-catchers!
His unmoving hand twists spider-
rigging into a horseshoe curve!
Giant forceps of imagination!
Dumb-struck blind men stare
at what he shows us.
Inaugural, unheard-of,
these tracings of metalwork miracles!

[1916: T 104]

I

When, in imitation of Tolstoy,
I first read Caesar's *Commentaries*,
his stultifying list of names
buzzed in my Volga-fed imagination
like swarms of flies. And I remembered then
what the old Egyptians used to call
all foreigners: the buzz-buzz people.
Your time is over, Caesars! Pass on by!
My voice has roused the buzz-buzz world!

But I recall the woman carved in stone—
the basin and the water jar she bore—

the measured sweetness of her singing,
the sea each morning sighted in her eyes.
I rose to meet the Cyprian wave
in you, the Virgin Sea.
My secret rabbit heart—
through snow-mad visions in your hands
and curls that whirled in conversation
like spinning flakes of snow
it falls astonished at the idol's feet—
see, it is no dying warrior-monk
who recognized you in the statue's song.

A stalk of rye, a ray of light,
the fearless hive
of goddess-golden bees,
braided gently.
Unbridled, mad, I read out loud
and tore apart the roebuck dark
while through your fingers, down your snowy neck,
that innocent alignment flowed.

You laugh at that! That—
full of distance, blaze and distance,
heavy, dark, foreboding,
the iron ingots of your hair—
that beauty. It's a bore.
Any hot young Hun will say so.

.
. . . but you are tall and slender, elegant,
a rainbow radiant with smiles,
you are sheaves of new-mown grain, a row of rye.
Your glance is a ray of Danube sky,
you shout: "The world surrounds me!"
For you the ivy spells out salutations,
and cherry blossoms fall when you appear—
fabulous cousin to the family of flowers!
You are all things delicate and beautiful—
the shake and shimmer of the water reeds,
the half-heard murmuring of half-hid lotuses,

where swans in dreams by willow trees
sing their exalted song.

[1916: II 241]

On a Hill

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.

A stream of crimson silk unrolled
out of the evening and over the grass.
Across Galicia on the backs of wolves,
the shadows of night-riding demons.

[1916, 1922: VRr 59]

Unbending as Boris Godunov's boyarina,
you sailed on past today, swan on a lake,
And I'd been expecting as much, I suppose.
I hadn't read daybreak's letter over.

But remember, once you were really divine,
the goddess of this place, all-knowing and passionate,
your braids like evening doves descending
to perch on your suntanned shoulders.

It really was you! You hid in the rye field,
rusalka-like, playing the lyre-strings of your braids.
It really was you! To make yourself beautiful
you oiled your body with honey, enchanting the bees . . .

Their golden beads
you wore like jewels,
on face and eyes and hair.
You taught your voice to punctuate

with the commas of bee-bites,
unwilling to quarrel with joy.

Here Our Lady walks the rye field,
moves at night through fields of rye;
here I grew to feel as I feel
and became no longer I.

Here had no “yes,” will have no “but”—
what was is forgotten; what will be, who knows?
Here the dove descends at teatime
and Our Lady lays her washing out in rows.

[1916, 1922: T 105]

Is it the voice of the goddess of foam,
a breeze in the poplars, or is it a dream?
Or only the fatal word “him”
beating against the wharf?
Or 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 the figure three, staring from storm-clouds!
It’s a flock of gray gulls!
It’s eider-ducks quacking!
Full of strength and courage,
he crosses the belted horizon.

[1916, 1922: VR1 54]

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,
the banner of the beautiful Savior!
I will never hide behind . . .
Follow him, follow him!

To No-man's-land!
To that green field in *Niemandland*,
beyond the leaden Nieman river,
To Nieman-land, to No-man's-land, follow, believer.

[1916, 1922: VR1 60]

Their faces by Maliavin,
their flowers Korovin's color,
these women have captured a flier, and scurry about.
The downed sky-wagon sticks in their throats.
They don't like the German, he is well-fed and fat.

[1915-1919, 1922: VR1 74]

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 defiant hole
in the skull of his father's son,
and into the hole quietly stuck
the fragrant twig of the Milky Way—
among the blue pearls of the dew;
in that skull, like a glass,
lived the Russtic twig of the Milky Way—
O sheaf of stars, you intimate of heaven,
whose fires bear a grateful tribute,
winged wonder, fly!
I wear the whole of Planet Earth
on the little finger of my right hand,
and I speak to you. You!
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 across
my hand stretched out to the stars.

[1917, 1922: VR1 48]

People in washhouses rush to scrub their souls,
rush to a mirror to powder their consciences,
as someone, flaring his maniac nostrils,
howls in their ears: "You know nothing?"
So many people put on collars
and then didn't know how to behave:
stand on tiptoe and hang from a branch,
or write down the names they ask for?

[1917-1918: BM 34]

Moscow's a crazed old skull
of letter-eyed buildings,
a slave who hangs from a sword,
a slave of unwept evenings.

I'd hone a stone and shear
them clean away, these walls
where kids hip-hop and die
like late-lamenting leaf-fall.

Night's lady casts no shadow, ever,
with the black torso of her eyelashes—
she moves away toward half-shut eyes
while I stand dumb, and she forgives me.

[1917?: III 28]

Yesterday I whistled: 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 in his teeth.
His whiplike beard 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 witches all in glowing garments,
dripping their foul guts behind,
do their horse-dance on our eyelids—
and still we call them women.
They whirl in a ritual witch-dance
screaming, "Vele! Vele! Vele!"
They grind their cigarettes out on the sun-disk
and streak like specters out of sight.

[1917, 1922: VR1 32]

The shining shower dripping from the oar
exalts the water-sailors in its blue.
Explorer, in your incorporeal crown!
We watch and wonder, see and believe!

Describe the man: hair bright as dawn,
tawny as stalks of ripening rye;
eyes like floes of ice in oceans
where walruses dive.

Like blue pearls, flames
entwine to make an icy crown.
His deeds forgotten now,
he stands apart, remote.

But he stands with his hand fixed
at the helm. His weapon rests.
Does he search for something on the sea?
Does something somewhere search for him?

The wind grows harsh, then harsher,
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!"

[1918, 1922: VR1 70]

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 shields, tough and unyielding—
"Now let the people rule themselves,
everywhere and forever!"
Let girls lean out their windows and sing
about wars our grandfathers went to,
about freedom for us, the people victorious,
faithful citizens of the Sun.

[1917, 1922: VR1 51]

The people raise the rod of sovereign power
and bear it lordly through the city's streets.
The people rise to act! . . . before, they dreamed.
The palace, like some wounded Caesar, stoops.

Wrapped in my Imperial cloak, I fall
slowly, and by infinite degrees.
Their joyful outcry, "Freedom shall not fail!"
echoes even in Vladivostok.

Songs of Freedom, once again you sound!
These hymns to bomb and bullet strike a flame.
The people make a monument to Freedom
in the railway car where I signed away my crown.

The winged spirit of that late-night council
squints with an iron eye along the machine-gun
barrel; but the fury of abuse, the shame—
that wields the knife, and hurts me mortally.

What have I done? Splashed the people's blood like dying robins
across my fallen banners left in flames,
while I lay back beside my harem-mistress
and dressed her in a string of baby names.

Days of abuse! The dreadful cry of dreadful pain,
and now—corruption and malignancy!
In every worn-out coat I see Danton,
and Cromwell hides behind each tree!

[1917: T 107]

A hundred and ten thousand seals weep—
their eyes are human seeming,
these languorous deities of water,
furred lamentation murdered in ocean
while earth turned round
in twenty-four hours,
and closed their eyes.
The encircling sea is Arctic.
See, the humanoid descending from heaven
might have been the seals' Buddha,
might have been even Mohammed.
Wasn't, and the floe is full of blood.
I will weep with the seals,
feel their pain.
In a blood-filled puddle on the ice,
humanity's heaven
stained with earth.

[1919–1921: V 64]

Freedom

Whirlwind of raging intelligence,
onward! For the goddess' sake!

The people raise their swan-wings,
Labor's blood-red flag!

The fire-bright eyes of Freedom—
beside them, flame is cold!
Hunger will raise new icons
as soon as we topple the old!

We are friends—let's move to the music!
Forward! For Freedom's sake!
Let us rise again from the dust of earth,
all men at last awake!

Let's advance on a marvelous journey
to the sound of a thunderous march;
if the gods are still in their prisons,
we'll give Freedom back to the gods!

[1918, 1922: T 112]

Wind whose song,
wound whose wrong?
Sweat of sword
to turn to word.

People fondle death
like a flower.
The East now plucks
the strings of power.

A shining-mountain magus
may refurbish our pride:
sheathed in reason like an iceberg,
I become the people's guide!

[1918–1919: T 112]

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!
Knight's men are moving, checkmate is near.

[1918–1919: T 458]

Warrior! You choose a cue from heaven's rack
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 flares against the darkening sky
with Mayakovsky's poetry.

[1918–1919: T 462]

The land where Izanagi
reads *Monagatori* 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 Quetzalcoatl
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!

[1919: IV 259]

The sayings and sallies of spring
poke through the pages of winter's volumes,
and somebody blue-eyed reads
the scribblings of bashful, blushing Nature.

A little gold ball flies through the net
of a budding poplar's branches.

These days the golden coltsfoot moves
like a huddle of golden turtles.

[1919: T 113]

Alive with glad tidings,
a spring-green Koran,
my poplar up early expects
emissaries of dawn.
Out to snare the sun-fish
in the blue pond overhead,
it tosses its meshes
and neatly nets the bellow of bulls,
a lazy-pacing thunderhead,
and the clean fragrance of a summer storm.
My poplar-angler,
green-stand of Nature,
you cast your green meshes
high and wide from your trunk
and there! the god of springtime
gapes, a sun-fish astonished
in the boat-bottom
of every glistening leaf.
Green mouth greets high heaven,
eats it up! Snare for sun-gods,
my high-flying poplar
with horn-roar and wind-blow
unleashes a wallop
that washes the meadow
in a wave of blue vodka.

[1919: T 114]

Why are these eyes forget-me-nots?
It's also the month of Ay!
Hear a woodling's flute
in the nightingale's note,
it's also the month of Ay!
The little woodling runs away—
Do the fauns still play?
I sing to while away my day!
It's also the month of Ay!

And piping Pan
is a rough and randy country man—
it's also the month of Ay!

[1919–1920: III 105]

Water eats at the rippling roots,
flows still near the shadowy trees.
The wind wavers at odd
or even. Nets hang still by the weir.

Perspiration blurs the hazy air.
In a place where they never heard of grief
a brooding, sunburnt boy grew up;
a girl grew up beside him.

Nighttime reeds on the bank shiver
and weeds in the water tremble,
and some tall, white-faced figure
stands near the trees, indistinguishable.

[1919: T 116]

Whorlen of the worldwide will,
the otheren of graygrow time,
stillfallen blanketing the field—
the selven that are names of mine.

[1919: T 627]

This whole day is full of blue bears, they
beat the bushes of unruffled eyelashes,
and beyond the blue water cupped in your eyes
I foresee a sharp dictate: stop dreaming.

In the silver spoon of your searching eyes
the sea sends a stormy petrel toward me,
and Bird Russia—see!—through uncharted eyelashes
wings its way to the sounding sea.

Yet love's black sea breeze overturns
someone's sail, it sinks in round blue water

and it's all over—spring storm, clear sailing—
all of it now only a hopeless wallow.

[1919: T 113]

A black crab on a white plate
clutches a stalk of dark-blue rye.
The conversation veers from weather
to this sea of laziness and lies.
But wait, an unexpected outcry—
“Behold, we die before our appointed day.”
Like Caesar once, to hide his legs,
draw the curtain. That's the way.
Die, my dear. The people stare,
but if their looks hit home,
no matter. You lean back, eat your fill,
and say: “Why worry? Looks can't kill.”

[1919: T 116]

A congress of politic grackles,
the grackles' autumnal assembly.
A stretch of woven willow fencing,
light rays drowsing in the wind.
Their mindful mouths keep making
mournful cries that drift in air.
Backwaters idling in the river,
snowy linen stretched along a line.
Three girls were guessing fortunes—
Who's the boy for you, who's mine?
and the doves keep constantly flying,
marking their too-brief time.
Everywhere shadows are lengthening,
spreading a pall of willow over me . . .
. . . not yet!

[1919–1920: T 117]

Crawling crying craven
stains the twilight sky
falling where the raven
turns the why-light of his eye.

[1919: VR2 210]

My Campaigns

A herd of horses dressed in men
wheels and runs when it sees the sea.
Fear of the sea! It swells beyond estimate,
spreading like measles among children.

But the name Vera expands like Siberia
waiting to confront her own Yermak—
verdant, vernal land, where birds grow still,
where the fabled fortress *A* will yield up all.

The splash of nonexistence, beyond all faith
in Vera's verity, reflects me like a mirror.
Oh sorrowful deep of the sea, sounded
with the swack of a bandit's bludgeon!

[1919–1920: T 117]

Now that the lilt of nightingales
shrivels, and the cry of the first 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 strange cold hair
invites me to taste the cold wine
of those "Egyptian Nights" . . .
by Pushkin.

[1920: VR1 55]

Where the sun like ready money
shines alike on good and bad,
I lie alone beside my gypsy,
picking time and straw apart.

Day is blue and night is black,
two halves of a single whole;

I am your slave, I kiss your feet,
we embrace, one single, shining soul.

[1920: VR₃ 270]

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!
The first of May comes pouring down.
The merry month of May!
Now is a young maid's sweet hay-day!
I chant and enchant, I call, I croon!
I sing the jolly month of June!

[1920: VR₄ 79]

Tough Talk

A fist in the face,
that's how I kiss.
Red,
redder
than the rough rowan-berry,
splashing splashes,
a shaft of red,
cherry blossom bough—
split lips.
And the air all howl.

[1920–1921: V 755]

Sweet Talk

Things today
are soft
and wise—
sweet surrender
sails the skies.

[1920–1921: V 75]

Night's color breeding darker blues
drifts over everything, all of it worthy of love,
and someone called out, the sound of it oppressive,
sobbing, full of the anguish of evening.
A moment once, when golden light,
three stars, flamed in boats on the water,
and a lonely juniper brushed
its branches over a gravestone.
A moment once, when giants bound
scarlet turbans on their heads,
and the wayward surge of the sea wind,
wonderful, never knew why.
A moment once, when fishermen's voices
echoed the words of Odysseus,
and beyond the swell in the distance
an upward wing, above the sea wave hovering.

[1920: T 118]

You boot-stomping workers in the poetry factory,
workplace where conveyor belts move thoughts,
shoulder your cargo of words:
heavy packing cases
where wedding rings
and maybe dead bodies
are stored away in sawdust;
cartons labeled "dead love"
packed with bits of scrap iron—
leftover angry ideas;
the sigh of a dying girl
as she falls back on her pillow;
the universe gleaming on the double wings
of damselflies by the lake,
bubbles of joy in their mouths—
shoulder them, ship them on underground roads—
bales of rustling and noises,
of clatter and whistlings,
swarms of secret midnight sounds—
to closed eyes.

They lie there, such a smiling heap
you almost want to run away,
run back to where god is a brutal god
and passion means arrows of pain,
squinting again with the bleary
drunk-at-midnight eyes
of wornout paths and outgrown places.

Leave the stamps and shipping labels:
stuck-on signs that tell the world
exactly how we got here.
Devil, god, virgin, plague,
birth and dying, faith and dirty words—
knives in the belly of god.

[1920: III 144]

The City of the Future

Here public dwelling-spaces, single fold,
rise upright, like pages of glass;
here they shouted, “No more stone!”
once human reason took control.
Glass blocks, transparent rectangles,
spheres, angles, expanses in flight,
transparent mounds, a concentrate
of clear glass honeycombs,
echoing streets built with these strange blocks,
and towering ramparts, dazzlingly white—
here we enter the City of the Sun,
where all is balance, order, and expanse.

Where the sky pours down from a beaker of blue
held in *rusalka* hands in the open dark,
and the scarlet sphere that domes the height
wreathed in hairfrost of glass, gleams
as its knowing eye probes night—now!
and a gaze that pierces heaven
flows ablaze into the ink of night.
This palace of the people now commands

the covering roof be rolled away
to contemplate the ranks of constellations
and amplify the law of retribution.

Where a solitary needle-tower
stands guard at a street corner,
the glass-walled thoroughfare, chamber
upon chamber, stands guard over silence;
in a colorful, transparent swarm
old wise men looked down from the walls.
In a stream of gold, about the dome
they watched, these wise old men,
searched for the truth, testing the patterns
of networks passed on from fathers to sons.
And the murmur of swarming human beings
was heard by this holy fraternity.

Like a book of black pages
the city cuts the sky in two,
and night's encircling emptiness
grows larger, and a deeper blue.
Above the depths of these transparent streets
of massive glass, within the deep,
ranks of blessed figures stretch themselves,
at one with the fire of heaven.
Tearing the coarse cocoon of life,
a mass of bright transparent windows
beneath great spheres and domes
will tell of herds of bygone visions,
will tell the dreams of bygone time.
Here in the sheer-walled, towering temple,
the fathers of the race of mortals
appear at the edges of the dome;
but their faces, like windows,
like a net, cannot hold back the light.
On this black jut-out, chorus-like,
the people of the new observance stand.

Platforms of steel that move on rails
and transport crowds in common heaps,

a palace of glass, erect as an old man's staff,
raises its own axis, alone against the dark clouds.
Vibrant beltways transport dwelling spaces,
sun-space after sun-space, a silver exaltation
of smiling cloister-cells, easily fixed in place,
blue strands of smooth glass homesteads.
And, casting light into these canyons,
the proud summit's florescence,
tall pillar blossoming with dwelling-spaces.
Wrapped in summer lightning-flash
it rises, ascending flute for monumental music.
Chorus of strands, strung perpendicular,
cascade from your height!
I will remember forever
the joy of these transparent walls.
Scour this city, you winds; move evenly
over this network of cellulose and meshes,
over these glass books, opening their pages,
over these axial needle-towers,
over this forest of austere surfaces.
Book-buildings, palace of pages,
glassy volumes on display,
the whole city is a sheet of reflecting windows,
a flute in fate's uncompromising hand.
And like the shoulder-strap of a barge-hauler
wearily dragging the sky behind him,
you cast glass canyons far and wide,
you have cut the pages of this volume of glass
and opened it, like some huge book.
Waves of transparent weave you curl one on another,
floor upon floor you pile beyond exhaustion;
you speak, and words resound in lions' mouths;
you multiply in mirror-fragment multitudes.

[1920: T 118]

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 new day?

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 wipe 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?"

[1920: III 123]

Asia

Always a slave girl, your breast bronze
with the birthmark of kings;
instead of an earring, your ear gleams
with a government seal.
A girl with a sword, innocent of conception,
or an old woman, midwife of insurgency.
You turn the pages of this book
whose writing is the grip of ocean's hand.
Human beings glitter in its dark ink!
A tsar is shot—an exclamation point!
Triumphant armies are commas,
and lines of dots become a field
where madness roars unchecked—
the people's anger, no mistake—
bracketed by gaps between centuries.

[1920: III 122]

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 each morning for fuel—
I have seen them go 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,
Yangtze-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 to face 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 idly,
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 breast
of ocean, to rest in the osprey's bed.

[1920: III 68]

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,
and the farmer refuses to haul his hay
into the exhausted city,
then suddenly there's news:
pills of Cossack lead prescribed
for anything the past held dear.
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 Kruchonykh's editions.

[1920: III 56]

Two Moscow imagos,
traveling mystery plays:
The naked nailing-up
of Marienhof . . .
the transfiguration
of Yesenin . . .
("And God brought forth a calf,
and wrapped him in
a fox-fur jacket!")

[1920: T 122]

To Alyosha Kruchonykh

A Game in Hell, hard work in heaven—
our first lessons were pretty good ones
together, remember?
We nibbled like mice at turbid time—
In hoc signo vinces!

[1920: T 126]

Someone wacky, someone nutty.
Time began to blow toward autumn.
Gray cells compartmentalize,
grille work set before his eyes.
Hoopla, hype, and hip-hooray,
a bigger blast than Judgment Day!
And here, in a scrawl he now regrets, he
's drawn by his nemesis Gorodetsky.
Tra-ta-ta! Get a load of that!
The sound of another way to skin a cat!

[1920: NP 177]

Like a flock of sheep peacefully grazing
they nestle asleep in their box.
Matches. Once they were gods, puffed with divine fire.

A twig, the dry drop of its sulfurous head—
this was man's ancestral horror,
the wild god of fire, the sad-eyed,
red-haired hurricane.
Lightning came down on our ancestors' straw-roofed houses,
the oak tree splits and smoulders,
women and children, old men
and dark-haired girls, their flying braids,
all of them flee to the forest, turning to look
and crying, raising their hands to heaven,
toward sharp teeth in the forest, toward the hiss
and shudder of snake bite, a meal for swarming mosquitoes.

The caves flare with wild fires:
here gold-tongue and green-tongue and blue-tongue burn.
The crimson god, green evil raging
in his rabid red-rimmed eyes;
once beaten out by a woman's stick, he raises now a twisted club:
his anger destroys the settlement.
Neighbors rush from their caves, ready to plunder the village.
Spears and knives, cries of war!
"God is with us!" the war-cry!
And all as they pass snatch from the god
his club and his long red hair.
"God is against us!"—in the forest
the burned out villagers weep.
Our howling ancestor, wild as a wolf,
watching his house become ashes.
All gone, except for the coals, snarling and spitting,
Except for a handful of cinders.
Wolf-eyes gouge
the darkness. Women weep.
The good house, the house-goods, gone—
the skins and the fish lines, the spears
and the deer meat, delicious to eat.
He flees to the hills, swift-foot escaping.

And now their descendants sing war-songs—
"We are with us!"—and have invented matches,
which means they are equally godlike

and stupid.
To subjugate lightning by shutting it up
in such narrow confinement!
“*We* are with us!”: hear their harsh cry
even at the moment they die.
Know that! Remember: we are with us!
These are the men who invented matches—
tame flock of divinities,
the god of fire confined at last.
The victory is a great one, and it is terrible too.
They have brought down fire
for stoves and machines
from the storm-filled, threatening heavens,
the original matchbox whose matches
still threaten the world.
Huddle of fire-sheep, golden fleece,
they lie side by side in their box, peacefully sleeping.
But once like a saber-toothed tiger
they tore men to pieces and chomped them,
horribly flaring their golden manes.

I now myself, greedy to gather my victories,
will engage as well in another austere task!
I will invent the matches of destiny,
safety matches of destiny!
I will drench my mind with destiny,
I will douse it and set it on fire!
“*We* are with us!” Matches of destiny,
matches of fate, matches of destiny.
Who’ll be my comrade?
I’ll strike destiny alight
as often and as much as I must
for this matter of life and death.
The very first box of matches of destiny!
Here it is! Right here!

[1921: T 130]

The Neva knows the look in those Last Supper eyes.
Here, the blood of saviors
commingled yesterday

with the body of the North
in stale black bread.
Love lies like ashes upon the river,
workingmen's love, a writer's love.

The Neva knows the look
in those Last Supper eyes—
in her cast-iron horses,
the austere stonework
of her Stroganov Palace.

The beds of dried seas
rise as the river's banks.
Cobwebs entangle
the graves of the tsars.
When the triple lamps burn
on the bridges at evening,
the stream runs red.
A kiss on the mouth.

[1921–1922: VR1 65]

Girls are the ones
whose black-boot eyes
trample the flowers of my heart.
Girls who lower their lashes
like lances over the pools of their eyes,
girls who wash their feet
in the pond of my poems.

[1921: T 133]

Evening darkens round
the poplar stands its ground
the sea has its say
you're far away.

[1921: T 135]

Easter in Enzeli

All these green gardens with golden eyes—
the gardens of Enzeli.

Here's the *portoghals*, the *nâranjes*
that showers dark branches
with drops of golden dew,
and the chinchona tree,
whose pale-blue bark
is a swarm of snails.
There are no *nâranjes* in Baku,
there's only the Nargin refinery
that poisons the fishes,
the sheatfish and sturgeons.
Beneath wide-eyed skies
I've heard stories
of deep-sea divers driven mad.
Darkness. Quiet.
The sky is deep blue.
The little gypsy sun appears
and silvers a buttermilk sky.
An Armenian goes by,
hauling a barrel of *ji-ji*
for somebody else.
A bunch of buddies, arm in arm,
howl a drunken chorus from the song
about Razin's Persian princess—
and they won't go home till morning.
A clap of thunder, the singing stops.
Listen, a boat-horn, the *Trotsky*:
the *Trotsky* approaching the dock.
Morning. They sleep, they snore,
while singing waves beat on the shore.
Morning. A crow perches high
on the top of a *portoghal*,
cawing out to Mother Russia
like a Kursk nightingale,
splitting its wheezing sides.
Back home, up north,
they call them croakers;
I remember a wild Kalmyk once,
from the Volga flatlands,
telling me crossly:

“Gimme more money, some
with the croakers on ’em.”

My feet, tired out in Kharkov,
covered with cuts in Baku,
laughed at by kids in the street and old ladies,
I wash now in the green river-water of Iran,
in stony reservoirs full
of fish more gold than fire,
that echo the orange trees
in endless tame herds.
In Zorgam’s canyon
I cut off my hair, grown long
since Kharkov, since the Don
and Baku—my dark wavy hair,
a tangle of thoughts and desires.

[1921: T 136]

Iranian Song

Down along the river, by the old Iran,
by the cool green ripple
by the deep dark bank
where the sweet sweet waters flow,
a pair of drifters one day walking,
walking, waving pistols, talking,
shooting fishes as they go.
Hold it, honey . . . got ’im! Right between the eyes!
Two men walking, two men talking . . .
I’m almost sure I remember this right.
They made fish soup, but they didn’t make it often.
“Gotta believe, it’s a tin-can life!”

Way up high a plane is flying,
magic carpet in the sky.
Where’s the carpet’s second cousin,
the magic tablecloth that covers itself with food?
That tablecloth has been delayed in transit,
or maybe even landed in jail. Now I always knew

fairy tales could come true:
today's hard fact was once a fairy tale.

And of course I believe there's a great day coming,
but by the time it gets here I'll be six feet under!
When the great day comes and they gather over yonder
and the flags start waving up ahead,
I may wake up from the dead
but by then I'll be a dusty bunch of bones.
Should I throw all my rights
in the furnace of the future?
Hey you hayfield, blast and blacken!
River, turn to stone forever!

[1921: T 141]

Night in Persia

The seashore.
Sky. Stars. I lie back tranquil.
No feathers for a pillow, and no stone;
just a sailor's cast-off shoe.
Like Samorodov wore in those Red days
when he raised revolt on the sea
and moved the ships of the Whites to Krasnovodsk—
into Redwater.
Getting dark. It's dark.
"Comrade, lend a hand!"
An Iranian calling, cast-iron color,
gathering brush from the ground.
I pulled his strap
and helped him hoist his load.
"Saool!" (Or thanks, as we would say.)
He disappeared in the darkness.
I whispered in the darkness
the name *Mahdi*.
Mahdi?
A beetle flew out of the black
and pounding sea,
flew straight at me,

turned twice above my head,
furled his wings, and settled in my hair.
He was calm and quiet at first but
suddenly began to make his sound.
He said distinctly what he had to say
and we understood each other!
A pact in night and darkness
signed by beetle-sound.
Then he hoisted his wings, his sails,
and flew away.
The sea erased his sound
and the trace of a kiss on the sand.
All this happened!
Just as I've told it here.

[1921: T 144]

The Opium Smoker

Work in blank wall eyeglasses
squats over tomorrow's lessons.
Eager to make the truths of work self-evident,
secret corners of the sunstruck streets
are full of shady stories, squalid lairs
where a solitary shot rings out! . . . No, only groans
that soon draw from the dreamer all intelligence
of doing day-to-day what day must do.
He sucks dry-mouthed, but sucks sweet honey,
and with this venom as his pilgrim staff
sets off to find the drowsy shore of dreams.
Immediately the holy blaze of fire,
the hammer beating on the soft red iron,
everything vanishes. The armor-plate of fantasy
seals up a sober mind.
Upon these plains grow only chains,
but he hears nothing now, not voices in the street,
not evening, enchanting, flowers of words wasted
yesterday, nor voices prophesying vanities,
the slow sea-sound of daily cares.
Forgotten, all of it. Work vanishes

in thought-smoke, in familiar favorite dreams . . .
but this captive in iron chains of smoke
is caught in the cloud of his desires,
and down his sleepy road he goes
to paradise, the smokey rites of paradise,
where people vanish. Adam is alone.
It's almost day. Dawn blisters in a crack of night
and see? A slave again. He goes to work.
But that same shore still beckons,
and in debts of iron chains he seems
a boat adrift, upon some night-smoke Volga.

[1921: V 34]

An Oak Tree in Persia

Set like an empty jug
on a tablecloth of tangled roots,
an oak tree spreads centennial leaves
beside a hermit cave.
Its rustling branches
sound the accord
of Mazdak and Marx.
"Hab-ma-oo!
Wah! Wah! Hab-gan!"
Jackals run, urging
each other like wolves.
But the branches shiver with echoes
of songs from the days of Batu.

[1921: T 144]

A wild old hank of hair,
a dark plowed field—his forehead.
Burnt stumps in swamp water—his lips.
A wild goat's udder—his beard.
an anchor rope—his moustache.
Snow White with a black broom—his teeth.
His blue eyes full of sleepless nights,
like holes in an old blanket.

[1921: LO 110]

I saw the young man, the young prophet,
lying by the glassy strands of a forest waterfall.
where moss-covered trees stood grave as old men in the twilight,
telling their beads on the strands of overgrown vines.
Like a mother-chord of glass, a chain fell into the chasm,
a chain of mothers and daughters of glass
born of the waterfall, where the mother of water
changed place with her children.
Below, the river murmured.
Branches of trees like clustering candles
filled the ravine's empty volume, and its cliffs
were inscribed with the alphabet of the centuries.
The monster boulders beneath the white water
formed a forest-girl's shoulders,
the one this naked holy man had come overseas to look for.
He had sworn to be Razin in reverse!
Will he throw the princess overboard again?
Reverse-Razin fantasies!
No. Never. As these towering trees are my witness!
Dousing himself in the icy stream,
learning the thoughts and speech of vital coldness,
of an icy body, of another world,
the young man sings:
"I have turned the waves to women,
and am wedded forever
to Zorgam's *rusalka*.
He could only turn a woman to a wave."
The trees whispered the speech of centuries.

[1921: T 148]

I am a wave, I roll down
the white face of Iranian mountains,
I see myself reflected
in the black stalk-eyes
of a crab scuttling crossways
as a mammal-eyed maiden
rides by on her donkey,
and her gray-haired father
hides his head in a collar of net.
I ran

with the wave, divided now
by a beluga's tail
and sea jelly,
and Einstein's radio
about the sun's specters
was printed out on the doubled . . .

.

branding me with the letter *A*.
A ray struck me and gave me *P*.
I rose like a wisp of steam
into the air,
went up in smoke like a stalk,
like a white tree,
an innocent birch beside the sea.
And the scheming Oriental wind
washed me with wing-sound,
sent me swirling northward.
I tickled the crude
American brush
of an airman's moustache,
and the wheel of the heavenly wagon
echoed in my ears.
Shadows of dew vanished
in white puffs of night.
A fire-tail moved itself heavily over
a toothy snake of mountains.
In Moscow I fell
in the snow, awoke
to the sound of shooting
from an ammunition dump.
Here I melted into
a tear fallen in the snow
from a girl's eyelashes.
In the snow I left
the poet Briusov's imprint.
I sailed the Oka
to Nizhny Novgorod.
Fishermen followed me closely
with their gray eyes, beyond me
they followed the movement of pike

along the net.
In Nizhny I wound up
willy-nilly,
Volga-Volga,
in a young man's mouth
and traversed the stomach
of one Khlebnikov,
then I rose as a ray of light
to a star,
and there a scientist
said:
behold this fragment
of an unknown star.
Study him: you may thus decipher
the entire process of life
upon that star.
There I found leaf-people
(they were equilateral)
with forked tails
who move by bouncing,
like balls.

[1921–1922: V 101]

The smell of night, inhaling stars
into my frenzied nostrils,
water broken on a bed
of nails, babbling into foam.

A figure passes, you, and on your head
a green turban of dried grass—
I recognize my teacher, your face
burned bonfire black.

And another approaches,
exhausted as all Asia. See?
He holds in his hand
a small red flower.

[1921: T 145]

A stream of icy water
where I splashed like a rattle-brained mullah
and enjoyed it.
The Cheka had sent for me, calling me thirty miles
for an interrogation.
On the way, we ran into some donkeys.
The rider turned to look.
We galloped about four miles.
“Eat some!” the rider broke a golden-baked *churek*,
some crumbly cheese, and a blue cluster of wine,
passed them across to me as we rode.
(A clutch of blue snake-eggs
without the mother around.)
We gallop again, chewing
these heavenly gifts as we ride.
The horses feel the rub of cut leather, the girths of the saddles.
A smile brightens my comrade’s face.
“Eat, comrade, eat some!” Again as we ride
he holds out his hand with the ocean-eyed cluster.
So we went riding the two of us, off to an interrogation,
over the foothills of mountains.
The dry milk of buffalo crunched in my mouth,
and then the pure wine-juice in its tiny balloons,
and the golden-baked flour.
Beside the trail stretched an overgrown forest
and there stood an ancient tree-trunk, wound
head to foot in the gloom of a hop-vine:
only a wild boar could break it, and then going fast as a bullet.
The remains of campfires, dark spots
whitened by ashes, scattered bones.
A shepherd and his flock of a thousand sheep
now and then flooded our path,
black waves of a living sea.

Suddenly, twilight.
A dark gorge loomed.
The river ran dark beside us,
stranding its blue lace on a thousand stones.
It was dark, suddenly, and a net of scattered drops

veiled us. That threatening gorge was suddenly
a book of stone for some other reader,
open to the view of some other world.
The mountain village was thinly settled, the *saklyas* seemed
like letters in a language we could not understand.
A red rock there rose straight up into the sky,
a quarter of a mile straight up, and someone
 had recently been reading it.
But I could see no reader now in the sky,
though he might have been somewhere close by
perhaps, wrapped in a turban of rain.
The river below us chattered, doing what rivers do,
and the heights above us were shadowed by lonely trees.
Those stone proclamations of bygone multitudes of years
were beautiful, standing there straight and uncrumpled.
That petrified newsprint hung there in accurate lines.
Does it speak of the bustle of commerce? Or describe some love
 both gentle and formless?
White clouds above the stone gazette moved like fingers
 toward some multiplicity of centuries.

A few days later the Cheka concluded its useless inquiry
 and I rode away.
Ravines where I climbed, pits of an empty riverbed
where shrines of the plant world lay concealed,
and an old pear tree in a garden, covered with the flower
 of the gods,
mistletoe, spreading its wide dominion, turbulent city,
a great tree tormenting trees of another race made bloody
 with blossoms—goodbye to you all.

Goodbye to you, evenings when shepherds, gray nighttime gods,
 led back their herds to the golden villages.
Buffalo wheeled and ran, and the taste and odor of milk
rose like a tree against the sky
and dissolved into clouds.

Goodbye to you, indigo eyes of the buffalo cow
beyond the black mesh of her eyelashes;
her maternal glance caresses a calf, and the people around her.

Goodbye to the nighttime darkness
when the dark and the buffalo both
flowed as the same dark cloud
and every evening I smoothed my hands
across their pointed horns—
vessels on the heads
of sad-eyed women,
their hesitant plod.

[1921: D 107]

Ra, who sees his own eye in the red rusty swamp water,
envisions his dream and himself
in the young mouse quietly nibbling the swamp grass,
in the young frog blowing pale bubbles, signs of his manhood,
in the grass-green field that cuts a red line
on the figure of a girl who bends with her sickle
cutting reeds for fuel and for home,
in streams of fish that sway in the water grass,
trailing small bubbles.
His eye awash in the Volga.
Ra, who extends into thousands of animals and plants,
Ra, whose leaves have life: scampering, thinking, rustling, moaning.

Volga-eye!

Ra-zin!

A thousand eyes regard him, a thousand *zir* and *zin*.
And Razin,
who was washing his feet,
straightened and stared for a long time at Ra,
until the crease in his neck became a blood-red line.

[1921: T 148]

Attentively I read the springtime thoughts of the Divinity
in designs on the speckled feet of tree-toads,
Homer shaken by the awful wagon of a great war,
the way a glass shakes at a wagon passing outside.
I have the same Neanderthal skull, the same curving forehead
as you, old Walt.

[1921: V 66]

Russia and Me

Russia has granted freedom to thousands and thousands.
It was really a terrific thing to do,
people will never forget it.
But what I did was take off my shirt
and all those shiny skyscrapers the strands of my hair,
every pore
in the city of my body,
broke out their banners and flags.
All the citizens, all the men and women
of the government of ME,
rushed to the windows of my thousand-windowed hair,
all those Igors and Olgas
and nobody told them to do it,
they were ecstatic at the sunshine
and peeked through my skin.
The Bastille of my shirt has fallen!
And all I did was take it off.
I have granted sunshine to the people of ME!
I stood on a beach with no clothes on,
that's how I gave freedom to my people
and suntans to the masses.

[1921: T 149]

Kruchonykh

Little apparition with a London air,
still a kid at thirty, wing collars and all,
perky, brisk, and skillful.
You keep that Siberian ending, that “chonykh,”
chained to your name like a prisoner on a rockpile.
You take other people's ideas and repeat them
till you beat them to death.
The face of an “Englishman”—
or maybe an indentured bookkeeper
tired of his books.
Skillful editor of scandalous texts,
lazy, unshaven, and slipshod,

but with eyes like a girl's
full of tenderness, sometimes.
Enormous gossip, tricky as they come,
a lover of personal put-downs.
You enchanting writer,
negative double of Burlinuk!

[1921: T 165]

Burlinuk

You galloped around with a big fat brush in your hand,
and your red flannel shirt and red-cheeked face
were a constant offense to the streets of Munich.
Your painting instructor
called you
“A wild mare
from the breadbasket of Russia.”
You just laughed,
and your belly shook with storms of joy
from the mighty breadbasket of Russia.

You knew your strength, and that wild “Ha-ha”
was the way you responded to everything.
One-eyed painter,
wiping your dark glass eye
with a handkerchief, drawing “Well-l-l . . .”
then fixing it behind a monocle
with a tortoiseshell holder,
and like a drill bit
from behind your glass armor-plate, your trench,
with a look and a disbelieving “Well-l-l . . .”
you poked your interlocutor full of holes.

You could turn instantly dark and distrustful.
That single eye
gave you enormous strength.
You never revealed your secret:
that lifeless crystal ball was your familiar,
and helped you tell the future.

Whoever faced you was under the spell of your will,
instantly bewitched by those dark glassy depths.

Your brothers and sisters, all powerful laughers,
had the bodies of giants
and shortbread complexions:
they looked like sacks of coarse-ground grain.
Bursting with health,
this one-eyed artist fixed a circle of glass
like a third eye in front of his unseeing one.
Sometimes the outlaw-songs of the southland
rang in the studio, and a jackdaw at the window
flew in to see what was happening.
And windows rattled far and wide
to hear the roaring Burliuks.

Mountains of powerful canvases were piled against the walls.
They sparkled with circles and angles and rings:
a black raven, its beak glittering;
crimson canvases hung beside green ones, painfully dark;
others heaved like hillocks, their rough
shaggy surfaces like black sheep shuddering;
bits of mirror and metal gleamed in their coats.
Your brush laid on the paint in heaps, like deposits
of clotted blood, a rash of colors.
It was all a display of devices, it was writing
on method and lessons in diligence,
and all of it only a spell cast by Burliuk's dead eye.
What power was it that crippled
your still-unacknowledged strength,
with insolent authority stating:
"Burliuk was a low-down knife
in the back of poor Art"?
Didn't Balashov put a nice slash
(it was done over heavily afterward)
in Ivan the Terrible's face?

Russia, that ever-widening continent,
has widened the voice of the West,
as if repeating the cry of a monster

a thousand times vaster.
You giant of fat, your laughter rolls
from one end of Russia to the other;
you sheaf of the Dnieper
grabbed in the estuary's fist,
a fighter for the people's right to a titanic art:
you have given the soul of Russia
an outlet to the sea.

The strange breakup of painterly worlds
was Freedom's forerunner, deliverance
from chains. So Art marched on
to the great song of silence,
and you advanced like a weight lifter
through the rich fat lands of the steppe,
gave the peasant hut a hope
of making the land its own at last,
and its barn-mountains gilded by sunlight
gave hope to the migrant workers of woe.
Harvest-sheaf of the Dnieper-mouth,
even those lumps of man-mud
obeyed you.

The beat of your giant heart
and your fat laugh alone
set chunks of cast-iron waves in motion.
Your voice sang songs of revenge and sorrow.
You have burrowed excavations into
the burial mound of cast-iron riches,
and emerged like a hero from the burial mound
of your ancient native land.

[1921: T 163]

I have come like a butterfly
into the hall of human life,
and must spatter my dusty coat
as signature upon its bleak windows,
across fate's windowpane.
Human life is papered thick
with a boring pattern of dull
gray leaves; with my dust

I must inscribe my life
upon the windowpane of fate,
upon fate's staring eyes.
If only I could find an open door
to that other world, where birds sing
and the wind is blue and everything,
even death in the jaws of a damsel-fly,
is sweet.

My dust forever fled,
my wings forever faded!
The transparent *no* of these windows!
Beyond them shimmers and flutters
the love of butterflies!
See how the love of butterflies
dances above the breezes!
Already I have worn away
my bright blue glow, my pointillated patterns;
The blue windstorm falls from my wings,
their bright motes vanish forever.
Stiff and colorless,
I droop despairing
at the windows of the human world.
A branch of flowering numbers scrapes
at the windows of this alien abode.

[1921: DP 216]

Weary wings of the dreamstead,
river of blue skystead,
names of not-here, calls of no-there,
fly-bys, these fledglings of flight
who drift away into their dreaming,
airways of cloud-cover shifting,
hurrying hover, like dark-blue Temnigov.
Their nevering songs of youngshine,
their creak-note of darkening sunshine—
they are a bright blue Stilland,
these never never fleeing things
who fly away into their Everland.

[1921: LO 110]

Fate hides her yawn, rolls over,
and again we lie
face down in sleep
and tear the pillow cover with our teeth:
our only native portion is the earth.

Damn! All thumbs
here at the shelves' edges,
deep-sea divers, staring at stars—
what are we looking for?

We float from the pillow into heaven,
a crooked-finger tail the only line
holding us to Planet Earth;
we bend our steel-suited body back and forth

and in our nightlong madness
sink into the sky. Fate has lured us
into night's bottomless emptiness.
Is this our crowning achievement?

Through the face-grating we see the sky,
and in our fury pound against our helmet.
So what? Fate shuts the book of dreams,
yawns us to scorn.

Like a drunk for his vodka we long for
the bar above, the Zodiac Club, begrudging
night its hallowed exaltation.
Damn! This grating between us!

Think of the caged ape, who bares his teeth at man. [1921: III 215]

Babylove, don't your eyes ever get tired
of being so wide and beautiful?
I want to call you little brother—will you let me?
If you do I swear by my own blue eyes
I'll hold up the flower of your life and protect it.

You and I are alike, I fell from the sky
just like you, and the world keeps causing me grief.
I wasn't what they wanted, never have been,
I'm a loner
and no one can love me.
Let's be brother and sister. You want to?
We're both of us free and the earth is free,
we won't be afraid of their laws, they can't hurt us,
we'll make our own laws
and model the clay of our own behavior.
You're my flower of blue, you are beautiful,
I know that, and everything's tender and sudden
when you talk about Sochi and sunshine
and your eyes grow wide when you do it.
I've been doubtful of everything all my life
but now I believe, instantly and forever:
a trail has been blazed ahead of us,
and no one can ever obscure it.
Let's avoid a lot of useless words.
I'll be your long-haired priest
and just say Mass.
We'll drink the blue waters of purity,
and names will never hurt us.

[1921: T 151]

The year the girls first called me "Gramps"—
giving me the go-by in their voices and acting
as if I was old—they put me down
because of my body, a plate not bashfully
dished, maybe, but still not eaten up yet—
in that healing-house by the Narzan stream
I sluiced down my body,
got stronger and stronger
and pulled myself into a man
once more. Veins reappeared in my arms,
my chest grew stronger,
and soft silky hairs
started to cover my chin.

[1921: T 157]

The lice had blind faith, and they prayed to me.
Every morning they would congregate on my clothes,
every morning I visited punishment upon them
and listened to them crackle and die.
But they kept on returning again and again
in a quiet worshipful wave.

[1921: T 161]

Russia, I give you my divine
white brain. Be me. Be Khlebnikov.
I have sunk a foundation deep in the minds
of your people, I have laid down an axis.
I have built a house on a firm foundation.
“We are Futurians.”
And I did all that as a beggarman,
a thief, a man with a curse on his head.

[1921: T 161]

With the grabhooks of wholesale slaughter I will pull down the old
order of nations,
with the ink of disease I will proof the rough draft, the pages of the
human manuscript;
with the crowbars of epidemics that follow great fires I will roll out
the ridgepoles, the foundation-pilings of nations, and frame up a
new dwelling.
I will fashion a new edifice with the hacksaws of tuberculosis,
I will cut out a new nation.
I will wrench nails from the walls with the ripsaws of typhoid fever,
and thus I shall extend myself, my great self,
and wear this sun of yours as a ring on my finger,
and examine it all through the lens of a puppy dog’s tears.

[1921: V 100]

Three years of civil war—
a slaughterhouse of gun and gain,
the howl of unbearable pain,
the wounds of cast-iron shells.
On a high hill, tail between his legs,
a wild-eyed stray dog begs.

A soldier takes aim at its pelt
and pulls the trigger.
Farmhouses are extinguished, blown out
like matches. Bang! Bam! Boom!
The village is all smoke and smoulder
from one end to the other.
The tiny belly of a yellow tomtit
swells, he sings: Ping! Pang! Pan!
What swagger, my God!
The ruin of law lies scattered
all over the place.
Two canisters of poison gas
have been fired at the village.
Tomorrow not a single living soul
will open a single eye.
The fields are oceans of ripening grain
but there's nobody left to reap.
No one will survive. Pity the man
who tries to run: a bullet will cut him down.

[1921: LO III]

Bow! Wow! Wow!
Black bunch
Bow! Wow! Wow!
Running dogs
Bow! Wow! Wow!
Rage in snow
Bow! Wow! Wow!
Outside town
Bow! Wow! Wow!
Rip the dead
Bow! Wow! Wow!
Drag someone's leg
Bow! Wow! Wow!
Drag someone's arm
Bow! Wow! Wow!
Belly Blood
Snout Snow

[1921?: V 73]

War and wildness part his hair, blowing it
across his shoulders, out of his eyes.
Time, terror-stricken at his speeches,
caught in rays of silence, dies.

The front of his skull slightly curves,
the line of his bull-brow is hard.
His insolent mouth never moves,
holds in check volcanic hordes.

Did she like him because
the sight of blood never bothered him?

[1921?: III 229]

The fault is yours, you gods—
you made us mortal, and for that we let fly at you
the poisoned arrows of our sadness.
The bow is ours.

[1921?: V 66]

When I was young I went alone
into the dead of night;
my hair was thick
and touched the ground.
Night was everywhere
and oh it was lonely,
wanting friends
and wanting a self.
I set my hair on fire,
threw the bits in a ring around me;
I burned my fields and trees
and things felt better.
Arson in Khlebnikov Acres!
Burning ego flickered in the dark.
Now I depart
with flaming hair,
not as I, but WE—
Our Rhineland enemies
fear the stink of famine and disease across our border.

Come, Nansen, upright Norseman,
bring back our law and order!

[1921: *Daugava* 7, (1986), 111; VRJ 120–121]

People stared in horror; souls in anguish wept.
They threw a sheaf of grain upon the ground,
then with their wives went rushing east,
heard the hum of airplanes overhead.
The steppe in flames,
the holy hills on fire.
Again in children's eyes
the Mongol hordes arise.
The grain is gone . . . an angry God
has smashed it flat.
Refugees go rushing east.

[1921–1922: T 177]

Hunger

I. In the Woods

Why do the elk and the rabbits run,
abandon the woods in autumn?
People have eaten the bark of the aspens,
the green shoots of the fir trees.

Women and children wander the woods,
gathering leaves from the birch trees
for soup: birch-borscht, birch-bouillon.

The tender tips of fir branches, the silvery moss—
Food from the forest.
They'll start getting teeth like the elk
from eating the trees.

Children out scouting for food
swarm in the forest.
They build campfires, they barbecue worms,
they fry caterpillars, they eat skunk cabbage,

they dig the fat grubs of the staghorn beetles
and stuff their hungry faces.
They bake their bread out of goose weed,
and chase butterflies out of hunger.

The smallest children babble like babies,
their eyes enormously empty.
Their faces are transparent windows
and hunger, self-satisfied landlord,
leans from their faces, at home there.

The children are wasting away:
their mouths stretch hugely from ear to ear,
their eyes like sunglasses—blue glasses, brown glasses—
glint in their faces like shiny reflectors;
their noses sharpen to knife-points,
like candles set out on a grave.

Kids in the forest,
chasing a rabbit who scampers away.
They stare in delight, watching him go
as if he were an angel, a vision of heaven—
but he vanishes, fleet apparition,
flicking the somber ends of his ears.
The children stand blissfully still—
what a wonderful dinner he'd make,
if only we knew how to catch him and eat him!
Grasses are their bread and butter,
with yummy weeds and hay for dessert.
“Look, there's a butterfly! Somebody catch it!
Somebody run, there's another, a blue one!”
“My acorns are gone! The people have eaten my acorns!”
the scampering squirrel chatters angrily.
The moles and the field mice have vanished,
and hen coops are only a memory for foxes.
All the rabbits are anxious—
Whatever became of the cabbage patch?

II. In the Village

1

In the hut next door with the board roof
a grim-faced father
broke up the bread into breadcrumbs
with hardened fingers.
Only to look at.
It wouldn't fill a sparrow, the one
that chirped just now.
You eat with your eyes nowadays.
"Times aren't right," the father muttered.
The black bread looked like topsoil
with bits of ground-up pine cone.
At least their eyes can eat.
Mother stood by the stove,
white with pain.
Black coals of hunger
burn in the pits of her eyes.
The thin slice of a white mouth.

2

Roast mouse.
Their son fixed it, went and
caught them in the field.
They lie stretched out on the table,
their long dark tails.
Today it's a decent dinner,
a real good meal!
Just a while back the housewife would shudder
and holler, smash the pitcher to smithereens
if she found a mouse drowned in the cream.
But now, how silent and peaceful.
Dead mice for dinner
stretched out on the table,
dangling dark tails.

3

They used to have a cow but they killed her.
Traded her for sacks of flour

and now that's all gone. One of the neighbors
killed her, none of the family could.
Blackie. She had heavy sides
and her udder held a full pail of milk.
She had big horns, and she really made a bellow
when she mooed for her baby in the evening,
and waited for an answer.
The little girls cried.
But they all ate the little calf anyway
once they were down to horse meat
in that village.

4

A boy down by the creek
caught three frogs yesterday.
They were big and fat and green
and "better than chicken"
he said to his sisters, who smiled
with glee. Last night
by the fire they chattered
cooked their frogs and ate them.
I wonder if maybe today
they get butterfly borscht.

5

Dinner's ready, and here's the first course
in the old iron kettle: boiled-up chaff.
It's good for scouring stomachs.
Children, come eat your boiling water
and your little bits of straw. Your soup.
The children sit down, now you stop that,
you're big kids, you stop that crying, hear?
And they all got serious faces
and nobody laughed. Nobody fooled around.
Mother stood by the stove like she used to
but she held her face in her hand and cried.
The kids got quiet and scared
like something mysterious happened
or somebody died.
Their eyes were dark and their mouths still open

and dinner was over.
Then the kids went away and disappeared.

6

In the corner, mother's eyes
grew dark and stared.
And what's for seconds? A hole in the ground
where all embrace. They will lie down
huddled together,
fathers and families:
fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers.

7

It has the unassuming face of a burnt-out candle.
Fire-eye, lacking its lashes
of downpour and rain.
It burned our fields, our land,
whole populations of stalks of grain
shaken like straw.
The fields grew smoky and the grain turned
yellow as death and fell.
The grain shriveled and the mice ate it.
Is the sky sick?
Does the sky hurt?
Where are its watery lashes?
What became of wet weather, and pounding rain?
Furious fire-eye, burning our hayfields,
our grasses and gardens,
constantly burning, its cloud-brows gone.
People sat down in a daze
to wait for a miracle, and
there wasn't one.
They were waiting to die.
This was sky-blue disaster.
This was drought. After a run of caring years,
this changeling.
Now everything—grain and rain—
plays false with the farmer's labor.
Didn't the plowman's sweating hand

scatter good seed that spring?
Didn't the farmer stand all spring
looking up, hoping for rain?
Fire-eye.
Naked golden glare,
burning the fields
of the Volga plain.
The fires of heaven were merciless.
They burned four regions whose names begin with S.

8

“Eat it up, puppy,
and hope you won't die!”
a mother shouted to her youngest
then ran from the farmhouse.
The sound of laughing and crying
came from the hayloft.
Her eyes flutter like black moths
caught in her eyebrows.
What's that noise from the ravine
in the woods, those feet
moving forward?
Downpours of eyelashes
vanished that summer . . .

9

Dust in the air near the ravine
in the woods.
A crowd rushed out to the green hills,
to the three tall pines,
all of them hurrying, anxious—
sticks in their hands,
long pointy beards,
anxious and hurrying,
running and rushing, all of them,
grown-ups and children, it was hunger that did it.
They were trying to find the holy land,
the dirt you can eat just like bread
and never get sick from.

People were running. Rushing.
You're all we have left, now
that everything's different!
Earth! Dirt!

10

Hunger herded humanity.
Men, women, children,
they fill the ravine
rushing to find the holy land,
the earth that makes do for bread.
Dirt, our silent savior
beneath the roots of century pines.
And at that very moment scientists' minds
were striving toward other worlds,
seeking to fashion a dream of life
out of earths made fertile by thought.

[1921: V 75]

The Tree

1

Above the scarlet glances of the raspberry bushes, among rejoicing
doves bluer than sky,
you trace the thorny highway from Berlin to Bombay!
When spiteful autumn comes, and the sons of summer wildly careen,
your sharp thorns lash about, poke eyes,
scratch the servile human face.
Along the steel fabric that rolls from Moscow to Vladivostok,
Siberia, you move like gray night's whistle through the blue.
And the route of Siberian trains, shamefaced and green as they
hurry to abstinence,
ends in the blue, in the sadness of flower petals.
Where midnight is mirrored in the curls of earth's oakgrove,
nothingness flows like a river, the path of the branches is broken
like a horseman's gallop, like the wailing of prisoners condemned
"to the wall."
Fighting over open spaces, bright with shamans' eyes,
spearing night on the black points of your branches,

Tree, you have terrified the oakgrove: space hangs from the hooks
of your branches.

The Cossack rider, his long hair streaming, flies across the field.

The lance in his hand trembles with war-fervor.

You tap at the window of the starry sky.

But the darkness has no eye.

2

I swear "I will with wrath repay my neighbor."

Rattling the Russian war-club, oh, the rustling of nighttime
branches!

And crushed the nightingale to death.

You spin night's oxygen into a sinewy drag-net
and challenge the firmament!

The resonant *thwack!* of a club with a thousand leaves!

And even the moon's at fault:

In the meshes of the drag-net,
night's colors glitter

with the heavy silver of fish scales.

And every morning Nietzsche echoes in the forest.

And every morning, sunny indigent,
you take your glasses off and beg for pennies!

The stars—even the ones up there—
talked all night of the fair-haired herd.

There are fights and fights,
and the forceful rights
of an outlaw's fist.

Bird-catcher stuck with stars,
your caveman hand trains a black bow
on the long extent of years
and you stiffen suddenly, like a hero
of underground slaughter.

Under and above ground,
the two-faced city, its thousand windows
plunging into earth and into sky like fishes.

You rise straight as a Cossack spear,
you battle for capacity, seem to seek Lobachevskian space,
and the young men seek a sword to swear an oath on.

Dressed in golden helmets

your troops march into the almost-dark.
God on our side! The warriors ride!
Here Yermaks lead their leafy troops
to overwhelm Siberias of blue.
Child of war, dressed in dove-song
you drape the blackthorn bush in autumn,
you know the sound of pine boughs scraping.
Warring with roots, slowly engaging the enemy,
the forest path trails silver smoke.
There:
troops of leaves move slowly
to besiege the sky,
so slowly decades pass before
they take their predecessors' places.
A branch tucked under an arm, like a warrior's spear,
like a bird, its beak wide open against blue sky.

[1921: NP 277]

The air splits on the black branches
like old glass.
Pray to Our Lady of Autumn,
the stained-glass windows of autumn,
smashed by a sprinting bullet, they wrinkle.
A tree burned like a torch in the golden air,
turning, bending.
Autumn's steel is angry,
striking sparks of golden days.
The forest a prayer meeting. All at once
the shaggy golden caps come off.
The trees stretch out like hayrakes
gathering armfuls of sunshine.
Their autumn branches diagram
the map of Russia's railroads.
The golden wind of autumn
has scattered me everywhere.

[1921: III 186]

The Moscow of the Future

In the claws of clanging plates,
stiller than the mouse in the owl's claw,
dwelling-spaces soar
into empty frameworks, combs
for humanity's honey,
honeycombs abandoned
in a hive deserted
by its austere inhabitants.
Above the Mississippi yesterday
or over the dusty Yangtze-Kiang
the house-unit hung suspended,
then soared, and with sensuous ease descended
into a palace of idle delight,
a palace of blessed idleness.

Eaten away by departing flights,
a tall vast building stood
bare as an autumn leaf, and heard
the hum of the departing dwellings.
A leaf in a city chewed bare
by the worm of flight.
A leaf of decaying autumn,
a transparent skeleton,
its flesh decayed and gone.
Let the cells of living tissue fly away—
the transparent patterns of tendons
and veins preserve the dry trace
of a leaf in autumn.

With the skeletal frame of its tracery leaf,
a palace of idleness raises
its sail of canvas glass.
It rises above the Oka,
dark with hollow slots,
with a grid of empty spaces,
a grid of deep housings

for a winged settlement,
like a hall full of chairs
when the crowd has departed—
“This is a Congress of dwellings of light,
an Assembly of glass houses.”

[1921: T 162]

Today Mount Mashuk is a hound dog,
all white, with clumps of birch-tree sparks.
A bird above him, freezing cold,
flies south toward Piatigorsk.

. . . Flies on a spark-spewing train,
forgets the stillness of mountains
where autumn stoops to glean
what grain still lies in the hollows.

And then what? A mindless return,
though the poor thing’s wings are frozen.
Their eyes are grating as lawn-rakes,
their hearts are wintry and cold.

Commerce has speeded their lives up,
turned their eyes grim as gunshot.
And now they sport a pair of ears
to hear the hucksters hawk their wares.

[1921: T 157]

The Solo Actor

While Akhmatova wept and her poems poured out over Tsarskoe
Selo,

I unwound the enchantress’ thread
and dragged myself like a drowsy corpse through a desert
where all about me impossibility lay dying:
a worn-out actor, a face-faker,
looking for a break in the wall.
But meanwhile in dark caves
the curly head of that subterranean bull
kept up its chomping, devouring men

in the smoke of insolent threats.
And wrapped in the moon's inclination
like the lated traveler in his drowsy cloak,
in dreams I leapt upon the precipice
and moved from cliff to cliff.
I moved like a blind man, until
Freedom's wind directed me,
beat me with slanting rain.
And I cut the bull's head from the hulking meat and the bones,
and set it upon the wall.
Like a fighter for the truth I shook it in the world's face:
Here it is! Look!
Here is that curly head the crowd once blazed for!
And with horror
I understood—no one could see me.

I would have to sow eyes.
My task was to be a sower of eyes!

[1921–1922: VR1 66]

At the backwoods whistle-stop
the sign says “Khopry.”
The wind has left “aurant,”
knocked the “rest” to the ground—
the wild wind of the past three years.
Wind, wind!
It beats the tin sign and shouts: Here's your life!
Grunt, groan, strain, the whole fraternal
mass is packed on a train, sent
rolling along on its way—
and merrily all together we shout: Hooray!
Fate, can you spare us a smile?

[1921: T 168]

Dinner

Laughter and raised glasses in those eyes!
The game of the universe begins!
Hide-and-seek with life and death,
blindman's bluff—and death the blind man.

Just like the moon that lights the sky,
the ax-blade rises over that bull-neck.
A man sits
and fishes in the sea of death,
and his long hair's reflection in the water
shines like a sunflower.
He catches life for maybe half an hour.
A thick slice of homemade bread
lies like the mighty Volga-bank,
an escarpment of invective, a place
for old Razin to stand.
He rises like a wave,
and the universal wave
beats on humanity's shoreline.
Icons of flesh
above the frame of a gaping mouth:
hunger's temple.
Loaves of gray bread
loom like dark clouds.
Death after death in weary waves
lashes at humanity's shoreline,
splashes and breaks, *rusalka*-like,
on humanity's rocks.
Day ran on
in the rough-out coat of a clanging alarm.
In the great capital cities—
fear to fall, call to kill, will to wail—
striding, like the shadow of Razin!

[1921: VR1 30]

Don't Mess with Me!

You hot-shot young hustlers,
you air-heads, look out!
There's a new man in Moscow
in old Pugachev's coat!

We didn't go through
all the blood and the mess

so you'd have fur coats
and could laugh at us.

We didn't sacrifice
our lives for this—
to see cheap crooks
sporting diamond rings.

Why should I lie here
and rage all night long?
I'll sail down the Volga
and sing my song!

The black boats of evening
will carry our crew—
and who will go with me?
My comrades, that's who!

[1922: T 174]

Let the plowman leave his furrow
to watch the crow that flies across his field,
and let him say: That cry contains
the fall of Troy,
Achilles' howling anger, and the weeping queen.
As it circles (its jaws
are black) above his head,
on a dusty table—let there be lots of dust,
and let the dust form circles, curves
like the gray insides of a wave,
and let some schoolboy say: That dust
is Moscow, there, and that's
Beijing, or a cowfield near Chicago.
Capital cities have circled the earth
in the eye of a fisherman's net.
The sound of various worlds produces
a planet Chicagoed in knots of dust.
And let a bride, who would not want to see
mourning bands beneath her fingernails,
scrape the dust from under them and murmur:

Here in this dust burn living suns,
and my nails' cold flesh has hidden
worlds no mind dares comprehend.
I believe that even the light of Sirius must fail
to pierce the dark beneath a fingernail.

[1921–1922: T 167]

The Future

If the wind comes to kiss me
I'll describe how the blood has congealed,
caked itself in my gray hair.
And this pair of lead pearl eyes
will ask . . . Tell us your name, they'll say . . .

And there will be more weeping
than in a week of meatless days.
There will be beautiful colors,
an eyebrow will scratch a grackle's wing,
cradling the constellations in madness.
There were beautiful colors—
snow-white, black, and gold,
there were women on horseback, Revenge's handmaidens,
who went flying from weapons, dwindling in flight.
Skyscrapers burned in their eyes.
They were seeking a path to the skies.
Their lips shone bright as scarlet snow,
and kept devouring distant corpses.
Across a thicket of imploring arms
the white horse gallops, and gallops hard.
Fate has spoken: "Like flowers in springtime,
the galloping rider will gobble you up."

[1922: VR1 77]

Suppose I make a timepiece of humanity,
demonstrate the movement of the century hand—
will war not wither like an unused letter, drop
from our alphabet, vanish from our little gap
of time? Humanity has piles, got by rocking

in armchairs forever and ever, compressing
the mainspring of war. I tell you, the future is
coming, and on it come my superhuman dreams.
I know you are true-believing wolves—
I squeeze my shots into the bull's-eye like yours—
but can't you hear Fate's needle, rustling
in her wonder-working seams?
The force of my thoughts will inundate
the structures of existing states—
I'll reveal the drowned city of Kitezh, risen by magic,
to serfs blinded by the old stupidities.
When the band of Presidents of Planet Earth
will be thrown like a green rind to feed appalling hunger,
then the rough lug nuts of existing states
will yield easily to the turn of our wrench.
And when the bearded lady
throws the long-awaited stone,
that, you will say,
is what we've been wanting
for centuries. Ticking timepiece of humanity!
move like the arrow of my thoughts!
Grow as governments destroy themselves, grow
through this book, let Planet Earth
be sovereignless at last! PRESPLANEARTH alone
will be our sovereign song.
I tell you, the universe is the scratch
of a match on the face of the calculus,
and my thoughts are a picklock at work
on a door, and behind it someone has shot himself . . . [1922: T 170]

OK, Graylegs,
you're pulling Planet Earth, so
how about a little giddap and go?

A plow of stars
hitched to your traces,
a whip of dreams—
and we're off to the races!

I write poems about it all
to put oats in your pail.
What would you say to ancestral hay?
It's a special honor, so don't say neigh.

I'm not making fun
of your coat of gray;
I love you, old girl,
and I just wanna play!

I'll fill your old pail
with a cup full of oats
before the universal brawl
to conquer the skies.

Like cool water flowing
I say where I'm going
and describe the great Numbers
that pasture my thoughts.

I fed you so we could
catch hold of our sail,
though of course you like oats
and a full water pail.

I fed you because:
My soul is a seer
who has seen in the skies
the constellations beginning to rise
and the thunderstorm fly like a bird.

White-maned—our friend, you know?—
whose mane shines bright in the mountain snow.
“OURS,” say letters of clouds in the sky,
and that means . . . keep your powder dry.

OK, Graylegs. You're pulling
Planet Earth, so take care.

Koltsov's Graylegs.
Tolstoy's Old Gray Mare.

The Milky Way!
Who's calling me up there?

[1922: T 173]

Cresting spines
of towering stronghold-books,
pages of glass habitats
on which to print inhabitants.
Here are cities: living books
ruffling their own pages,
towering stronghold-surfaces,
books set upright, bound in back,
where thundercloud plough-horses
shake sheets of blue lightning from their manes.
O write of rights, uprighting rites!
People gathered into human haystacks,
stowed as cozily as drying hay.
In the glass canyons of this city's streets
the balladeer calls us to play.
A city undefiled by scabby walls!
Habitable, populated pages,
glass woven into habitats,
shiny flatirons, pleating their inhabitants
into crisp, unwrinkled folds of symmetry.
Shelves of books, whose author's name is Sound,
whose common carcass—those who read the book.

[1922: VR1 81]

Three *V*'s, three *M*'s, three words—
your name towers over your father's!
Tall as a teamster,
you chew up the steel of silence!
Cracking away with a whip of words,
you stampede nations in nervous tandems!

[1922: T 170]

Who?

The guy
with the elephant neck
and enormous awkward easy honest ears,
with his lip curled down on the words “That’s that!”
sticks out the iron chin
of a leader of men,
pushes his way out, breaks out, flies out!
A pilot who laughs
as his plane cracks up in midair
and the gloom of the universe glitters
like an iron bird exploding with laughter.
A soft tender lip, a pouting lip,
a hulk, a hero with five-foot shoulders—
Who is he?
What he does is, over and over,
with a voice that sounds like a smile,
he strikes the blazing match of his wit
on the sole of stupidity’s shoe.

[1922: T 175]

Acknowledgment

No this is no joke, no surly style,
no flowering of perfect vision.
This is fate. This is fate.
V.V.! Mayakovsky, you and me!
It’s we, it’s us, we’re—what’s the Soviet
word, mumbo-jumbled all together,
the USSR word,
with the righteous ring of the local lingo?
Just say it out loud:
SLOBS!

Let’s both of us be proud
of the rigorous destiny of sound.
We’ll stand together at the tree of silence,
stained with the names they call us.

We'll defeat the Turks of doubt
like Jan Sobieski at Vienna.

We are iron tsars,
let's jam on our heads
the iron crowns
of SLOBS,
and—draw sabers!
From the scabbards of the past! See them shine!
Sleep, uneventful days.
Shhh!
Sleep, old moans and groans, like Merezhkovsky,
the weepy old papa of our pastorals.

Sounds are the source of life!
We shout out defiance
and slam a wild song
into the face of heaven.
No longer SLOBS,
behold the MAN!
Let's raise our rough-hunk scaffolding
over humanity's swarm.

[1922: T 171]

You feel my summons—
my saber here against your shirt.
You've got no shirt.
Repeat after my saber: The emperor has no clothes.
What we accomplished with a breath of air
I summon you to carry out in steel.

[1922: T 175]

To You All

Revenge. The word exists.
My tears are ready.
The snowstorm whirls,
spirits without a sound.
I am stabbed full of holes

by lances of spiritual hunger,
pierced by lances of hungry mouths.
Your hunger is hungry,
in the stewpot of tasteful pestilence
it scrounges for food, in a profiteer's pocket!
And then I'll collapse, like Kuchum
on the lances of Yermak.
To pierce the hunger of the lances
I must murder my manuscripts.
Oh god, to find the pearls of those I loved
on a fishwife screaming in the street!
Why did I abandon that bundle of pages?
Why was I willfully stupid?
Not just the mischief of shivering farmboys,
burning my books at the stake—
everywhere hatchets and axes
and the bodies of my poor poems.
Everything this three-year period has given us,
poems, maybe a hundred in all,
a circle of faces known to you all—
everywhere you look, the bodies of murdered tsareviches,
everywhere Uglich, that godforsaken ugliness!

[1922: T 179]

Hey, holy man!
Old graybeard!
Tell me, who are you?
Monster or man?
What's your name?
And the hills answered:
Monster or man?
What's your name?
No answer.
He carried a white book
before him,
reflected in the blue water.
On it were old Glagolitic letters,
and the wind that worried his beard
tried to keep him from walking
or carrying his book.

And in it was written:
“Beware of a horse with three legs,
beware also three-legged men.”
Hey, holy man!
What are you after?
And the hills answered:
What are you after?
Who were your ancestors?
Where are you from?
From a land where two
hitch themselves to the plow,
and a third plows the earth.
Three peasants in a black field
and a cloud of crows.
Also a herdsman cracking his whip.
A pack of demons hide in its tangles,
dodging the raindrops;
they will help him take care of his cows.

[1922: T 180]

I'm not just some carnival barker
huffing and puffing my cheeks out
and squealing like a wet baby.
No, I come from a communal grave
where the bell of freedom lies buried.
I raise my hand to be recognized
and stand to speak about danger.
I've shown you the route you must follow,
it is long and obscure and uncharted
and there are no great bonfires burning
on your deck for the broiling of beef,
or on the decks of your friends and relations.
Yes, I've revolted, I've fallen;
the clouds kept me covered
and cover me still.
But you fell yourselves a bit later, didn't you,
awakened by the memory of tumbling that distance,
shaped me unwillingly
into this earthly shadow in stone.
Because I wouldn't let you forget the stars,

because I could feel the quick of these beggars' lives,
more than once you went off and left me,
ran away with my clothes
while I swam through the gulfs of poetry,
and laughed at me for being naked.
But you took off your own clothes
a few years later,
and never noticed that I had become
the apex of events,
the pen in the hand of time
that traced the thinker's thoughts.

I was the only physician left
in this madhouse, and I brought you
my medicinal poems.

[1922: T 180]

Refusal

I would rather
watch stars
than sign a death warrant.
I would rather
hear flowers murmur
("It's him!")
when I'm out in the garden
than see a gun
shoot down a man
who wants to shoot me down.
Which is why I would never
be a governor.
Ever.

[1922: T 172]

The Road I Took

Astrakhan
Moscow
Kharkov

Rostov
Baku
Persia
Piatigorsk
The Train
Moscow
Freedom

[1922: VR1 26]

Once more, once more
I am
your star.
Woe to the sailor with level
and compass
whose angle is false;
he will wreck on rocks
and hidden shoals.
Woe to you without love
or compassion
who angled me false.
You will wreck on rocks
and the rocks will laugh
at you
the way you did
at me.

[1922: T 182]

Longer Poems

Zoo

(Dedicated to V.I.)

O Garden of Animals!

Where steel bars seem like a father who stops a bloody fight to remind his sons they are brothers.

Where Germans come to drink beer.

And easy women sell their bodies.

Where eagles perch like an eternity figured by the present day, as yet unfinished by evening.

Where the camel, its great hump riderless, knows the secret of Buddhism and suppresses a smile of China.

Where a deer is fear itself beneath its branching stone.

Where people's outfits astonish.

Where people stroll with mindless frowns, while the Germans glow with health.

Where the dark glance of a swan—wintry all over, its beak orange-black as a thicket in autumn—is somewhat too hesitant, even for him.

Where a blue gorgeousness fans out its tail, and a blue net of clouds is cast across the golden fire of leaf-fall and the forest green, and it is all shadowed differently by the roughness of the ground.

Where we want to seize the lyre bird's tail, strike its strings, and sing of Russian heroism.

Where we clench our fist as if it held a sword, and whisper an oath:
to defend the race of Russians at the cost of life, of death, of
everything.

Where the monkeys are variously angry and display their variegated
bottoms, and seem, except for the sad ones and shy ones, eter-
nally irritated by the presence of man.

Where elephants shivering like mountains during an earthquake ask
a child for something to eat, making old meanings ring true: "I'm
hungree! Gimme something to eat!" and who kneel as if asking
for charity.

Where the agile bears scramble up and look down, waiting for their
keepers' orders.

Where bats hang upside down, like the heart of a present-day Rus-
sian.

Where the falcon's breast recalls ragged clouds before a storm.

Where a little ground bird drags behind it a golden sunset full of
embers on fire.

Where we see in the tiger's face the white beard and the eyes of an
elderly Muslim, and we honor the first follower of the prophet
and read the essence of Islam.

Where we begin to think that religions are the subsiding surge of
waves whose dispersion formed the species.

And that therefore the earth contains as many animals as they find
different ways of witnessing God.

Where the animals, tired of roaring, stand and look up at the sky.

Where a caged seal is a vivid reminder of the sufferings of sinners,
hurtling back and forth and wailing.

Where funny fishwingers groom one another with the touching care
of Gogol's Old-World Landowners.

O Garden of animals, where the stare of a beast has more meaning
than stacks of reread books.

O Garden.

Where an eagle broods over something, like a child grown tired of
complaining.

Where an Eskimo husky vents its Siberian aggression in a hostile rit-
ual born in the blood, at the sight of a kitten washing its face.

Where billy goats beg by waving their cloven hooves through the
bars and then look pleased or satisfied when they get what they
want.

Where the overstated giraffe stands and stares.

Where the signal cannon at noon makes the eagles look up at the
sky expecting a storm.

Where eagles drop from their high perches like graven images falling
from temples and rooftops during an earthquake.

Where an eagle, shaggy as a girl, looks at the sky, then at its talons.

Where we see a "tree-beast" in the silhouette of a stock-still deer.

Where an eagle sits, its neck toward the public and its face to the
wall, its wings oddly ruffled. Does it imagine it's soaring high in
the mountains? Or is it praying? Or is it only suffering from the
heat?

Where an elk, through the fence, kisses a flat-horned buffalo.

Where deer lick cold steel bars.

Where a black seal hobbles along the ground on its long flippers,
moving like a man tied up in a sack, like a cast-iron monument
that suddenly finds something irrepressibly funny.

Where a shaggy-haired “Ivanov” jumps and slaps its paw against the
steel bars whenever his keeper calls him “buddy.”

Where lions lie dreaming, their heads on their paws.

Where the deer never stop banging their horns against their cages,
never stop tossing their heads.

Where a single breed of ducks in a dry cage raises a unanimous cry
after a shower of rain, as if performing a rite of thanksgiving to
some deity—one with webbed feet and a bill?

Where guinea hens are sometimes honking matrons, with insolent
necks and ashy-silver bodies ordered specially from the same dress-
maker who stitches dresses for the starry nights.

Where I refuse to recognize a Malay bear as a fellow northerner and
unmask him as a Mongolian and feel like taking revenge on him
for Port Arthur.

Where wolves display readiness and loyalty in the attentive squint of
their eyes.

Where I enter an animal house so stifling I cannot stay long and am
met by an impersonal “Stoopid!” and a shower of seed pods from
idle, smooth-talking parrots.

Where the massive gleaming walrus, like some languid beauty, fans
itself with its slippery black flipper and falls into the water, and
when it heaves itself back onto its platform, its great blubbery
body sports the bristly whiskered, smooth-browed head of
Nietzsche.

Where the jaws of a tall, white, dark-eyed llama and a stooped
smooth-horned buffalo and other ruminants move regularly right
or left, like the life of a nation.

Where a rhinoceros' red-and-white eyes hold all the unquenched
fury of an overthrown emperor. Alone among animals he shows
his disdain for humans as if they were slaves in revolt. In him
lurks the spirit of Ivan the Terrible.

Where seagulls with long beaks and cold, blue, bespectacled eyes
look like international con-men, whom we recognize by the easy
artistry with which they snatch up food thrown to the seals.

Where we remember that Russians have always called their heroes
falcons, and that the eyes of a Cossack, deeply hidden in a fur-
rowed brow, and the eyes of the falcon, the king of royal birds,
are identical, and we begin to understand who taught the Rus-
sians how to fight! O you falcons, breasting herons out of the air!
Your sharp beaks turned inward! But never as pins, for bearers of
honor, loyalty, and duty would hardly impale an insect!

Where a red duck on webbed feet makes us recall the skulls of Rus-
sians fallen in battle, in whose skeletons its ancestors built their
nests.

Where the golden tuft of a certain bird displays a fire whose power
belongs only to those who have sworn eternal virginity.

Where Russia pronounces the word "Cossack" like an eagle's scream.

Where elephants forget how to trumpet and make noises that sound
like complaints of indigestion. Perhaps, when they see us so insig-
nificant, they think insignificant sounds are called for? I don't
know. O you wrinkled gray mountains! With lichens and grasses
sprouting in your crevasses!

Where wonderful possibilities perish in the animals, like the codex of
the *Igor Tale*, lost in the burning of Moscow.

[1908, 1911: T 185]

Venus and the Shaman

Venus and the shaman met one evening
in his cave. It was short and sweet, their episode.
She appeared at his door like spring fever,
all in flower. (Had she taken the wrong road?)
There she stood before him in the buff—
oh, naked and pink—a diamond in the rough
of cold Siberia, with desperation
in her eyes. Also the sultriness of passion.
It almost seemed as if a flaming fire
had fallen from Olympus, burnt the snow!
Blue constellations in her eyes glowed bright
as she asked the Asiatic for lodging for the night.

She pouted prettily. “Hey, Mongo,” she began—
(That’s the way Lady Love always spoke to man.
Whenever she thought, she got lines in her face
so she generally spoke without thinking.)
“Mongo,” she said, “you’re old and wrinkled,
while I am frankly a river of delights,
but could I beg a corner of your savage cave?
A goddess begs—the situation’s grave.
I’ll only be a day or two. And say—
you think you could push your junk away
so we can sit together by the fire?
Have you looked outside?
Can you *believe* that storm? I almost died
of cold! Kings kept their furriers
working for me once, but here I am
freezing in a savage land,
and my face is an absolute mess.
Still, things could be worse.

Oh, Mongo, if you knew what I've been through!
You're a sweetheart to let me stay with you."

Then the lady let her hair down, all of it,
shook the snowflakes out of it,
and moved right in—with a shaman who'd retired
to the forest because he loved his peace and quiet.
"There was a time," she began, "when every town in Greece
had a statue of me, usually a masterpiece—
you're sure this isn't beginning to bore
you? Anyway, about those statues. Not any more.
They won't sing my praises, they've forgotten my name,
even what I look like. They ignore me! That's fame
for you." The shaman lit his pipe and scratched his brow.
"Things could be worse," he observed. "Right now
you're freezing cold. You likely had a fight
with somebody you lavished time on, right?"
"No," she said, "it's worse than you can guess.
No one admires my breasts these days. What shallowness!
Why, I could make a milk-cow quit the field!"
(There were tears on her cheek, barely concealed.)
"And look at this profile! Glom these arms!
But modern men ignore my charms:
young ones, old ones, ones who love their wives,
drunks who drink away their lives,
even the military, officers and men,
they all ignore me. Why, I remember when
my bosom conquered multitudes!
Kings or commons, any man in the place!
But now, poor things, they're in disgrace.
People nowadays are sneering snots,
they made me cover my forget-me-nots!
Would you believe it?
Let me tell you, I'd rather die
than have to sunbathe on the sly.
It's just too cruel!" She turned aside
wringing her hands, and almost cried.
"Oh, this life is such an *awful* mess,
Mongo! Everything is vanity!

We're born the children of distress!
I get upset at everything I see!
All the beauty in a young girl's cheek
will feed the worms within a week."

The shaman shrugged, and watched
the milk-and-honey goddess, near collapse,
sit on a nearby rock and burst into tears.
Finally he found his tongue: "Better mind
that rock, you'll scratch your pretty behind."
He reached for a jug on the table near
and downed a draft of birch-bark beer,
then sat in silence, puffed his smoke,
and stared into the evening air.
(He always thought before he spoke:
he liked a judicious atmosphere.)

The goddess thanked him for his advice,
and the look in her round blue eyes
went from being playful to a heavy smoulder—
because he *was* rather good-looking, though older.
The passing hours slipped away;
they sat together in that cave
until a few pale streaks of light
pushed at the edges of the night.
The shaman kept on staring into space.
Venus yawned, beginning to tire.
He poked at the fire.
She fell asleep. He stared at her face.
Now for shamans, rules of hospitality
are sacred. He sat all night and watched her,
watched her silken curves. That's right, sat
all night and never touched her,
watched her as she tossed and turned,
and just made sure his fire burned.
She moved in her sleep, gave a couple of sighs,
occasionally opened her sweet little eyes
as if begging for something, he wasn't sure what;
then lifted her arms as if for protection

and stretched—oh, was she open to suggestion?—
and gave a sleepy smile in his direction.

But morning came at last. The pale birds
on the fir trees all sang out.
Full of sadness and self-doubt,
she stared at the slowly fading stars
and whispered something to herself.
Beneath the trees, a trace of night still lingers.
The sky grows pale, then pink, then red:
the sun appears. Dawn with her rosy fingers
calls all Nature from its bed.

Venus finally achieved a blush
at her behavior of the previous night,
and, testing the path of virtue with a novice toe,
began to think things over: was it polite
to show up naked in the house of a man you didn't know?
Alas, the lady's answer went unheard
for just then the shaman, without a word,
tossed her a fox-fur jacket. The goddess for once
was speechless, and gave him a grateful glance.
The lady began to do up her hair,
all by herself, into a braid;
the process left her shoulders bare
but the shaman never said a word.
Those snowy shoulders! Many a civilization
had set aside days for celebration . . .
But the wily shaman simply sat, grave
as an idol, deep in meditation.

Venus stalked about the cave
and wrung her hands for inspiration.
“They're animals, you hear me, animals!
Where are the hymns they used to sing
and the hungry kisses they used to bring
me? Animals, all of them!
Mongol, help me! I shall expire!
My heart's a tambourine on fire!

I can see the truth without being told—
Look at me, Mongo! I've gotten *old!*
Nobody writes me love songs anymore
or waits to see if I'll appear—
no wonder they all read books!
I've lost my looks!
They see me and they run away!
Everyone's become a stay-
at-home, afraid to practice
love's little lessons—it's awful!"
cried the lady, and burst into tears.
"What's become of old-fashioned devotion?
You tell me—is this some notion
thought up by an Indian guru
to rid the world of love's emotion?"

The shaman never said a word,
just sat there. Was he angry? Bored?
Early that morning she had gone out
before the birds had sung a note
to gather blue forget-me-nots,
woven them into a fetching chain
and draped it around herself . . . In vain.
Now, as before, the shaman sat
gloomy, grave, and sunk in thought.
The lady gave him a mournful smile.
"Well, Mongo," she began, "I guess you don't
get what I'm saying, or maybe I'm a bit
wild for you. Or maybe you just don't like my style.
I'm going for a walk, need a change of scene,
want to be alone—you know what I mean?
I want to pick flowers, talk to the trees,
get back in touch with the birds and the bees,
far from the hum of the pressing crowd,
find a place with a rustic temple,
hunt for mushrooms, and sing out loud.
I want to try to follow your example.
What could be better than a life that's simple?"
"Help yourself," the shaman said,
and gave her a smile of pure relief—

"I know a spot with a hollow tree—
a nice little nook. It works for me."

She smiled her thanks, and in her delight
hugged the seer with all her might;
her hair fell down and brushed his arms—
the shaman's senses surged against her charms—
but then she began a lecture on hygiene,
how he really ought to keep his dugout clean,
". . . and stop smoking, for godssakes!
Look at the mess it makes!"
With a roll of his eyes he called the name Anduri,
rose impressively, and began
a ritual dance around the fire,
his sacred rattle in his hand.
He marked the tempo loudly with his feet,
so a sullen Venus couldn't say a word,
but sat and plucked his bowstring, keeping time.
Then the shaman took his bow and arrows,
ignored her squeals and cries of fear,
and strode from the cave, a mighty hunter
out to bag a deer.
He moved away like the morning breeze
and disappeared beyond the trees.

Alone beside the dying embers
the chastened goddess starts to pine.
(She was down in the dumps.) Then she remembers
after all she's really quite divine,
and picks some more forget-me-nots
to make a kind of housedress with;
she's rather pleased at first with what she's got—
a kind of flowery image out of some myth
or other, reflected in the woodland pool.
She laughs, giggles like a silly fool,
but recalls from somewhere—she isn't quite sure—
the set of tyrannical rules laid down
for the latest fashionable couture,
and mutters to herself: "You call *that* a dress?"
or: "How unflattering!" or: "God, I look a mess . . ."

Still, all alone she snips and tucks
and hums and frowns,
tries again for a different fit,
holds it up beneath her chin—
and never seems to be bored a bit.
Later she wanders past the pond
and strolls about the field beyond
picking loads of wildflowers;
she braids them into wreaths and tries
them on. A dove sings in its leafy bowers—
the goddess coos and whistles in reply.

Venus sat down at last on a hard pine stump
and sighed to the wind: "Blow, big boy,
blow! Possess me, caress me, distress my hair!
I'm all yours, if you've got the time.
No one else seems to know I'm there.
For you, big boy, believe me, I'm
already a meadow. Just feel my flowers!
Honey, I could spend hours
making you happy, giving you joy—
we're all looking for love, even Love! Even me!
Even this stump that in life was a tree!
Get it now, I don't care if it's more or less—
there ain't no second chance at happiness."

Meanwhile she hears the footsteps of the seer,
back from the hunt. She greets him with kisses
and hugs, takes the carcass of the deer,
cuts it up, and fixes one of her favorite dishes:
Venison à la Venus. He takes a bite—
and has to admit, by god, it tastes all right!
Later he lights his pipe and looks around—
then shuts his eyes with something like a frown.
The cave is hung with wreaths of leaves and flowers:
he now resides in one of Venus' bowers.

Next day a white swan flew in from the coast,
flapped a feeble wing, cried hoarsely, "You!"

Goddess, return! You are the toast
at dinner parties once again. They want you back!
Look, I know I'm a mess—
I'm bloody and bowed, but I've got to impress
you, got to convince you before I die.
Come back to your people! Oh, try
to forgive them; they love you, you know.
And one of them, a true admirer,
has gone so far as to buy a tiara.
A new one—for you. It goes to show.
So. I'm a dying swan and I'm singing a song
to say you've been away too long.
Come on home! Leave Siberia
and strike out, my dear, for the interior."
He gave a white wiggle at her feet and died.

It convinced her. She turned to the shaman and cried:
"Mongo, you're the smartest man I've ever met.
I really loved you. Loved your jet-
black hair, and your biting smile.
I melted. But for me the simple life was wrong,
so I'm leaving. But I'll have them write a song
about you, I promise. Now, forget my breasts.
Put them out of your mind.
Forget my face, my sweet behind,
and the fire in my eyes (which was, let's face it, lust)
and the glory in my thighs. It's just
that I wanted to be a simple girl at heart . . .
But come, we must forget all that. We have to part,
and you mustn't ever regret you turned me down."
The shaman looked up; his usual frown
had turned to a smile. "Drop by whenever things get slow,"
he said. "You're always welcome, even though
a bed on the rocks is all I've got. But we can share.
And there's always sunshine, and lots of fresh air.
As long as those birds sing in the trees,
you're welcome to stay as long as you please."
Venus smiled as he spoke, and stroked his beard.
Then, like a sweet mistake, she disappeared.

[1912: T 230]

The Stone Woman

A bent old man, his twisted stick,
the stillness of a magic spell.
And you like a laughing *rusalka*,
perched upon a mammoth skull.
The bark of ancient willows rustles,
telling tales like people do;
the stone women of the fields
are tales told in books of stone.

Ancient cults erected you.
You stretch to heaven and back again.
Their faces are vengeful and austere.
Their necklaces are crudely carved.
Hawks, uncomprehending, drift
above these stony Eastern legends.
Her smile is motionless, she stands
abandoned by some unknown father;
her breasts are cobblestones, the dew
shines there upon a silver aureole.
Here a dark-haired woman's step
wakens a nocturnal eagle;
her braids hang long and limp;
the silence of his horse's bridle!
The mountains whirl in webs of snow,
unwindings of millennial sounds,
and the babble of water falling
from the rock face into the wheatfields.

That tree raises its arms
and prays, on the twilight meadow
it weeps and wails

in words with no names.
O gentle poplar, somber poplar,
suppliant to the cool of evening!
The conversational rustle
of your trembling leaves!
And here comes little "scribble-scrabble,"
blond-haired and speechless.
What does the child want in the stillness
that overlies this silver murmur?
Cry because the Milky Way isn't mine?
"How many dead thousands weep
beneath a cool veil of clay!
And I am the last depicter
of earth's inaudible anxieties.
I expect to be shot. Every day.
But why? For what? After all, I have loved
all creation, and spent my childhood
here in the steppe, amid plume-grass and stones."
He approached and sat down. His hand paged
the glowing book of his face.

And the moon gave her crying child
a loaf of evening stars.
"Do I need a lot?
A crust of bread,
a cup of milk,
the sky above,
these clouds."
I love all milky women, even
these, who are slow to flower.
I hid myself in that butterfly net,
the meshes of the Milky Way.
When the Vistula flowed with blood
and blood streamed in the Tisza,
then shrieking numbers in formation
closed ranks above the suffering world.

And a butterfly's wings were blue
as the idol-figure's eyes.

She is condemned to stand here,
graying shade where insects swarm,
without a comb and pins,
her crude hand tracing
erotic stony ciphers.
Her gray eyes are plank-
like, flat unmoving things.
But a moth hovers upon them,
descends, covers them with
the bright blue heaven of its wings.
A lacework of spots protected
by a spot of fire, a cherry stain.
Those spots of fire made
the statue's eyes flicker with intelligence.
The eyes became blue, intelligence grew
with the airy teachings of those agile wings.
Has a straw caught fire in the dark night?
Idol of stone, rise and thunder
like a tournament of storms!
Flock-watcher, bat-blind once,
open now your moth-wing eyes,
be a seer through the Milky Way!
Gun-song bites bits from these blocks,
maddening the moth-grave to shatter
its fetters, grappling the graven grave.
Hip! Hop! Stomp the grave in heaven's hoedown!
Stamp, stone, the star-spinner reel
of the moth-eye turned toward the sky.
Remember then these shining stars,
their fire all glitter; they are studs
stamped in the blue boot-heels
that reel in heaven's hoedown!
More rainbows of light!
Summers of stormy flight!
The maid of the steppe restored to sight!

[1919: T 255]

The Poet

When autumn comes to turn the trees,
to stain them crimson, rust, and copper,
and chill refractions in the waterfall
predict the triumph of the coming snow,
the trunks of birch trees shimmer white
in some last fevered vision,
and winter's heralds, birds in flight,
take a long leave of summer's green.
The slanting hillsides wear a shawl
of fragile gold, falling
among the ghostly naked slopes
that mark the white ravines;
the soft blue stillness seems to call
words from the poet's mouth—

then we think of spring and *Mardi Gras!*
Carnival, unbridled energy
to bury too-short days; the sun
skulks low along the horizon,
tramples winter's weavings underfoot,
and, teasing time, outruns the deer.
Then out of nowhere overhead
a golden ghost appears,
and noontime shadows fawn upon our feet
like dazed enchanted animals.
Then the barefoot thicket of humanity
with heartfelt thanks begins the dance,
and the lonely linden loosely weaves
its hair of languid leaves.

Bouncing along like a gaggle of fools,
the human horde makes up new faces,

effacing frozen winter's pale,
its bleary creams and pallid powders.
Down with Winter! Welcome, Spring!
Blow a blast on springtime's trumpet!
See the race of men done up like cupids
dressed in clouds, or naked,
drifting in the hush of heaven,
scattering flowers underfoot.
Constant lover of inconstant spring,
man hails the coming summer sun.

Spring, in costume as a fisher-maid,
trails full nets of flowers,
and the season's cold wet scales
flicker from her silver leaves.
the wind, inspired by things
half spoke, half sung,
plays with the fabric at her knees,
ringed in pure imaginings.

Good friends, arise! and stand prepared
to follow her with heaps of light
and woven strands of mist and flowers!
Wilder than the sea at dawn,
spread yourselves in streams across
the east and watch, enchanted by
the air's blue escapades,
as dreams uncoil like waking snakes.
Iridescent as the flowers,
blown by the breath of human mouths,
Spring arises from her sleep.
All men who scabble after profit,
who reckon days in gain and strain,
who reckon days in trade and coin,
all have joined the single flood
of love for the Virgin Spring, loyal subjects
sure her carnival will last forever.
The joker's shout, the women's wail,
the shaking rattle's ringing roll,

old whiteface with his baggy pants,
the righteous wrath of once-reasoning hordes,
All praise the Virgin Baby Doll!
They shout their singsong loud and clear
drunk on waves of wild wailing song.
Two figures there, beside a bench,
shelved in the shadow of a poplar tree.

A naughty laugh, the pressure of a thumb,
and mischief from a seltzer bottle!
A gypsy in holiday motley
barely strikes his instrument,
leads a lot of ragamuffins.
A hooligan, a bad bad boy,
a dark-haired, suntanned boy,
flails the parade with an empty pumpkin head;
its eyes and mouth carved out with a knife.
It bangs about, it cracks about,
advancing airy spear and shield.
The dance rolls onward in a stream—
women in transparent clothes—
“Sweet friends, can it really be,
our sleepy wood-wart will not dance?
Sweet friends, how can he sleep
in such a time of revelry?
Little brother, sleepyhead,
what a spoilsport you turned out to be.”
Tweaked awake by pinching fingers
he hops and lumbers awkwardly—
a bear! then suddenly a bird, and free,
he flutters from his teasing sisters.
Another carnival grotesque, black mask
with a red and shiny mouth,
shakes a spear bound up in willow withes
and terrifies the crowd.

Behind him there, by magic unattached,
an enormous hand—the rest invisible—
bears a basket of vegetables

that overclouds the sunny day.
Carnival maskers everywhere,
and sunburnt fiddlers' country songs.

The briefest stillness, then
the henbane game begins:
faces whitened with the drug,
the children of hallucination prance
and drug-enchanted demons dance
a chain of visions, one by one,
as if someone were dreaming them,
as if he saw their silent stream,
visitations in an alien dream,
creeping in at Flora's windowsills.
Laughter forever! Care is dead!
Flags and banners overhead
Laughter tosses Care aside
and boldly struts ahead of the parade,
an octopus emblazoned on his chest.
Burning bold and bright he goes:
high priest of jokes, in a rubber nose.

A whale's great jaws are trundled by,
Hell-gate gaping wide and high;
two hermit-saints concealed within it
debate a dead religion's tenet.
But the crowd is driven like the snow
and puts its faith in love and joy.
A melancholy bagpipe wails,
an old man cackles, cries, and crows,
snowflakes swirl and catch the light,
dry confetti-glitter now,
and glitter-blizzard the parade.
In this wholehearted merriment
a figure wrapped in wolfskins howls—
a warrior with a shield of bronze;
an ancient pilgrim sprouts a cookpot
on her head, and makes the pious laugh.

Look, those eyes! How blue!
Surely an icon walks the earth!
Her aura of eternity disturbs the dance;
she moves as through an Easter vigil,
a holy picture strayed from church;
she makes the unbeliever and the infidel
of Islam turn their eyes,
she makes the painter seize his brush!
Sweet Jesus! Lovey, look!
It's the holy Mother of God!
Every human passion stills
before those sorrow-darkened eyes;
to her the race of Adam turns
for intercession in the skies.
Whiter than the whitest marble,
wrapped about in prayerful calm,
she stretches out her blessed hand
and humbly takes the offered alms.
But look! Just look! See how she goes
hand in hand with some buffoon!
She is shamed by the vulgar gaze!
God's mother, begging in the street!
But her unworldly countenance
shines as on a summer's day.
the white of her mantle seems like purest stone
and streams from her shoulders like milk,
a beggar from the distant faraway
come down from her altar—the Mother of God.
Stock-still. Like little boys and girls,
dumbstruck. From the vision streaming,
pure white radiance bathes the crowd.

But now the merrymaking swells:
wind-moan, laughter of ashes,
redskins with savage shouts
rush by without turning to look.
Behind false faces, passers-by
leap and dance and hop about
and the crowd of let's-pretenders

with tearful wails and jokesters' whoops
and feline screeching, battling cats
streak with snarls along the street.
Howling witches, bellowing cows,
a camel-figure slowly bows,
eyes of owls, speech of fish,
weeping whiskers drawn with soot,
a wagon with a scarlet crab
with painted hair;
an idiot in a carnival face
bangs his tin can on a barrel,
drags along his little girls.
A rain of soaking soot,
bonfires full of resinous flames,
nearsighted eyes drip soot on faces
across these cityscapes of curly hair,
these fiery nights of magic spells,
this general hunger for hallucination;
weird faces madly shining,
faces burning flannel red,
were reflected like candles
in a thousand-mirrored hall
where fire splashed like death.
Up with laughter! Down with fatal stars!
They shouted, whirling by like wind.
And still persistent snowflakes fall,
spearing the pavement underfoot.

Again the bench. A monk, whose shaven head
partners a woman with dark eyes.
Like bowers to eternal blue
her hair in ringlets rose and fell
and a petal like a burning coal
flamed in the midnight of her hair.
Then what? Her eyes insistent blue
burned with the joys of anxiety,
and full of languorous luxury
promised nights of doubtful dreams.

But whirling like snowstorm, set free from their bodies,
their eyes all some other's, not this one's or that one's,
the crowd in a frenzy went helling along
now sheet-white as phantoms, now savage and dark.
And plodding ever where east is west
and west is east, beside dead gods
whose prophets perished long ago,
a stumble-footed weary wind
forgets the lessons of the here and now.
Twisting this chain in thought about
his much-tormented mind, he stood
by a wall, harmony's eternal prisoner,
at odds with merriment, an altar of ideas.
See his cloak, a mountain of darkness,
ridges and rivers and chutes of white water
falling in waves to his feet,
obscuring the blue-petaled flowers
he wears in his buttonhole, Lada's devotion.
His brow is the curve of a dream,
a mountain swallow's arching flight;
his mouth curls down
in disbelieving scorn.
From his high forehead the hair descends
like a herd of deer driven to frenzy
by the sight of predators circling above them
who throw back their antlers and flee,
breaking in madness like waves of the sea,
their antlers entangling each other
and branching like stonework above their heads.
Their trustful black muzzles shuddering,
shaking and shuddering, treasuring time,
hearts straining to follow the stag,
panting they race to the glacier.
His hair tumbles down to his shoulders
like a herd of deer driven to frenzy
fleeing past waterfall, rockslide,
fear-maddened deer, stampeding in darkness,
ecstatic in panic
and swifter than birds!

There he stands—mad, proud, poet.
(A tatter of blue, like a wave of the sea,
a scarf round his neck, crumpled and twisted),
and a diamond known as *Kizel-E*
set in a stickpin, a magical star
given in care of a virginal soul
whose crimson reflections set fire
to the blue endeavors of the cloak.

Are you happy, sweet lady,
to see his hair streaming,
a river of fear-maddened deer
stampeding over a steep snowy rockface—
a starched snowy whiteness, his collar?
In this august hour, this evening hour,
your daughter-vows forgotten, girl,
with your sky-blue soul you stand
and comb his eagle hair,
leaning like a stalk of wheat
whose grains are pearls.
And like the wind, whose
stormy song divides waves
drunk with the seagull's cry,
so the comb slips through his hair,
this child of other worlds,
his long hair fallow as a field
before a lazy, knowing plow.
He neither sleeps, nor dreams, nor lives,
a crimson light upon him falls.
With his black curls he caresses
the pattern of the blue stone walls;
his arms are crossed upon his heart
a specter pressed against the piled-up stones,
he leaves this life attracted by some light,
astonished by some vision,
and his body there against the wall
strains to hear the footsteps of his soul,
its promised return from on high:
clay vessel full of water,

an empty vase, its flowers gone,
all sensation absent.

A *rusalka* at his feet sits sobbing.
Unclear desire has driven her
here, far from her mill wheel,
to him, whose evensong she listened to
over and over, the song
of evening that subdued her,
tamed her and her sisters,
wiped away all memory of forests at night
and the miller and his pact with the devil,
the miller and his compact with the stars,
his muttered dark enchantments,
the daring of their underwater games.
When the black silk pond at evening
is threaded with stories of stars,
someone carried from this world of words
to heaven hears the secret of the world,
and from nocturnal heaven sees the earth
and waits for one to join him there,
tender, perishing in stillness.
When on their rocks, translucent,
the *rusalka*-race sit combing their hair,
half-hidden in the willow branches,
a belated rider calms his skittish horse,
and only the bittern's booming cry
lows like cattle beyond the mill.
The weary descant of the weary mill
charms the heart with secret pleasure
and all seems proof against transgression.
Then darkness shines within the deep,
and like a vision of deception
a maiden rises from the river waves
and proudly, simply, all divinely,
begins to sing.
She sings of blue eyes' ecstasy
behind a spiderweb of rays,
delusions of the waterways

shadowed in a kind of shivering.
Then the stars burn with longing
to join in single consonance
the water's rustic faith,
the dancing splash *rusalkas* make,
the lumbering of the ancient mill,
the treetop full of croaking crows
and the girl's nocturnal apparition.

And now proud and lonely
you move through the town.
Her body, blue-green
in the moonlight, frightens the people.
She knocks at a door
and goes in. He is there.
Something in her soul
the mind can't comprehend.
Her prescient heart remains untouched
by night's scheming adventurers,
hustling herds who always crowd the streets.

In moon rays *rusalka* comes veiled
like a bride to her wedding,
her eyes full of silences;
blushing, she stares at the poet.
Nighttime eyes. They call and fly
away into the swans' homeland,
gleaming like flax-flowers
under the curve of anxious brows,
shining, suppliant, and sweet.
"Remember how often you came to the mill,
turning my fine intelligence
with your stories of feasts
and triumphs of scientific fires.
For the moons have fallen from heaven,
in the tangled wood they shine like eyes;
and lightning, trained to human gait,
transports whole crowds in carriages,
replacing gentle horses.

The old world is ground
to fine white flour
by the work of common sense,
the old world dies in the saddle!
And over the corpse forget-me-nots burn blue,
clear-eyed daughters of the riverbed.

Our onetime world is lost in night.
Tormentor, you even told me
that I, *Rusalka*, died with it,
and the river will never again see
with its virginal eye the eagle of time.
Father of painful persuasions,
you were cruel in nighttime silence.
I have come to crown your poetry.
Count me among your admirers. Now write!"
She stops speaking. She clutches a corner of his cloak,
steps back, and stands dumbly silent
watching him and trembling.
"Father of murderers, cruel hangman!
Do you really take me for dead?
Do lurking crabs devour me?
Their dark claws tear my flesh?
Why have you destroyed the delight
we traced in night and darkness
and discarded me forever?
Call me whatever you want:
a clutch of light
flickering at your window,
sorrow-river, heavenly coursing,
or *no* from *yes* in the vale of poetry,
or the mind of water through the mind of numbers
where the blue damsel-fly hovers.
You have rescued reason
from our underwater nonexistence,
not left to death our dreaming 'but' . . .
Am I a game of nighttime eyes,
always cruel and cheatful,
radiant in the bosom of night,

the backwater where a horseman drinks,
or a ray of the moon that breaks through a chink—
am I left to be nothing but legend?
Pity me! Be brave,
turn away your sharp spear!”

Some inspiration moved his hand;
he gestured toward the Holy Virgin.
“You and she are sisters. I’ve never doubted it.
Go walk with her,” he said.
“I know no place for you or you,
among the people of this world.
Bride of water, bride of stars.
Take each other’s hand and go,
flow like a river wave through a net
or carry the web of constellations
into the great cathedral’s gloom
like a vast mural.
You may be fated to wander
as dwellers in the waves,
to be divinities in daily fact
in the white church or the dark stable,
to live as beggars in a fence’s shadow,
to be strangers in filth and tatters,
to cross the waves to earthly delights,
and be a nest of infestation
gleaming in the godhead of your eyes,
to sleep on earth, on piles of straw,
beneath the shining hand of night
in groves of birches, vale of tears,
or in a house of bitter sighs.
Know this: you will be exiles everywhere.
A bitter fate awaits you:
always to hear ‘Please step aside.’”
He followed the white stone staircase
to the garden, moving beneath Aquarius.
“We swear we will never change our vow,”
he said. He raised his hand, picked a flower,
and gave it to them both.

“As many days as crowd a year,
so many times I mean to swear
my intentions: I will guide these outcasts
along the stony paths of fate.”

And like the ghost of some nocturnal band,
beside a bench three figures stand.

[1919, 1921: T 263]

Night in the Trenches

Statues of women, stony sisterhood,
stood like sentries in the open field,
watched over stretches of flatland.

A man who was once a tsarist draftee
crouched in the trenches cursing: “Christ!
Those weird old women! Where did they come from?
Too many dead men tomorrow to count—
they’ll roll us under, one by one.”
“Well, one last chance to roll your own.”
Soon the constellations’ infantry
will quit the field;
now the hours dribble lazily;
even thinking seems a waste of time.
“What’s on your mind, buddy—
you tired of being a hero yet?
Let’s sing the regimental chorus,
then let’s turn in, OK?”

Above the rhythmic snoring of the camp,
over the noise, the creak, the rustling sounds,
the *Internationale’s* great chorus
engulfs the nighttime steppe, vowing
itself eternally to heaven.

The dew descends across the steppe
and in the night a bright red star
gleams on a soldier’s cap.

“ . . . Who once was nothing
will now be all . . . ”

Which of these warrior hordes will win?
The first one cocks a dubious eye

at fat, complacent Muscovites;
the other, shaken, tries to hide
behind the Kremlin walls.
Two spears advancing from two seas,
one from the north, the other from the south?
No—the clash of tsarist lackey
and one whom Labor claimed as friend.
One who scrawled on a convent wall,
the Convent of the Holy Savior:
“He cannot eat who will not work.”
Even the trapper’s bloody work is blest!

Driving out the chanting monks
from their ancient holy choir,
the powers-that-be converted it
to classrooms for the art of war.
But HE with his uncompromising hand
holds a course along the iron way.
No—I’m not him, I’m not like that!
Mankind, fly!
His face has a Mongol cast—
a massive forehead, creased with care,
the questioning eye that sees right
through you—the farmstead his only care.
“The iron way’s the only way!
Too much idle talk already!
My time will come, and even I
will trail the tsars into oblivion;
then you’ll have time for talk. Once we die
we see it all; then we can judge.
I sent a team of scientists, specialists
in superstition, to excavate the hermits’ caves;
their scalpels laid the relics bare
and raised above the crowd a woman’s
glove, inhabitant of artfully produced relics.
He died, the gaunt miracle-worker,
but that woman’s glove
meant superstition’s death by firing squad.
And let it come to horseflesh

in the market, curving horses' heads
snickering from Moscow's butcher stores,
I swear by horseflesh I'll succeed—
I am the mousetrap, not the mouse.
I swear by horseflesh, you're my witness,
that from its hinges I will tear—
though even God should bar the way—
the gate to that Red edifice
where I will have my say.
I promise that. If that seems stupid
to the stupid and the fools,
still let the earth lie tranquil as a corpse,
and commend itself into my hands.
And redder than the flesh of horses
when the skins are stripped away,
our banners claw the air like eagles
and rip to bits the bygone day!
I will unite the human race,
parts of a whole imagined long ago.
Red regiments, the game is up to you!
The dying Whites have fouled themselves!
We will want flowers to cover graves,
and graves remind us we ourselves
are flowers—fleeting things, that nothing saves.
When you ask me to raise the stargazer
closer to the heavens,
or when, like the Holy Virgin,
you flee to save your son from slaughter,
when nomads were the only ones
who came to save your banners,
or when you shine like some foreboding star
upon this people of a single tribe,
Moscow, still you raise a golden torch
above the world, our own Statue of Liberty,
your own *rusalka* blood watering
with crimson these destroyed foundations—
But are you in the right? What keeps you alive?
Your dresses hide lace underwear:
when like a blackening scaffold

you rose beside your walls,
when on our crowded Maidenfield
you tied a bandage on the wounds of war.”
The face of the Mongolian East, where streams
of blood contort the Slavic features,
stands powerful and cruel:
a brand-new icon—yours, O Time!

Damn, what a dream! All quiet
in the trenches . . . the stars above us burn.
Will tomorrow bring a battle? Not likely.
The burial mound of pagan Rogneda
still guards her virgin bones.
The feather-grasses move their fronds
and you appear, a brazen monster
armored up in plates of steel.
Red Cossacks from Kuban upon the hills.
Like clockwork, see, it creeps along
upon its armored belly, trampling human beings!
creeps like a lizard from before the Flood
along the linked lines of the Red trenches.
Trees fall with a smash in its path,
entrenched outposts are nothing to it,
and the noisy machine gun chattered,
spitting up its stomach at the sight.
It looked as if a bear was squatting
above the anthill of the trenches,
invincible, scooping out bright honey
with his powerful enormous paws.
And the trophy of the strong—death’s bed—
and the groans of the weak: Oh God! My God!
Again the creature’s scaly back caught light
and then the desert seemed again the way
it had been—but the faithful machine gun
like a bell-man, echoed the prayers
of a requiem Mass.

Borne on by faithful friends,
the cavalry flew across the flatlands.

Like guests, old friends returning home,
spear points entered shrieking bodies.
And the horse leaps forward . . .
See the yellow teeth grin!
And over and over a copper crucifix
beats blow on blow upon the corpse.
Like basher-boys: "Smash their faces!"
sounded from the White encampment.
His wound convulses, all on fire,
the bullet's path lies through the Virgin's medal.
Upon his shimmering stallion
the cavalry commander rides.
His steed's a strider.
Behind the front-line palisades
the enemy's cavalry waits—
his chant comes ringing through the morning light:
"Zhuravel zhuravka, zhur zhur zhur . . ."
And the stone slabs of the stupid women,
a longing for the twang of a hometown guitar,
for the structure of wheels and spokes,
for the kinship of fairy-tale *rusalkas*,
then out of nowhere, a voice singing:

"Got a pound of paper money,
gonna get myself a bride,
gonna stick my saber to her,
then across the fields I'll ride.
Now it's rape and loot and killing
as we march through fields of rye,
stick a lilac in your rifle,
kiss the girls and say goodbye.
Gonna get ourselves a grave
where the feather-grasses wave."

That's the song that someone sang.
An old soldier growled: Wasn't their grandfathers' fate enough for
them?
"Well, all you're gonna get yourselves—"

the old folks know, it happened once before—
is a pile of pine-plank coffins.
But we'd be better off at home
planting beans, or framing up
new houses, planting cabbages or rye,
instead of here with guns and knives.”

Then out of the Scythian burial mound
came the sons of ghosts gone by,
they herd their horses before them,
tangling their hair in the horses' manes,
threatening, shaking their long-handled lances.
They hack the foe-folk with their swords,
then suddenly all race to one side,
their ancestral war-whoop echoing
across an amplitude of boundless grass.
The horse-charge shakes with bellowing.
Some leapt upon the horse's croup
and wrestling, swaying, grappled with the foe;
others with a gripping fist made fast
a horsetail, coursing behind;
their feet still stuck in stirrups, while
their faces bit the grass.
Then quick, inspired by former bravery,
again they leap upon the horse
or snatch the wounded in their arms.
The scratch and rustle of a pack of wolves . . .
A bent and withered pine-tree branch
still bears a rugged nest . . .
So Moscow-snow dissolves like foam
before the fires of spring.
When you are full of tears,
Old Moscow, when you weep, remember:
those tears will wake some day
as waves upon a distant sea.
But the Black Sea laboring to reach
the pearl-gray Valdai hills
stretches its arms toward Moscow.

The long spears clash together
and the voices of the sea resound.
They sound among the stalks of rye,
in the disappearing bullet's whine,
at the moment when the sharp knives shine.
The waves of the sea are deceivers:
their roar repeats the deep sea-swell,
gray as seagulls diving for their prey
unrecognized by anyone.
They are dressed in the helmets of men.
The sea's hostility, ocean's white avalanche,
floods forever from these fair-haired savages,
this always innocent horde.

Three maidens of the steppe stood guard,
to warn the traveler this is ancient land.
Priestesses of the ecstatic wasteland,
but the arms of the stone goddess
clasp the severe stone of her legs
like granular hands
pressed against the severe legs,
and dully with dead eyes,
secret witnesses of ancient acts,
the stone women watch.
Stone
beholds
the work of man.
"Where is the bowstring made from maidens' hair,
the bending bow as tall as any man,
the cloth-yard arrows, birdtail fletched,
the warrior women I knew when young?"
The question came from the barely moving mouth
of the goddess-stone.

And the black snake coiled in a ring
hissed at some mysterious presence.
Vacant, dull—the animal face
of the steppe-goddess stared. Why
do the harsh hands of the warriors

snatch the dead by the temples
and Red-besotted regiments
fly with delight in the chase?
Bitter stone witness, tell us—
what follows war?

Typhus.

[1919: T 275]

Lightland

And the fortified centers of world trade
where poverty's fetters shine in the many-paned windows,
the day will come when you turn them to ashes,
and the look on your face is a rapturous vengeance.
You who were weakened in ancient struggle and argument,
whose torments are figured in the constellations above you,
shoulder these barrels of gunpowder, persuade the palaces
to shatter to rubble and blow in the wind.
And when the pillar of smoke dies down
in the fiery glow of the flames,
let blood stream from your hands in place of your banners
and throw down the gauntlet, a challenge to destiny.
And if the conflagration proves accurate
and a sail of smoke billows up in the blue,
enter the burning tent, draw from its holster
the fire you conceal at your heart.
While ill-gotten profits slumber their nighttimes
in crystal cases, in the Tsar's particular palace
explosive devices are all the rage, to say
nothing of clever feminine intrigues.
When even God denies your life,
slave of the rich, remember your knife!
Someone has murdered your childhood, girl:
strangle him with your hair when next you see him
because you were barefoot and helpless
and went to him asking for help and he kicked you aside.
Creep like a cat, keep yourself clean,
untouched by soft pawings at midnight.
When you are sick, go kiss him on the mouth
and breathe your disease through the laugh on his lips.
Your hands are unused to steel?

Run to the rabid watchdog
and kiss his slaving mouth,
then go kiss your enemy, kiss him until he dissolves.
Slave of the rich, go laugh in his face.
You are poor and have nothing, and poverty tears you,
you crawled like a have-not at a king's feet,
and then you kissed him.
You are ailing and sick with a great hurt
and must open the fiery gates of dawn:
Tear out the dripping beard of Aquarius,
and the Dog Stars, whip them yelping from heaven.
And from this moment on, let Lobachevskian space
stream from the flagpoles of night-loving Petrograd.
The Time of the Takers is over; the Might of the Makers
parades; *T* has fallen; *M* occupies the stage.
These are the high priests of LIGHTLAND,
and "Workers of the World" is their banner's device.
This is the havoc that Razin unleashed,
come home at last to roost in the clouds over Petrograd!
And its mad rush is the theoretical system
of Lobachevsky, and Lobachevskian space itself.
Let Lobachevsky's curves descend
as ornaments over all the city,
let them rest like strongbows on the sweating shoulders of Universal
Labor,
and the lightning will wail, complaining and crackling,
when it finds itself harnessed, condemned to a life at hard labor.
And gold, done up tightly in bars and portfolios,
will lie untouched, with no one to buy it.
Death will sit counting the hour of death,
the hour when he will come again,
And the prophets of earth in their constant appearance
will reform all alphabets, wiping out unwanted letters.
The day when winter died in early spring,
workers in Hungary stretched out their hands to us!
Workman, raise up the fortress of what you are worth,
let its building blocks be only the beats of your heart.
Then raise your glass, clink it in the face of starry Virgo,
and remember the melodious songs of the mind

and the voices of strong men long since vanished.
Then leave, go out to the clang of one sword on another.
Let the linden tree send her ambassadors
to the high seats of governments everywhere,
and there will be no one left to desire
those long-gone occasions of sinful passionate ecstasy.
Let kings make much of the carved façades of their palaces,
though the carving is cheap and vulgar and tasteless—
in the same way, see how often the venerated crutch,
holy relic of a famous saint,
becomes a façade for highway robbery!
When even God denies your life,
slave of the rich, remember your knife!
Move ever onward, you convicts of earth,
move ever onward, you squeezed-out survivors of hunger strikes,
see how one man sweats and labors in the dusty field,
while his sharp hustling neighbor snaps up the harvest!
Move ever onward, you convicts of earth,
move ever onward, you who are free to starve,
and you others, you kings of commerce,
your eyes are left you for one thing only—for weeping.
Move ahead—there, that way—toward a time of universal health.
Let us fill up our words with sunlight, making them glow,
and pull down thrones, and hurl them like fallen idols,
like Perun, to be pieces of wood adrift in the Dnieper.
Soar, you great constellations, star-clustered humanity,
fly farther and deeper into space,
and melt all forms of human speech
into one unified conversation of mortal men!
In the heavens shot through with stars
like the chest of the Tsar, the last Romanov,
some homeless loungeur, tattered by thinking, friend to all that's un-
holy,
will hammer away at a forge, refashion that star-cluster.
And you dawdlers, deceivers, you pitiful madmen, you drunkards,
scatter across the winds, part of the past
like chopping blocks and the wedding rings of the last kings.
Your textbook twitter bores us, stories of black swans,
how once a black swan dwelt far to the south—

but now a swan with scarlet wings
flies on the waves in a blizzard of bullets.
It is time for you tsars to keep your appointment:
your time is up, your scaffold is appointed.
And the secret every army keeps is this:
when the bride arrives, her dress is crimson red.
Let the last kings on earth,
overcoming their anger, smile
and stand like statues, stones against the glow
that shines from the graves of dawn.
You gave wings to constellations,
a rush of infantry against the sky.
You set depth charges in the riverbed of time
and locked up kings in cages in the zoo.
There he sits now, the last surviving king on earth,
behind the iron monotony of bars on a cage,
next-door neighbor to a horde of monkeys,
downing the fatal vodka of his poisonous thoughts.
In a swirl of bluish smoke you have drowned
all thrones, their glitter, their glory, their pomp and their majesty,
and one last tear rolls down his cheek, child
of an unseen visitation of thoughts.
Capital cities rear up on their hind legs,
trampling great hooves upon the low-lying places,
their living inhabitants swarm in the streets
and advance to assault the thrones.
With the sound of thunder, graves split open
and thrones come tumbling down.
The sea will remember, will always recount
in its awful threatening language,
how a castle of lace was the prize of a girl
who won it by dancing in front of a throne.
The sea will remember, will always recount
in its thundering racket and roar
that the palace was once a prize for a dance
danced for the assassin of a hundred nations.
Limestone carved into fretwork lace
on a palace for their majesty's girlfriend.
Now the dancer's private residence

beats out a call to arms that arouses the mind.
You remember a time of thunder and threat by night;
you were walking, stalking the enemy's odor,
and heaven looked down at you, whistling,
blaring its madness in howling horns.
The sign of the hangman writ large in the heavens.
Once again the crack and beating of thunder
while someone who smiled a divinely idiotic smile
looked down upon earth's conflagrations.
Germany's *G* fell away from its name,
likewise the *R* dropped from the name Russia.
And I myself beheld the rise and extension of *L*
in the smoke of the fires on Midsummer's Eve.
Raise your bow above the expanse of storm clouds,
above the violin of Planet Earth
and assign a black name to the firemen
who come to extinguish the fire of intellect.
Remember, a tsar is only a panhandler now,
and a king is a poor relation.
Move ever onward, rabble of freedom,
let Freedom's hammer fall!
You are fodder for cannons—meat, nothing more,
warfare's scabby corpse—at least
until across the waves of universal dancing
the hopak-hurricane descends.
You hear? "Banzai!" is dead,
and "Hoch!" and "Hurrah!" both are silent.
Raise your shout to the red god,
direct at him your groan of anger.
Decorate the summit of Mont Blanc
with the all-knowing skull of Hiawatha.
His land is innocent, and part
of the encampment of Humanity.
The Valparaisans scramble for doubloons;
rubles have overwhelmed the Hondurans.
Your task, you madman, is simply to assure
the drench of your knife blade in blood.
Hatred is the good word nowadays;
bloody yourself in its actions.

You records of bygone centuries,
hurl yourself into the sea of thoughts and swim.
Strike up the band again, light of dawn,
and call down battalions, defenders of freedom,
if ever again the people whose kaiser is iron
move out like iron, like an iron river.
Where the Volga says "I"
the Yangtze-Kiang says "love"
the Mississippi answers "the"
Old Man Danube adds "whole"
and the Ganges-waters finish "world."
The river idol in his courses marks
the edges of the green world.
Everywhere always, ever and everywhere,
all for one, forever and everywhere!
Our shouts will rise up to the stars!
The language of love drifts over the world
and the Song of Songs longs to be sung in heaven.
The blue expanses of ocean peer
through their depths, their own blue eyes,
and in diagrams of destiny I will decipher
the reason that scarlet lightning shines.
Wars have pecked your eyes from your eyesockets—
go, you trouble-filled blind men,
seek for yourselves such power and authority
that your fathers have reason for savage rejoicing.
I have seen such trains of blind men,
their arms outstretched to those who call them family,
the doing of dealers—wheelers, stealers!—
all testimonials to the filthy workings of evil.
Wars have torn the legs from your bodies—
but Siberian forests are sprouting with crutches—
and after all, perhaps God will lend a hand
to help you cross the vast expanse of Russia's fields.
Shuffle along through the night, you skeletons,
on pathways cut between these palaces of glass,
and let the wits among you coin their cleverness
into the booming bell-song of the dead.
For the last time now, over the city Krupp has built,

which rustles with the bones of slaughtered armies,
the corrupted soul of the golden corpse
spreads itself out in every direction.
You have crammed yourself into these prisons,
where even the stairways and handrails run in harmonious accord,
and the skyscrapers neighbor the clouds,
but all of it heavy with smoke and anxiety.
A thick layer of dust
covers the iron kaiser's cohorts.
The fingers of the past bit into Adam's apple,
digging, convulsed by what has come to pass.
But you have known the strings of ruptured muscles,
tied up your bleeding sores with a shirt;
you know the terrifying song they sing:
your groans—or are they howls of torment?
And now for the first time appears on earth:
the face of Razin, sculpted by Konenkov,
like a holy book on the Kremlin,
and Shevchenko, who no longer fears the day—
warrior of freedom, barefoot wanderer.
See there, those horses galloping by?
A herd of turbulent freedoms,
smashing cast iron.
Drive your knee upon his chest
try to be strong, however you can!
And you, wind, with your pockmarks of iron,
go whispering, "Lord, Lord."
You showed the god of nighttime
the ancient sores your fetters caused—
find a better class of idiots!—
and you showed the sky the road.
The hand of earth seals off the mouths
of those whom cannon shot has buried.
Carry into the temple of slander
the wind of those who burn in chorus.
The man whose neck is strangled
by gold's implacable fist,
cursing with the strength of a hammer,
is familiar with the speech of lightning.

A team of six horses, their front-bending heads,
no longer transports noblemen;
the continent flares like a star from one end to the other
with a fire more ardent than flame.
And there! Those icons of freedom,
the bright shining eyes
of Qurrat al-‘Ayn,
wreathed in secretive eyelashes.
A Slavic girl, her light-brown hair in braids,
tearing petals from the water-flowers,
dissolves the sayings of Tsong-kha-pa
in the innocent morning dew.
Where the scarlet beef of battles
lies still smoking from the fusillade,
everlasting Freedom marches,
in her hand a banner boldly flying,
and the skyscrapers drown in the smoke
of an explosion set off by the hand of God,
and the palace of profit and salesmanship
is hidden in smoke rings and grayness.
The city that snapped the carriage-poles
of God as they wheeled in a sudden turn
has quieted now; unease seems barely perceptible
in the quiver of its horse’s mouth.
The city that boasted once of its ancient rightness
and rose strong in the beauty of its laughter—
in its eyes the most heavenly horsehead
chews on the steel bit and the bridle.
Cruel always, and eternally sad,
caress your throat with a heavy razor.
From heaven’s case of drawing instruments
you chose the hurly-burly of revolt,
and it will fall across the anvil
beneath the hammer’s blow—God’s own design!
You have pounded horseshoes onto the feet of God
to make him serve you as a faithful slave
and fastened tightly fitting fetters
on the raven summits of the sky.
It makes its horse’s head look human,

entangled in the mane of man's intelligence.
Its eyes blinded with the splash of whitewash,
the chalky city strikes tinder, sets fire.
Who is the horseman, who the horse?
Is this a city, or is the city God?
But the clattering racket of beating hooves
calls out for galloping, for a great wild rush!
To the land where Izanagi
reads *Monagatori* 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 Quetzalcoatl
adore Correggio
and admire Murillo;
where Unkulunkulu and Thor
with folded arms
play peaceful games of chess
beside Astarte, who worships Hokusai—
go there, go there!
Like owls ranged along a blood-stained perch
the towering palaces go up in flames.
Wherever labor finds it easy walking
and rebel drills and wedges beat the ore,
there deep as all rebellions shine
the Virgin Mother's cast-iron eyes.
Again the cattle low within the cave,
and the innocent child takes suck from the she-goat's udder
and beasts and people crowd about
the Divine Birth of women for today.
I see horse-freedom
and equal rights for cows.
Again years flow together as they did in ancient tales,
the scales have fallen from mankind's eyes.
And one who knows no dawnlight is wiser
than a horse conflagration in indigo darkness,
he shelters the horses' ambassadors

at Volkonsky's great house on Ostozhenko.
And once again, sectarians austere
as Arctic oceans cover
the nighttime triangles of the face
of Freedom, closed over with stars.
From flowers of May to April showers
the year is one long labor for us all,
and yet they say the gods are kind,
that every workday has a right to rest.
Side by side from dawn's first light
you gather sheaves beside your wife.
And what repayment from the man who owns the grain?
"Peasant, much obliged."
From sowing-seed to stubble-field,
until the first snow covers all traces of the path,
an army dressed in white, armed with sickles,
binds up the laborious sheaves.
You are bound around with the landlord's ropes,
you are gentled by whips in the hands of priests,
you pant like an ox—until the perspiration
on your shoulders burns. Chew your chunk
of moldy bread, your cruel bread—
how long already?—until you are freed
by the force of earthly rack and ruin.
Fill the drinking bowls of Freedom up
with a song of exultant poison.
Freedom goes on, it moves, it grows
like the conflagration of the universal soul.
There will be armor, a breastplate of time
on the chest of international labor,
and the reins of power will be transferred
to number, understood as farmsteads.
There will come a final struggle
between the angry ruble and the hungry rabble.
Rejoice, you edible grains, in brotherhood
with the hammer in the worker's hand!
And let the plague-breath ink
cover the blank pages of existence,
the breathing of destiny has transformed

the lands that wear Freedom's garment.
Then will the beautiful angle
of labor's earthly sail catch the wind
and you will fly, immortally sunburnt,
blessed young man, to that land!
A final assault on the pestilence of gold!
Come join us, you thieves of heavenly eyesockets,
you best and you brightest, come learn the trick
of muzzling the mouth of the plague-beast!
And let the chatter of birds now echo
in the bright blue heavens of springtime,
tomorrow the scaffold will tumble you down
into dreams beyond all human dreaming.
This is the surf of humanity
pounding away at the cliff-face of death.
The Russians no longer have
a land to call their own.
Where London carries its trading to China,
we, the creators of what's to come,
adjusting the clouds like a Panama hat,
we ignore their insolent palaces.
For us, their ashes do not count.
We have followed the path of rebellion,
and our losses at last are but little.
The Presidents of Planet Earth
advance in a group, ready for anything.
For thirteen years we Futurians have kept
alive, at heart, in sight, before our eyes,
in our retreat at Krasnaia Poliana,
the burning spark of Nosar's revolution.
Upholders of the banners of all freedoms,
guiding the galloping ride with your bridle,
fly fast along the highway of blue,
go be a part of this superhuman campaign.
Bury the remains of time
and drink from the starry glass of freedom
and upon the heavy ingot of the sun
let the clanging giant's hammer of assembly ring!
You hoist a sail above the constellations,

so earth can sail its strength and wildness
into the highest tier encircling the world,
and the bird of stars remains as it was before.
Sweep from the face of earth the filth of commerce
and level the castles and fortresses of trade,
then use the stars as building blocks
and let grass bells ring in the streets of Capital cities.
And in the great grillework of mirror-windows,
you night-bird wrapped in a glow of blue,
spin yourself a cocoon of filaments;
let the silkworm mark the path of your flight.
And the giant sounds of nighttime beat
upon the earth as on some vast alarm,
when those mirrors reflect their echoes outward
and the mesh of capitals spreads its encampments.
When the fleece of fields is combed
by a rake of clouds of deep nocturnal color,
the birds of the air will pause in midflight
to steal the grain as it falls from the fertile skies.
Early in springtime the wizard of wings
will cut the clouds in his flying machine,
and the plowman will hang there, high over the earth,
sowing his spring grain with an aerial hand.
His harnesses span heaven and all its clouds,
his harrows help the sprouting fleece of earth,
and everywhere the stalks of rye spring up,
tended by herds of horses in the sky.
He does not simply pray: Gimme a good
and heavy harvest, God, amen!
but trusts his crops to the power of equations,
and carries a series of numbers in his heart.
And their millstones grind out
flour made of edible earth,
nocturnal windmills there by the steep ravines,
wearily turning their tired wings.
Words of knowledge form themselves into lightning flashes,
speak out loud to an audience of rejoicing young people.
Thus are textbooks transported through clear air
to learning centers, one in every village.

Search beyond the downpour of grains of rye,
for one who cut the East in two,
where tanker-trains go north,
transporting the nourishing broth of lakes.
Where once the landlord's fishing rod jiggled
and his children lazily sailed their boats,
waves are now roasted to feed the capital cities,
and fumes of intoxication rise from vodka lakes.
Nightriding steam-engines carry lake-soup,
vast kettles of it; the stuff is frozen
into ice-blue blocks and brought to human eyes.
Behold the sea, slipcovered
in cragged peaks of glass;
a plume of heavy smoke arises from it,
and hangs in the air like a twist of some god's hair.
A structure casts its shadow on the water
and the palace of the seas arises, ready—
a troika of whales sets the sea afoam
as it carries the castle of waters onward.
The lakemaker, mirror of a wilderness of clouds,
finds that it has the power to fly.
The bard who sings the uprising of writing
seeds workbenches as he sows plowed fields,
and a band of youths, all of them sworn
to the destruction of all languages—
I know you have no trouble guessing their names!—
march in parade, and flowers crown their heads.
And you march too, a sheepskin carelessly thrown
across your daring shoulders, full of wildness,
marching to light the bonfire that signals
the inception of changes in earthly existence.
In love with wandering, he reached for
a row of numbers, as if they were a walking stick,
and squaring the root of minus 1
cleverly noticed the *rusalka* it contained.
He discovered the double-visaged root
of one who has nothing, never had,
in order to perceive in the land of the mind
the *rusalka* hidden at the roots of the tree.

The pearls of the Pechora burn above us
through a headdress of distant stars—
there's your direction, go, you heaven-helper,
exalted by the force of your lever-device.
We will form bucket brigades to transport Neva-water
to extinguish the Dog Stars where they blaze.
Let a train lay a scar of soot across the blue
as it flies along the branching forest network.
Let the heavens shake and stagger
at your heavy footfall.
Brace up the constellations with log-beams,
and fasten the valleys together with an axial grid.
Crawl like an ant across the face of heaven,
explore the cracks and fissures of the firmament.
Blue wanderer, snatch fast at those prizes,
those blessings that were already promised you.
The savage force of that lever-device
has allowed this descendant of midnight storms
to set piledrivers, power drills, sledgehammers
in place among the nighttime constellations.
Brace your ladder against the face of heaven,
set a fireman's helmet upon your head,
and climb, scramble, over the walls of the moon
through the carbon smoke of corrosive fire.
Set the hammer for a sign in the heavens,
spin the sun in a circle a turn or two
and see—where the east burns with a red glow,
set in motion its cog-wheels and gears.
You replace one clock with another,
you pay for your supper with a smile;
whenever the value of labor must be measured,
you place the number of heartbeats on the scale.
The sharp-eyed attractions of profit and gain,
inequality and heaps of money—
the great prime movers of the distant past—
the poet of today will exchange them for poems.
A masterful siren will brighten
the silences of the great desert,
and the train, swift envoy, will pass out of sight

more glittering than the crowned constellations.
You wind electric coils from the very earth,
whose wires are conductors for storms alone,
and you praise the gentle shepherdess
who sits by the brook among the damsel-flies.
And there will be equal signs
between the hours of labor and the hours of rest,
and the sacred iron rod of perished power
will be entrusted entirely to the voice of song.
And even idleness, the mother of invention,
will rank as labor's equal,
will grasp the crowbar of authority
with the otherworldly force of ecstasy,
and your flight, forever forward,
will be followed later by those who move limply
as even the traffickers in truth begin
to recognize the booming voice of justice.
Trace out a path on the shores of the sea of slander,
tensing the soles of your feet as you go!
Encased in a shell of steel, an eaglet
will fly, trailing its crimson wings;
only a moment before the flame of a match,
like the tongue of a calf, licks it alive.
Survey the world with love, not chalk,
draw us diagrams of what is sure to come,
and Fate, descending through air to your bedside,
will stoop to listen, a sentient ear of rye.

[1920, 1921: T 281]

Night Raid

Get 'em out.
It's this one here,
it's thirty-eight.
Ready, men.
We're goin' in.
Kick it in!
Yessir! Harder!

Officers, please!

Come right on in . . .

We're Marines, lady,
not the cops. Take a better
look. Anyway, you lie.
You don't ever want to try
to fuck over a sea-soldier.
This apartment thirty-eight?

This is number thirty-eight.

Were you boys

looking for a party?

*(Her head shakes,
she's really old.)*

OK, lady, what's your name?
What do you say, lady,
show us the way, lady,
we gotta check this out.
You just keep calm, lady,
no harm, lady,
we're just checkin' for Whitey.
One of you guys watch the door—
nobody there.
Somebody check out the floor
above. Buddy, over here!

Yessir!

Come on, Marines, let's move it out!
Grab 'em by the short hair.
Sneaky bastards
could be hidin' anywhere.
The rowdy crowd of bootboys
holstered their iron,
grabbed what wasn't nailed down—
they never played Whitey's fool.

Listen, lady, move it, will ya?
See this rifle? It can kill ya
even though ya got gray hair.
Where's your menfolks hidin'?
Where you got your stash?
Listen, lady, I'm an old sea-wolf
and I'm after cash.
I smell Whitey, lady,
got a nose can smell 'em
and I got a whiff of Whitey
right now. You smell that, brother?
Gonna get us something White
tonight.
Sure as shootin'.

Here's everything I've got.
You can take my pearls . . .
How much is there?
. . . worth forty, fifty, maybe.
Maybe buy us all a beer.
Don't just stand there yakkin',
grab the stuff, let's go!
Time to blow.
No one here.
Grab your share,
no time to spare,
to sit around.
Come on, boys,
take the lady's toys, boys,

and let's get back to base.
Let's go, you sea-soldiers,
move out as much as you can carry.

Hey wait! Play a polka, lady,
on your fancy piano;
show this bunch of swabbies
how a lady goes to town!

(A Voice)

Mama! Mama!
Keep it shut, lady! Don't say a word!
Whitey's not here, huh?
You'll get yours for this tomorrow—

*Friend, I'm old.
(Red, White,
Blue-blood, who
can tell them apart?)
All I know is what I'm told.
My hair is white.
And I'm his mother.*

Bam! Bam!
Gunfire, smoke!
Stop!
Where you headed, buddy boy?
Drop your weapon! Both hands up!
Shall I shoot the fucker, boys?
OK, smart boy, up against the wall!
That's right! That's the way!
Well, look at baby's golden curls,
hasn't even learned to shave!
Over there beside the stove, Whitey.
Strip. Let's see the kind of man you are.

*Sorry to interrupt
your shore leave, fellows—
sorry my shot went wild.*

The fucker's laughin' at us!
Is that an insult, or just brave?

Shall I shoot the fucker, fellas?

*Going to blow my brains out,
swabbies, celebrate your night ashore?*

And everybody says that you're the good guys—

Everybody's right, goddammit!

We're Marines, sea-soldiers, we can be
nice if we feel like it.

Don't want you watchin' this, lady.

OK, boys, what'll it be?

Shoot the White bastard?

But he's my son!

Take off your shirt!

Don't want holes in something
someone else can use.

You don't need clothes
where you're goin'.

Got no girls to impress
when you're six feet under.

Drop your trousers, buddy boy.

Take it all off. That's the way.

Hurry it up, you think we got all day?

Later on, you can take your time.

Where you're goin' you can rest forever.

Mama, goodbye!

I won't be back,

don't leave the night light burning.

Here, kid, take these clothes away. Ready! Aim!

So long, sucker! Thanks for the shot!

Fire! In the People's name!

Bam Bam Bam!

Bam!

Thanks for the shot?

Pigeon's-egg size?

Sparrow's-egg size?

Who the hell cares?

He's bought it now.

Good-lookin' young fucker.

Too smart for his own good.

Two more shots—
one into the floor,
and now one more
at the sky! That's the way!
Send the fucker packin'.
We're Marines, we're the flying sea's soldiers,
and we shoot back over our shoulders,
our white-shirt shoulders,
our navy-blue shoulders.
We sight 'em we fight 'em
we meet 'em we beat 'em.
I got blue bell-bottoms
and my gun goes dancin' in my hand
and I don't wear fancy, all I got
is the navy-blue sea around my shoulders
and my tight white shirt.
Mother of Christ.
Hey, man, whatta we do now? Carry him out?
Take him along?
It don't look right to leave him lying here.
Fuck him! It's not our job.

Mama!

Now what the—wow, will you look at that!
Seventeen, and look, her hair's turned white!
And dark eyes, full of fire.

*You Marines bring the snow ashore—
half an hour and my hair's gone white!
If you don't like staring at an old lady,
don't look! Just turn around!*

Vladimir! Volodya! Vladimir!

Mama!

They took off his clothes!

Calm down, girlie, dead men
don't need clothes.
Can't embarrass a dead man!
You men, stand easy! Watch your mouth!

*Bastards! Making jokes
about a man you've killed!*

Listen, lady, see this shirt?

I'll never be able to afford one like it,
why shoot it full of holes?
Custom-made. And see? No bloodstains.

A step on the stairs, the squad returns,
a hand on a shoulder.
Got another one. Hiding in the attic.
Squeezed off a couple of rounds.
No problem!
Way to go!

Where's my mother?

Listen, Snowbird, don't blame us
your hair turned white.
You had a snowfall here, upstairs,
before us Marines came along,
before our sea-wind sang its song.
You were stuffin' your mattress
with machine guns.
But what the hell, we'll forget it.
It's just an early spring,
that's an apple-blossom snowstorm
on your head.
Get a grip on, girlie.
It's autumn. Time for leaves to fall.
Not the greatest funeral wreath, but still—
Knock it off! Buddy,
why you want to bother her?
Fuck her! OK, Snowbird,
up against the wall!

Where? Here? Like this?

Go ahead, I'm ready!

OK, blow her fuckin' brains out!
Stop!
No more blood, you hear me?
It's OK, baby, you can turn around.
Blood? You call this blood?
Red blood from these Whiteys?
They dribble piss, man, piss and shit,
pollute our water everywhere!

He must be her brother.
Maybe he's her husband.

Vladimir! Mama!

Don't forget to yell for Papa, sweetheart.
Say, where the hell is Papa anyway?
Gone with the rest of the thoroughbreds,
racing to get out of the country?
Is Papa the odds-on favorite
to get his ass across the finish line?
OK, sweetheart,
go to your room. And stay there.
You're no sight for sore eyes, baby, so relax.
We're gonna do a little drinkin' here tonight.
Don't cry, sister, just beat it.
This is no place for civilians.
We got sisters, too, back home,
just hometown girls, not hot-shot
city sluts like you.
Get out of here, old woman.
Deal with this your own way,
we'll leave you alone.

We got the time, they got a mirror,
I'm gonna give myself a shave.
The mirror's crooked,
and my face ain't none too straight.
Come on, you guys, let's heave
this junk out the window.
Nobody needs it any more.
What we want here is the sea,
great waves like the sea,
and a few seagulls.

Fuck this mirror! There!
A hard left, right in its kisser!
Watch it, you cut yourself!
Looks like you broke a bottle of red ink.
A fightin' man, cut with a piece of mirror!
Sometimes a mirror can be cruel, can look

too close. Nobody wants to be shown up.
Somebody turn down the lights.
Gimme your handkerchief,
buddy.

Vladimir!

Volodya!

Look, lady, he's dead! He died
tonight! Just up and died!
He can't hear you,
He's a lump on the floor!
Too bad
for poor Vlad.

What the hell is this thing?
Some tinkle-toy to keep
rich White girls entertained?
She sits there nights
and dreams about her boyfriend,
plays herself a happy little tune.
The keys are black and white.
White follows black
and black follows white
as day follows night.
Any of you guys play this thing?
Yeah, I can bang out a beat
with the butt of my gun.
Hey you guys help us
shove it over here!
Now we'll have some fun.
Slam-bam, sing it, shout it,
and then a faint complaint,
like a puppy left whining out in the yard.
Then a roar and a rumble of cannon-thunder
and the echo of somebody laughing,
a watery snicker,
a *rusalka* laughing.
They crowd the keyboard. Sound of strings.
Strings go ha-ha, snickering strings.
Then a gun-butt beat!

Beat-beat-butt-butt! Sea-storm laughter!
Sea-soldier laughter! Fat-fist hurricane
harries the keyboard!
Pow! Hand grenade in the enemy trenches!
Down in their dugouts, the homeboys
hassle the Holy Mother's holiday.
Their White bodies go to fill
a certain need, then the worms.
Two changes of shirt,
one smaller than the other.
Two big eaters, just one dish.
God, what a noise it makes,
taking a nosedive to doom!
The strung-out metal jangles,
jangles on and on.
Hammer it harder, buddy,
make it hum like a hive
when the honeyman
comes, collecting his combs.
Wham! Pow!
Atsa way, boys,
that's music for Marines!
Bash out the beat, boys, bang, bang!
Break it in, break it up!
Beat it in, beat it up!
Bang bang, beat it down
blow it up! That's the way us sea-scum
operate! The big bad bang boys!
The fat cats will pay
when the party's over.
And this pile of shit,
this big box with the wails and whines
out the window!
Crashing down to the street below!
Wake up the neighborhood,
way to go!
That's the kind of job for a sea-soldier.
The sea gets rough, right?
That's the job for us,

we're not just sailors,
not fuckin' failures,
we're Marines!
So fling it to fuck-all,
Ba-baam! Slam! Bam! Kraak!
Kraak! Bababoom! Vavavoom!
Now the sea is getting higher
now the waves are getting wilder,
now the storm is at its height.
Sea power! *Pow!*
Did it hit anybody?
Nope. Just three little insects
out to take a look.
That piano went bust,
sure raised some dust.
Where's your rifle, kiddo?
See the sparrow on the rooftop
opposite? Think you can pick him off?
Just watch.
Ready?
P-toing!
Get him?
Got him.
Shot him
dead.
Where's that old lady gone to?
Lady, you still here?
Round us up some eats, lady,
roast beef and booze, lady,
and a clean tablecloth underneath it.
Flowers! Glasses!
We wanna have a party, just like
you White folks. Hustle up now,
you rustle up the good stuff.
Got any steak?
Get a move on,
before we improve on
your fuckin' face.
We're gonna eat, boys,

we're gonna gorge, boys.
Chomp down, chow down,
feed our fuckin' faces, fellas.
She's gonna lay it on us good
and we'll chew till our jaws hurt.
Only something stinks.
Something dead is starting to stink.

Vladimir!

Listen, boys, she wants Vladimir!
She doesn't want us!
Gotta give the young lady some time—
Wait a minute, baby, what about us?
Hey baby, how about me!
Hey lady, how about me!
Hey there, honey, how about me?
Meeeeeow!
What a fuckin' laugh.
Listen to him whine,
like a fuckin' piece of pussy.
Knock it off, you guys.
Have a little respect
for the dead.

What about the tinkle-box?
You clubbed it good
before it hit the ground.
That bang-box sure made music
on the way down. Sang out,
rang out, rang like a bell,
flapped like a dead bird
and flew all to hell.
That's the kind of stuff happens
when the sea gets rough.
Hey listen, they had a sign out front
says: "Please knock,"
one of our guys wrote on it
and now it says: "Please fuck,"
right by the dead man's door,
where his sister can see it. Or maybe

she's his widow. Ha-ha-ha.
What an asshole.
Still, she's got a lot to weep for,
that young widow-lady
with her hair gone white.
We're the wind, we blew that snowstorm
over her head.
The wind from the sea.
Marines are sea-soldiers.
That's us, boys. Wherever we go
we bring sorrow and snow.
We are the sea!
We are the sea!
Count up the bodies we leave behind.
The drunken-sailor sea,
the tattooed-dagger sea,
the pirate sea,
the unquiet sea,
a storm of red flannel,
the unquiet sea,
the Pugachev Sea!
I got a nose for Whitey,
smelled the bastard a mile away.
Got us something White
tonight.
And the bastard tried to fight!
Mama's boy
hiding in the closet.
He fires, he misses,
he laughs.
So I say: "OK, smart boy, stop!"
And he says:
"Gonna blow my brains out?"
So I say: "Goddam right!"
Bam! Bam! Bam!
And the way he tosses his head
and laughs,
like he was askin' what's the price
of somethin' we were selling.

Like we were in business.
Right, we're in business,
no need to be nice,
we all wind up alike—
and nobody kicks the bucket twice.
What the fuck.
It's just his luck.
"Goddam right," I say.
"We're Marines, sea-soldiers,
we can be nice if we feel like it."
Bam! Bam! Bam!
That's the way it happened, boys—
There's the young guy there,
"Gonna blow my brains out?"
"Goddam right,"
that's what I tell him.
Bam! Bam! Bam! Smoke!
Scorched the air.
And look at him lying there
with his golden curls, till his sister
came and kissed him
goodbye.
"Bye-bye, baby,
Time for beddy-bye."
Hey kid! Little girl! Where you goin'?
Just to put the cat out.
Hold it right there!
Gimme that cat
I'll put her out.
Out the fuckin' window!
What's your name, honey?
Missy.
Pussy'd be better!

Your table is ready, officers.

The old lady stands there,
straight as a pine tree.
You can tell she's the mother

of Vladimir. Her eyes are hard.
Roll out the barrel, boys,
it's six o'clock and time to party!
Pour out the good stuff, buddy boy!
Let's get this off our minds.
Drink it down, you Marines.
Live it up, you Marines.
Harder, faster!
Raise a few waves!
Let's hear the sound of the sea,
the drunken sea!
"And the pirate chieftain feasted
as he drank his liquor down . . . drank it down!"
This is the life, boys!
Sit down, you guys,
we got ourselves a party,
and the wine is gonna flow till dawn.
"Roll out the barrel,
and we'll all fall down!"
You wanna smoke?
I wanna light!
Gimme a light, goddammit,
mine's gone out.
Little by little it just went out.
'Samatta, Pops, you give it up?
He don't say shit. Just sits there dreamin'.
The old man keeps to himself,
dug down deep in the dumps.
With his head in the clouds.
So what? We got the booze we wanted—
oceans of vodka, a whole sea-full,
so God can have the clouds.
We won't fight him for that.

There's a picture of God on the wall there
and another one here on my chest,
nailed up, crown of thorns and all,
picked out in blue ink on my skin—
that's what sea-soldiers do.

The one on the wall's got a candle burning—
a better smoke than we got!
Yeah, he sits there in the corner
smoking
and gives us the eye.
I'd like to split him into splinters
for the stove! Smash him to bits.
Fuel for fancy fires.
Fuck his baby-blues,
he's got a come-on like a girl's!
God's face is a girl's face,
only he's got whiskers.
Got a little beard hangs down
ends in two points
like the twilight muddle of sheep
herded along a lake,
like a rain at night.
His eyes are blue as the sky before dawn,
serene and all-knowing,
austere and beautiful,
tender with speech unspoken,
they look down in silent reproach,
the whole drunken bunch
of us, killers of saints,
the whole damn mess
of us, killers of saints.
Look out, he'll come down
and start screwing around.
Face to face, blink to blink,
like the flick-flick of a lighter.
His eyes are dark as heaven,
there's an all-knowing secret
that breathes in his image,
lakes of blue thought!
"You wanna blow my brains out?"
Blow my brains out, girl-god,
you got them seven bullets left.
With those beautiful baby-blues?
Thanks, really appreciate

your letters and cards.
Marines! Marines!
He says he will!
He bats and bats his baby-blues
like a bird flaps its wings.
His eyes race right into my soul,
they fly full speed, flapping and sounding
and as chill as the gallows
he looks at me with unrelenting cold.
Wide open, staring like horror stories,
his blue eyes fly like furious birds
straight into my soul.
Like two seabirds, enormous, dark blue
as the storm, stormy petrels, prophesying the worst.
The whoosh and wave of their wings full speed
right through me! Bottoming right through my soul.
Yeah . . . I'm drunk . . . And this is really happening . . .
And I want him to kill me right now,
right here on the tablecloth
in the wine-slop and glitter of broken glass!
You guys, you band of buddies,
saint-killers all of you,
in your white shirts
with sea-blue bands,
your sailor pants, bell-bottom black,
blue wings flying on your unbending necks
like sea waves curling, like the white surf surging,
like the blue breezes of the sea,
the black swallowtail flutter on your necks,
with the home-sign in front, your ship's name,
O speech of Marines, our sea-soldier homeland,
seagoing fortress, O name of the power of the state!
You guys, you band of brothers,
you convoy of sea-tramps,
you stomp in blunt boots
on deck and on shore,
when the going gets rough you never waver—
you're not even afraid of the sea.
Listen to me now, hear what I say—

I wanna fall dead, be killed on the spot,
and the bullet that kills me,
I want it to come from there,
from that face on the wall, the sheen of a rifle
from there, so I can shout at him: Asshole!
Right in the face of my death.
Like that kid shouted at me
and laughed a cool laugh
point-blank at the cartridge-clip of death.
I burst into his life and killed him
like some dark deity of night
but he won, he beat me with his laughter
that echoed with the glass-clink of youth.
Now I want to conquer God
with a laugh as strong as his,
though my mind right now
is black. And heavy. And hurts.
God, I'm drunk!

The old man's really shit-faced.
Time to get back to the ship. Let's go!
No, wait—I know I'm drunk, but listen . . .
listen, let's have a smoke.
I wanna have a heart-to-heart with you.
You worked a lot of miracles—
but you never got to be a father, did you?
Forget how I know, I just know.
You're a girl. With a beard.
You go out in the fields and pick
flowers to stick in your hair
then you look at yourself in the water.
Wanna know what you are—
you're a blue-eyed country girl,
a hick-town farmer's daughter
with a curly beard.
That's what you are.
A fuckin' girl! You wanna little present,
I'll bring you some perfume.
Wanna go on a date?

Just tell me when,
I'll show up with a shave and be polite
and bring you flowers.
And make eyes and sighs and maybe
we'll go for a stroll
on the boardwalk
arm in arm,
out on a date like the rest of them.
Gimme a little kiss, baby.
Have a little drink, baby. Call me baby, baby.
. . . which art in heaven, baby.
You guys, wait up,
don't go, don't get so crazy!
A mermaid with ferocious fog-bank eyes—
Rusalka baby, drink it down!
Buddies, buddy-boys,
think we'll ever get together again?
Will we be best buddies in the sweet by-and-by?
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!
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 drink the saints in heaven blind,
we'll drink to our Odessa mama—
we'll see if God's got a light
and that's that. Nothin' more to say.
Hey, buddy, you on the wall—
Bottoms up!—Christ!
His lips are moving, he's saying something,
fuckin' fish-mouth talking, saying something,
something terrible, a word,
something terrible,
guys, it's a terrible word—
FIRE!
—You're drunk!—No, we're all drunk!

Night Raid

See you in the sweet by-and-by!
You wanna blow my brains out?
The old lady! Fuckin' old bitch!
You did it! You set the place on fire!
Christ, the smoke! Help! We'll burn to death!
I don't care. I'm cool. I'm even happy.
I'll stand here, comb my hair,
ready for inspection.
Savior! You're an asshole!
Come on! Chief, come on! We gotta break out!
Use your rifle butts!
It's an iron door!
What'll we do?
Choke on the smoke?
Shoot me first!
What'll we do?

(The Old Woman appears)

You can do whatever you please.

[1921: T 317]

The Chairman of the Cheka

He comes in, laughs, takes a drag on his cigarette.
He comes back again, another laugh.
Again he takes a drag, smoke drifts from his little white rifle.
He offers us a blueprint, shows how the suite of generations
bears laws devised by rational intelligence, polygons of fate:
“I think sometimes that I’m a paste-up job,
one-half Nero, one-half Jesus Christ,
I understand them both at heart;
I realize I’ve got two souls.
I was sentenced to be shot
because they found I’d never sentenced
anyone to die.
As Death’s provider, I’m a loss.
I’ve never scratched my signature, remember,
on anybody’s death warrant,
never put a nail in anybody’s coffin.
Of course I like to watch my clients sweat
while I interrogate them,
like to watch their shaky eyes.
I’ve terrified the locals more than once
with my exacting unemotional inquiries.
A man would say farewell to all his family
in his mind, see himself already in his grave,
and then I’d say, without emotion,
‘Citizen, you’re free. You’re free to go.’
He’d back away like a rabbit, shivering, stammering,
chewing his lip, not believing his luck, through the door
and down the stairs, into a cab and home to his family.
My own leave of absence came a month late,
we had to travel by night.”

He stopped, his blue eyes smiled; again he gulped
a heavy hit of Soviet smoke.

“I never let things go as far as execution;
I ransom them spiritually from death
with the spiritual torture of interrogation.
The shower room of death, you know, cleans the body and the soul.
Yes, I could have been crucified in the name of the Cheka
and hung on a cross before society’s tribunal.

Of course I could.

Look, I used to study numbers myself, learned their secrets.
I’m young, I’m only twenty-two, I learned to build steel bridges,
learned that the law of generations is accurate,
straighter than a steel bridge,
learned how flamboyant Moscow burned—
the angles come together here, and here they separate,
see?” he said, raising his cold eyes to the sky.

He didn’t live alone. His wife was someone else’s.
She seemed to have stepped down from a wall painting
in Pompeii, some curly-haired divinity of spring,
ashes sprung to life again.
Her clipped black curls
(she’d recently been sick with typhus),
her Hellenic springtime eyes, her body, exquisitely thin,
transparent as wax, and her ardent face
had conquered everyone. A very few were critical,
called her “pushy,” and “a whore.”
Her husband was a big-shot Soviet official.

We lived in a communal room, it had five windows.
I often watched them mornings, making love
before he left. They lay on the floor
beneath a black sheepskin coat, getting ready to go.
Suddenly the blanket would heave,
and from beneath it peered two pairs
of eyes, one dark, one blue and slightly sleepy.
Sometimes he’d lay his mad head in the girl’s sweet lap
and his pale head would suddenly seem an invalid’s.
Then she would gently stroke his golden hair,

it moved in the air,
she played with it, ran her fingers
constantly through it. Her dark eyes brimmed with love
and with tears, proud of their passion.
Sometimes they kissed fiercely, tenderly, wildly,
in front of us all;
their heads seemed to be one,
his blue eyes and her dark ones seemed like day and night,
two halves of twenty-four hours, a single ring.
“You bastard, you’re mine, you’re my bastard,
my fabulous bastard . . .”
She kissed his pale forehead, slapped him lightly in the face,
caressed him with love-talk as she was leaving,
tenderly fondled the golden hair that fell across his forehead.
He smiled forlornly, tenderly, hung his head, and sat down.
I saw the burning slap marks on his cheeks,
heard the echo of that noisy kiss at the doorway,
like a punctuation mark,
and his sad, derisive, long-lingering glance—
Two months ago he shot himself because of her,
to prove to her “he wasn’t fooling,” and the bullet
almost grazed his heart.
He was only a hair’s breadth from dying—a golden hair.
He bore it all without complaining.
Then he would look at us all with a look of intelligent scorn,
unemotional, skeptical, and dead,
but eternally and beautifully blue,
like a goblet someone had emptied.
It was the look a superior gives to subordinates.
“Go ahead,” she said, “you bastard, hit me!”
and turned her cheek.
Now and then his gray-haired mother came,
her gray hair neatly parted,
the same blue eyes, enormous,
with the same mad blue fire in them,
she smoked eagerly, caressed her son hurriedly, stroked his hand,
laughing, whispering. She too played with his hair.
From time to time she wept with reproaches of happiness:
“You’re such a silly boy, such a silly boy. Oh, my silly little boy, my
silly little boy, you’re so silly.”

Sometimes she shed quick tears and wiped her happy blue eyes
beneath her white-gray hair,
whispering for a long time with her sad, dry son.
And he charmed his mother's mind with endless meanderings.

He lied mercilessly about his wife's estate, her money;
they were planning a long trip in a heated freight car
to the front lines in Poland, a seven-day trip.
He'd sneak out every night like a thief to arrange
his leave papers;
he evidently made two sets of them (he had an official stamp),
and proudly said: "The Cheka almost arrested me."

She was surrounded by dressmakers and endless wristwatches.
I never knew exactly what went on, but every day there were ex-
changes of gold watches through third parties.
What for, or where they came from, I never knew.
But there was a real flood of watches:
she had organized a happy lavish trade.

But he, Nero with blue eyes,
interrogator, tormentor of solid citizens,
exacting punishment from the Old World
with the exquisite tortures of his blue eyes,
the gleam in his blue eyes,
it was he who hung on the Cheka's cross!
And his golden curls fell
from his broad forehead to the ground.
He too came down to dwell amongst us
and groveled in filth.
He didn't shine against a bright sky
Like a good boy, papa's favorite.
And in the very bowels of his soul
with a lyre in his hand
he used to go each morning to watch Russia go up in flames,
to watch a world on fire, collapsing into nothingness.
"We'll turn the Old World upside down, and then . . ."
to watch old Moscow, her temples of trade, her fortresses,
burn by the law of what is happening today.
Once more, a flesh-winged Savior known to all,

yielding up his beautiful flesh to spiritual nails,
sarcastic, in the rough clothing of the official icon,
a green uniform jacket and puttees.
And afterward he overturns the throne of his nailed-up hands
in order to go watch Rome burn,
in a white sheet with a purple stripe, like a Roman emperor crowned
with flowers,
the purple streams of burning Russia, the Russia of lords and land-
lords, of moneyed men,
two cruel blue eyes,
they rested on you like a flower,
and relished the perfume of smoke and fire.
He loved to go out in the streets of the burning world
and say, "Good!"

The worn-out charges of the Cheka lived
In a basement protected by barred windows;
from his seat behind an armored barrier,
a sentry chased the passers-by away.
And to one window, at the same time
everyday, a white dog with black spots
came to whine and howl to her master,
to bark and howl mournfully
at the windows of that sinister cellar.
We used to go out walking together.
She stood there, her white ear cocked,
offering her paw, stood on three legs,
anxiously, lovingly watching the window
and barking softly—
her master was somewhere in the dark basement.

The name Saenko was notorious in the city.
They told stories about him, how he said
his favorite fruit was eyeballs—
". . . especially those I pluck myself," he added,
smiling through his moustache.

The Cheka building stood beside a great muddy slope
at the edge of a deep ravine,

its rear windows faced the slope.
You couldn't hear the moans from there.
They threw dead bodies out the window into the ravine.
Chinamen buried them in waiting graves.
Garbage pits were graves sometimes,
and splinters driven under fingernails
were decorations, signs of manhood.

The Cheka's fortress stood at the dead end
of a large street on the edge of town.
Sinister stories hung all over it, that castle of death,
there at the end of a street named after a great writer.
One phrase describes it:
silence speaks louder than words.

"And what do *you* think of Saenko?"
the chairman of the Cheka asked me carelessly,
looking at me with his innocent blue eyes.

[1921: *Novyi mir* 10 (1988), 149]

Cracking the Universe

Wonderworld

1

Student (he slams a book shut and closes his eyes):

I am dreaming a strange dream:
a little girl cups my nation in the palm of her hand,
then tosses it into the void.
It resembles a little red insect, a beetle
wrinkling its weak and tattered wings.
It is tiny and tired and close to death.
Her mother from an open window calls:
“You put that down and wash your hands,
you hear?” “Oh mother I will,” she says,
“and see? It fell in the water, there by the window.”
Then she herself sits by the window, braids her hair
and drinks her lemonade.
The fall of my nation is near!
Oh teacher! What a painful dream!

The Older Man:

All things are waves. We have left the crest,
and wallow in a trough.
When Lobachevskian space
shone on our banner,
when we began to perceive
his transparent polygons
in every living face
and our poems decomposed like the flesh of the dead
into the simplest of particles,
and the poem-skull smiled
the death of prophetic language
leaving only the skull of rational language—

then things came close to the edge,
and the keenest of men burned with foreknowledge.
In the morning many voices sing on the rooftops.
See how it rises,
the sun of the downfall of the nation!
Its first dark rays
shine upon mountains and me,
we are the burning mirror
of death's enormous sun.
And the sleeping valleys
still gather their grain.

Son:

Hear me. When many men died
in a great deep of water,
died in the rye-fields of home,
there was no one to write down what happened.
I made a promise then,
and into the sky-blue bark
of a swamp-side birch tree
I scratched the names of the ships
that I took from the chronicles.
On that sky-blue bark
I sketched the outlines of bodies and smokestacks and waves—
I, the clever conjuror—
I dragged into conflict the faraway ocean
and my down-home swamp and the birch tree.
Now who will win? My down-home birch
or the fury of iron-clad seas?
I promised to understand everything,
to pardon everything and everyone
and teach them
the how of it all.
I gathered old books,
harvested numbers with the rotary sickle of memory,
watered it all with my thoughts; bent and exhausted,
on the seashore I raised up pillars for poetry
that found a support in the sky.
I established white temples of Time,

filled them with poetry and the life of young men,
temples chiseled from the dead sea.
I discovered truths, majestic and straightforward,
and like divinities they entered my temples,
greeted me with outstretched open arms,
and filled the empty white temples with their breath.
My mind, precise to the *n*th degree,
like a heart of burning coal, I placed on
the tongue of the dead prophet of the universe,
placed in the breathing breast of the universe,
and I understood suddenly: Time does not exist.
Aloft on the wings of an eagle, I saw simultaneously
all that was and is to be.
I saw the powers of twos and threes,
mainsprings in the steel workings of worlds,
the resilient speech of numbers.
What would happen in the future was clear to me.
I smiled the smile of Buddha,
then suddenly I began to groan,
I raised my hand, I foamed at the mouth,
and the lightning tore my flesh.
You see the lighted match flare up
by the dark ammunition dump,
once fenced-off, unassailable?
You see that explosive mixture
of workers and owners,
of kings and their frenzied pursuers?
Look: some enormous being will throw us away,
we will fall from our seat on Planet Earth
into the vast deep of the stars.
Are you ready to drop headlong into death?
Come, like swimmers in the waters of death
we will press through the waters,
stroking our way through the river of death
with unrelenting arms.
Swimming is always refreshing,
though it's never easy at first.
O Teacher, come with me!

Teacher:

Think first.

Student:

I have thought, and have made up my mind. I'm going.

The Older Man:

Green leaves like butterflies
cover the tree once again;
every tree is a fisherman dressed in green,
a green-shirted fisherman
casting his green meshes wide
in the endless blue of the sky-sea
to net the industrious sun.

2

The Young Leader:

O Comrades!
You see before you the rational skull of the universe
and the dark entwinings of the Milky Way—
the Horde-road, they call it sometimes—
Let's raise a scaling ladder
to besiege the fortress stars!
Let us batter our shields like warriors,
let us breach the walls of the rational skull of the universe,
let's storm our way in—like ants
swarming over a rotten stump hissing with death—
to the mechanism of its brain,
and shake up the strings of this heavenly puppet,
this doll whose eyes shine in the night,
cause her to move her arms, to open her eyes.
Where flywheels exuding oil
moved the mechanism of the brain
where wheels and winches are,
you'll see me on the belt
sawing through the first will—
a high priest of breaking and entering,
smashing his way through the sacred shackles.
A picklock undoing high heaven! What an encounter,

what a face-off at the dance party of words!
We will turn it into a doll!
Make it bat its eyelashes,
learn to say papa and mama!
Let's attack that mechanism!
We will make the sky a talking doll!
All you children of the grand design,
follow me!

3

Make it fast!
Push it higher!
There, right in the witch's ear!
More! More!
Against the right side of her head!
She'll never get rid of us now!
The ladder is fast now,
against the right side of her head.
Chisels ready! Go!
Beyond the shoulders of all of us
tremble oceans of daring and pride.
Now use your drills and your augers!
Dynamite, now is your chance!
Shatter the skull of the universe!
Heroic as ants,
unnoticed as night,
we will leap to the side of the skull
and begin operations.
The sun glints on our hair,
fitting us all with the crimson helmets of warriors.
The final step! Bright as universal dawn!
Now! I stand upon the fractured skull,
my fingers probe the heavens.
One after another let's jump back down,
rappelling like mountain climbers.
We are already distant from earth
by the measure of the many years we've climbed.
We will soar up into the skies
and after many thousands of years we'll return to earth

as obscure ashes.

And again in the mechanism
a screen for shadow-pictures begins to glow,
and there's the same face still, reflected
in the blue opalescence.

Look! It's her, she's still here,
the girl who held the beetle in her hand,
still sitting at the darkened window, dubious still;
yes and *no* still brandish their wings
and here's a notice in human characters,
and beside it a valve. Something written here
is of crucial importance to me, and I must read it:
"Stranger! You have come unannounced
into this world.

If you turn this valve,
you will rescue the insect, the ladybird you love.
That red-coated insect may well be your nation,
your native land. Only thinking and reason
can help you to save it.

It flounders now in the water, drowning.
This is the valve of my will.
Turn it! Do it now! See, how simple it is!"

Young Warrior:

I've turned it. It's done.
The shadowy world is still the same as before,
but the beetle now rests on a flower.
And if it is indeed my native land,
it is saved from disaster once more, by the turn
of an uncomplicated valve handle.
Hurrah for us all! Hurrah for unlooked-for assistance!

"Mama! I just had the most hurtful dream!
And someone much stronger than me
took charge of my will
and I rescued the ladybird, look!
Now it can dry its wings
and fly wherever it likes."

[1921: D 202]

The Gul-Mullah's Trumpet

1

Hak! Hak!

It's a prophet come down from the mountains!
From the throats of the crowd, like the breathing of whales,
moaning, and cries of frenzy—
the Flower Priest passed like a frenzied buffalo:
a rough sheepskin, bare legs, bare arms.
A mountain shepherd would take him for one of his own,
and a wild water buffalo whisper: "My brother!"
Like some divine wind he descends from his mountains
of snow, to pass through the streets of the city.
The Flower Priest, wild man,
his white fleece threatening, somehow.
"*Çok pul!*" "*Çok şai!*" Like surf sound, the cry
is incessant! Across the world,
the flood of buying and selling rises too high.
His black hair streams madly, a waterfall,
over the sunburnt face
and dark arms of the prophet.
His chest burnt the color of gold, the color of acorn,
his feet are bare,
his sheepskin dangles like a golden leaf,
a fur coat inside out.
Divine darkness shines in his wild eyes,
a dungeon of delights.
Unshorn for over a decade,
ignorant of scissors
his hair like a river streams over his shoulders.
A horse would be proud of a tail like that,
a black meadow of midnight musings,
haystack of starry midnights,

shocks of black wheat.

Birds in flight swoop down from the snowy mountains
across the naked shoulders,
the dark arms of the prophet.

A nest of dark voices,
conductors to heaven for his conversations,
his dark talk with God.

His sheepskin is stronger than mountains of money,
and he holds a white feather dropped from a swan,
dropped in the night from a swan
as it flew high above the world
and its mountains and valleys.

An iron bull crowned the prophet's staff,
perched there like a bird,
nodding its metallic head.

His yellowed fingers held the white feather
dropped from the nighttime sky,
lost in the wild swamps, there by the cliffs.

There on his staff stands the bull of nighttime,
and there in his eyes the fire of sunshine.

Hak! Hak!

Again! Again!

These are prophets come down from the mountains
to meet the child Khlebnikov!

Come down from their mountains, precursors,
voices crying in the wilderness.

Oçana! Moçana!

Let us be friends!

A cloud weighs more than a stone!
From the throats of the crowd, like the breathing of whales,
come their wild cries.

"Gul-Mullah," sounds in the wind,

"Gul-Mullah," sounds in their cry.

And the wind descends,
sounds in the darkened villages,

sounds in the sands of the sea.

"Ours," sing the holy men of the mountains,

"Ours," say the flowers—

spots of gold ink

spilled on a green tabletop
by the hand of careless Spring.
“Ours,” sing the oak trees and thickets,
a golden clangor, the summons of Spring!
Hundreds of eyes, inquisitive suns,
gospel on the branches of trees.
“Ours,” say the clouds in the nighttime sky,
“Ours,” croak the ravens above the sea,
green-eyed, iron-beaked,
like a sweep-net meshed with severe regularity,
hurrying eastward
into the fishing grounds of dawn.
Catching the moon in the net of their flight,
weightily, heavily, onward they fly.
But the maid of Iran never said “Mine,”
she never said “Mine.”
She glanced through her veil, darkly,
through her black silk, and stood some distance away.

2

My white wings broken
and my brain all blood,
I fell into white snow
and blackthorn branches.
“Help me, comrades!” I cried
to the mountain gods of the sea cave,
to my equals in children’s games.
And I lay there, sheeted
in my white wings, rudely fallen to earth.
A fox nipped and snarled,
tearing feathers from my white wings.
And I lay there unmoving.
You mountains, white mountains,
the *Kursk* went chugging toward you,
the sea was stitched with lacy foam
like soft silk lace.
The sky was blue.
A grizzled old sailor was reading
Kropotkin’s *Bread and Will*.

In the past a man lit up
from a stick on fire. I wonder, someday
 will he discover a hotter fire
to light up a smokestack at sea?
They kissed me with their eyes—
me, heaven's conquest—
the oceans, the oceans,
boundless blue.
My blood, these scarlet gardens,
my wings, these snowy mountains.
“Get in, Gul-Mullah,
let me take you across.”

3

I'm a star-studded rider
out hunting the stars,
I am Razin read backward,
I am Razin reversed.
I sailed on the *Kursk* cross-current to fate.
He looted and burned, while I am a word-god.
The breeze-cutter boat
sailed into the mouth of the gulf.
Razin threw his bride overboard.
I'll do the reverse! I'll save her!
We'll see. Time is no lover of bridles,
has never yet opened its mouth for the bit.
Are these caves in the mountains
all empty?
Are there gods who live there?
I read in a children's book one time
that the gods in their caves are alive,
and that hordes of blue butterflies
cover their feet, like swarms of eyes.
Kropotkin's my path to the past,
out to hunt down the crude and the common.
The fates bless me
and after my recent disgrace, again I feel
wings on my shoulders.

4

We are redskinned giants
weather-beaten by Caspian winds.
We stand today and sing for freedom,
praising liberty and godlessness.
Silent let the hireling stand
whose oath to the sea was sworn in vain.
Hear the hymn of the sea resound.
All exploitation falls silent.
Well, wind?

5

Shepherd of eyes, he stands apart.
The white eyes of the gods sail across the skies!
Snowy sawtooth mountains. Sea-siren songs.
Recording the song of the earth.
The wind drives these punishing eyes
like mountain sheep
across the pasture of the world.
Across the flinty plains like mountain sheep
from dark mountains, to feed in the cities.
The Shepherd of Human Torments stands apart.
Snowy imaginings,
white mountain streams,
snowy thoughts
of a stone brain,
of a blue brow,
the clouded eyes of flint-haired cliffs.
Torments beyond the snowy branches of the hedge-rose.
The wind is the shepherd of God's eyes.
Qurrat al-'Ayn,
Tahira, tied the rope to the stake
herself, turned to the executioners,
and asked: "Is that all?"
"Ropes and bullets
in your bridegroom's breast!"
This is her dead body, these snow-covered mountains.

6

The black nostrils of the hills
eagerly breathe in
the scent of Razin,
the wind from the sea.

I ride
the wind of pain.

7

Golden birds twitter
on a golden stalk.
Louder, you birds, don't be shy!
Green streets and stone buildings,
regiments of narrow streets.
I am flogged with stones!
Cobblestone whips
have flogged the eyes of wildmen from the steppe.
(I cover my head with both hands.)
Stop it! There's no mercy in heaven!
I am riddled with a thousand holes
by the bullets of curious looks in these alleyways.
These cobblestone whips have
sliced open my shoulders!
Only a tower of dark-blue stone, like a birch tree
there by the bridge, smiles like the Virgin Mary
and binds up my wounds.
I have been whipped by these gray walls.

8

The marketplace. Evening.
"Hard-boiled eggs,
only one *şai!* One *şai!* Only one *şai!*
Come buy! Come buy!"
Curly hair, luxuriant hair, blue black,
savage princelings from the marshlands,
languorously blue,
buttery gold—they make a roof-cover
to get sparrows' eyes to live there,

eyes for twittering larks.
(Butter from the cow's udder of the white skies, the snow and hoar-frost.)
Bonfires. Fires in earthenware basins.
A bull's head, dead, on a wall. They carry the bull
away on poles; and half an hour ago he was alive.
Savage shadows of night. Icy drinks in mixing jugs—
in a warrior's shawls.
Vendors sell ice, and beans, and oil-cakes.
Leftover blue basins—
left here like broken stones of blue
from heaven's rubbish heap.
Is that the Volga Boatmen's song I hear,
or is some boatman hauling heaven to earth?
Green hens, the shells of red eggs.
In black hemispheres, like a skull,
the crowd's eyes glitter,
banging their prayer beads,
crowds from the dark street. "No speak Russian.
Allo, allo, kamrad."
Hand-to-hand combat of the forests,
sheepskin coats thrown open,
green sheepskins,
the gods of stone fall
in a game of dimensions.

9

Children bake the smiles of their wide eyes
on the grilles of their long lashes
and hand them out laughing to passers-by.
By the mosque a crippled boy,
spiderlike, stretches his threadlike hands.
Like wine bottles, women in black walk by,
dark shapes sealed with pale foil.
Who uncorks them?
Lazy! Easy!
I'm tinder to the spark
of their animal-terror eyes, dumb charm, a dark charm beneath the
veils

that protects them from fear.
A fatal fever,
a white fever
their white veils shine above black shadows.
White twigs cast black shadows—wicket of death.
The little window of a black prison, white wickets
on the women passing by.
Silence! The Orient's Holy of Holies!
I am a prophet! *Hak! Hak!*

10

Midnight: Rasht. Cat-leaping jackals
slap down the two-spots of green graveyard eyes,
tear through the backyards, teasing the dogs.
Bow-wow! Wow-wow! Wow-wow!
The dogs respond lazily. Wild jackals
bark back at the dogs
in the yards of the sleeping town.
Souls of the dead in gardens of prayer.
Those are sons of the devil, that leap through the yards.
We stared all evening
at the naked globes of skulls, shaven heads,
with one dark lock left dangling on the side
(dark cloud of smoke).
Unclean women, raising their veils,
called to the men: "Come here! Come rest!
Come sleep on my breast!"

11

Tyrant—but if the *t*'s were gone?
"Rais tumam doniya."
Ali became a President of Planet Earth—
sworn in
over a glass of the local gin.
A land where all men are Adams,
the exposed roots of the heavenly Paradise!
Where they call money *pul*
and in mountain ravines
khans in white linen

by thundering waterfalls
come to snare the salmon with netted poles.
And everything starts with a shhh: *shab, shai, shira*.
Where they give the silent moon
a resounding name—
Ay!
And that's the land where I am now!

12

Springtime brings the sea
a necklace of dead fishes—
the entire shore is paved with their bodies.
Dogs, visionaries, and prophets—
and me too—
are served up a dinner by the sea:
fishes, gone to sleep
on the tablecloth of the beach. What luxury!
Be human! Don't hold back! Rest! Enjoy!
There is no one here besides the sea.
No need for me to thank you, Sea,
you are too vast
to let me kiss your hand.
I go for a swim, I kiss the waves,
the sea doesn't smell like a lady's hand.
I found three sacs of caviar,
cooked them up and ate them,
now I'm full!
Ravens cry
there in the sky!
The sea sings
"Requiem" and "In Paradiso"
to the rotting carcasses of dogs.
In this land
time borrows scarlet ink from blood—
a friendly loan—around Pentecost,
when a scarlet down
turns the impatiens in the woodland red,
in the tender green of eyelashes opened wide.
The tree is impatient, it wants to be for me

the green banner of the Prophet.
But the bloody marks of Pentecost
haven't coagulated yet.
The green feathers of a flock of swans—tree branches—
float through the air,
and springtime's golden ink
spilled into sundown, rudely,
and the scarlet forest
changed to green.
In this land, dogs don't bark
if you step on them accidentally at night;
these big dogs are gentle and quiet.
And a baby chick, before falling asleep in its master's hand,
runs at his heels, full of predatory urges,
snapping at gnats and mosquitoes.
People won't give you silks,
O Prophet! And for the tree to be a banner,
the bloodstained fingers of summer smear the green leaves
when I pick the sweet impatiens as a banner.

13

Today I am the sea's guest.
A broad tablecloth of sand,
a dog in the distance.
We both sniff around, chew what we find.
We watch one another.
I dined on a few little fishes, and caviar.
It was good! You don't eat this well when people invite you!
From beyond the fence a boy shouts:
"Uruss dervish! Uruss dervish!"
—shouts at me, ten times at least.

14

A shaggy lion—his eyes are like your friend's eyes—
holding a scimitar,
threatening someone, challenging, sentry of peace, guarding the sun-
set,
and the sun like an overripe floozy
(I'm sure she has a secret sweet tooth)

sweetly, leisurely, rolls from the lion's shoulder
among the green tiles.
Among the green tiles!

15

Khalkhal.

The Khan all dressed in white
sniffs a red flower, fills his nostrils with its perfume.
His eager eyes are caught by the distance.
“Not know Russian—bad! No good!
No need gibble-gabble, what for? No good!
Teacher—give
(fifty years) how many fingers, how many—
Asia Russian,
Russia first teacher, very good.
Big man, Russian dervish, yes?
Ha? Zorastr, ha! Very good!”
And the *sahib*, getting tipsy, sniffed the red flower,
barefoot, in white,
and stared at the distant dark-blue mountains.
His veranda faced the mountains, it was covered with carpets and
heaps of rifles.
Higher up, his ancestors' graves.
Nearby a servant sat tickling his son's feet;
he laughed, kept trying to kick
the serving-girl's face.
He was all dressed in white.
The khans, in white, walk unconcerned in their gardens,
or peacefully spade up the cabbage patch.
“Behbot *eh-oo-velvyats!*”
the warbler sings.

A stone mirror of mountains.
I'm up in the mountains.
The sea-mirror's there
in that direction—
The Mother (like a big head).
From here, at right angles to the Volga,
rivers flow into the same sea's expanse,

where buckets scoop up reserves of will.
A human being here among the mountains
understands how pretentious he is.
The river leaps noisily
its dripping hair is glassy.
Loaves of rock.
Burdock grows high as a man.
Streams of water. Who strung these rocks?
Who plays this instrument?

16

Round boulders gathered in a circle,
a valley unwrinkled as a tablecloth,
the floor of the ravine swept clean—
no need to wipe dust from your eyes.
Trees in the center of these boulder crowns.
Houses white as human skulls.
Twigs on sticks.
This is the *chai-khané* of the wilderness.
The eyes of hungry children bulge like cherries.
Armenian children are timid.
Like hundreds of fairy-tale faces
the roots of a fig tree
(the one I was sleeping under)
swirl and swell, fighting for leg room,
then make their way into the earth,
reaching out as a mother will reach for her children,
an umbilical cord, stretching from branches to roots.
I press ahead, my doctrines press hard on my back.
My sermon is mute, I have no disciples.
Like a great hollow in a tree trunk,
the account book of the centuries lies open wide.
The trunk with its massive belly (broader across
than a horse), billowing, big-bellied,
raises high a green mushroom cloud of branches and leaves,
a green hat,
a shower of branches flowing down to the roots,
winding among them in knots,
like the meshes of some enormous net.

A downpour of tree from above, a tree-rain
falling into the roots and into the earth, rooting itself in the under-
ground flesh,
knitting itself like the mesh of a net into a dense loop.
And the leaves, poets of that which is not,
the younger branches and the older ones
and a crowd of new ones—are held in their mother’s ancient em-
brace.

A diagram? Or a tree?
The tree poured down and flowed to its roots,
dripping with tree sap
like mountain streams
in the slow downpour of centuries.
The trunk is a swollen belly where the number 3 resides,
and spreads a second sky, all green, over the valley—
rings of meshes in four knots.
Here’s where I slept, worn out.
White horses (swans of arrogance) already saddled,
grazed in the pasture.
“You are one of our children! Sit down, eat!”
a warrior cried to me, fugitive from the Russian draft.
“Tea, cherries, rice.”
In those days I had no “*pu!*,” I was traveling on foot,
for two whole days I’d been eating wild blackberries,
on loan to the stomach of a President of Planet Earth
(Marienhof and Yesenin).
“Behbot *eh-oo-vehvyats!*” the warbler kept singing!

17

The black shadows of monsters, nocturnal visitations.
Black lions.
A dancer, a tease, hopped in the treetop,
stood on one foot, raised the other, bent at the knee,
above her head, arm bent at the elbow.
In a dress of black lace. What visions!
A porcupine’s quill gleamed in the light of *Ay*.
I wound the tip with thread and begin to write poems—new ones.
I got very tired. All I have is my rifle and manuscripts.
A fox barks in the bushes.

Where the crossroads fork I lie down
like a living legend, right in the middle of the road,
my arms stretched out like a fairy-tale hero.
I wasn't making camp for the night, I was being
a living legend from Lake Onega.
The stars in the black sky looked down into my soul.
A rifle and a pile of grass—a tired man's pillow.
I went right to sleep. When I woke up, I saw
a dozen warriors squatting in a circle around me.
They smoked, meditated, said nothing. "No speak Russian."
They sat and thought. Rifles slung across their shoulders.
Their chests were heavily armored with shells,
hung with the luxury of future shots.
"Let's go." They led me off, fed me, gave my hungry mouth a cigarette.
And, miracle—in the morning they gave me back my gun.
 And then let me go.
A *kardeş* gave me a hunk of cheese,
and a pitying look.

18

"Get in, Gul-Mullah."
A black kettle, spitting in my face?
Black water? No, just Ali Mohammed, who looked at me and
 laughed:
"I know who you are."
"Who?"
"Gul-Mullah."
"Flower Priest?"
"Yes! Yes! Yes!"
He laughs and keeps rowing.
We move across the reflecting gulf
among clouds of rigging and zigzagging monsters with iron bodies,
their names on their hulls: *Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg.*

19

"I've got a boat,
Comrade Gul-Mullah!
Get in, I'll take you!"

No money? That's OK,
I'll take you anyway! Get in!"
The *kerji* vied with each other talking.
I got into the old man's boat. Kindly, sunburnt, he sang songs
about Turkey.
The oars creaked. A cormorant flew by.
We row from Enzeli to Kazyan.
Do I bring them luck? Why do they all want me as a passenger?
In Persia, nothing is more worthy of respect
than being a Gul-Mullah,
treasurer of springtime's golden ink.
On the first day of the month of May
I dance around, shouting, "Hey!"
to the pale moon whose name is *Ay*,
who rises on my right.
In summer you shed your blood,
in springtime you spread your golden hair.
And every day I stretch out on the beach
and fall asleep.

[1921-1922: T 348]

Autumns Passing in Piatigorsk

I

The autumn sun has lowered
its comforting golden staff,
the golden skulls of plants
are mired on the hilltops;
sleepy clouds of blue autumn,
and hoarfrost shivers in the clear sky.
Only the thin gold bones of branches
shiver wildly, reaching down toward us here:
“You don’t need division, you don’t need distinction;
once you were like us, now we’ll be like you.”
Tossed, they twist,
shaking and shattering,
savagely torn by the autumn wind.
Clouds keep piling their terraces higher.
The naked carcasses of black trees
shake their black hair at us,
like that early morning, before I’d put my shoes on,
asking a question meant to catch me:
“Do you believe in dreams?”
. . . someday we’ll lie down together,
while orchards dress themselves in golden dreams . . .
Everything stripped bare. The gold is going.
See the spiky specter there, that tree:
hundreds of gold coins glittering—
What’s the matter, miser?
Why not grab them all?
Stuff your moneybags with leaves!
Afraid you’ll wind up the mark
of a cartel of thieves?

2

Like the shadow above us of a murderer's knife,
a triple-bladed razor, blurred,
gray mountains raise their peaks:
dead battles slumber here
in the dried blood of foam and fame.
There's Mount Beshtau, crude curve,
a splash of stones more unbridled than brigandage,
the distant image of recorded sound,
an *A* or *V* grooved into a disc by a gramophone needle,
sharp as the points of flint arrows
made for the bows of ancestral hunters.
Strong with the soul of earth, white with clouds,
it drives its hostile blade against the sky
as if it were some fragile flaxen throat.
The mountain is a flint knife
in a murderous underhand
aimed at the neck of heaven,
but the vastness of heaven seems unmoved:
the brow of God shows no emotion.
Strong chains bind Beshtau like a leper;
the conquering flatlands beat him into a valley.
Murderous madman, caught in the distance!
White eyes drift across the ordered grooves,
tracking this recorded voice:
hermits inhabit the traces of this sound.
In the bright grove, a thicket of raspberry canes—
listen to the robins
and the little yellow buntings.
This towering trace of a recorded voice
was habitable once,
full of shining waters and priest-stones:
surely our ancestors worshiped here.

3

Long-vanished sea basins
stand gray guard over autumn.
In the basin I can make out fossil fish.
It's the wave of a dead sea

awakened.

A sea compressed to a petrified log
sawn-up into slabs, into eagles,
by the cross-cut saw of humanity's intellect.
A staircase of streams, musical stave for songs of the sea,
its risers rugged as cow tongues, rough and gravelly.
White walls lead over the hills,
along the path of that sea's remains
high up into the notch,
to eagles and sea fossils
flashing their towering wings
as if they were sharp steel swords.
Across this world of autumn, more yielding than wax,
peasant feet shuffle through the sea's remains.
A barefoot giant talks with me softly
about the little feathered friends of God.
A white helmet caps the shale-shattered hill,
the flatlands' commander,
rough and gravelly, the ascending scale
of the songs of a dried-up sea!
Slate roofs arise from the waves of a dead sea,
a fossil lightning-field!
The whale-road, the water-monster way,
has turned to a slat, a bat for a ballgame.
Here in the hot springs,
human griefs and human tears
subside in laughter and singing.
How many watchdogs,
sculptors of their own gray heads,
guard Piatigorsk!
In cloud-pelts they crouch:
the two Beetles,
Gold Kurgan, Mashuk, and Dubravy.

Who licks their dark noses? They leap up—
to rest their paws on whose shoulders?
And down in the town, pressed to their windows,
writers and children, doctors and salesmen,
and every hair on a girl's head

a skyscraper teeming with thousands!
The sheepish green roofs nuzzle each other, then sleep.
Poplar trees stand like golden knives,
a girl full of passion shouts “La!” to her friend,
and the windwhip drives the clouds.

4

Autumnal violins turn spiteful
when green things turn gold.
Autumn winds throw leaves into the sky
like handfuls of love letters;
by mistake they land in your eye
 (holes of sky poked through the dark branches).
I’m to blame
for wanting to come back here.
I point my prosecuting finger at the sky,
I plead my complaint,
from the ground I grab
a handful of damaging letters
and hurl them at heaven’s face.
Too late.

5

Golden gobs of consumptive spit
as the branches cough up their gold;
the hoarse croaking of golden cadavers,
 branches that die and collapse at my feet.
Rustling where Shura sat, hunched on her bench,
a heavy boot scabbling the roots, the rustle of gold,
scabbling the air, seated on stallions
 of instantaneous wind,
in the teeth of the wind with tails aloft,
golden gypsies in a tented field,
encampment of autumn’s wanders, galloping hunters,
 hallooing and howling.

6

Break, break, my brain,
on the great rock
of the world’s “NO.”

I'm tired of heaving through wave after wave
like a transparent star.

That snowy finger raised above
the redheaded flatlands of autumn
is aimed derisively at me!

Autumn is the sickbed of summer,
curtained off in green silk smoke.

Time for me to leave, to go kiss
winter's frozen hands.

7

The sunflower's eyelets have darkened and dried,
earth is paved over with sunflower seeds.

How many declarations of love
have been trampled into this earth!

I strap my sighs to my boots like skis,
they glide on the wind like my spit-gobs!

This is no orchard, it's heartburn,
the sour pain of a love spit out
with the sunflower seed-husks.

[1921: T 331]

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Notes

“Harsh hush bends bow” The battle between silence and sound is, among other things, a highly charged political allegory. One of the neologisms that Khlebnikov uses to designate silence is *nem*’, derived from *nemoi* (“dumb, mute”), which in turn is linked etymologically to *nemets* (German). The triumph of the “clamor-call of dawn” is a victory of the Slavic principle over the German principle—a major preoccupation for Khlebnikov in his militant Slavophile years.

“Where the winking waxwings whistle” The principal actors in this poem are birds called *vremiri*, a neologism based on the concatenation of the word for “time” (*vrem-ia*) and the word for “bullfinch” (*smeg-ir*). Khlebnikov thus builds into the name itself the notion of birds as augurs of seasonal change.

“The Dostoyology of racing clouds!” The neologisms in this poem are based on associations typically evoked by the names of the writers cited. Dostoevsky’s name suggests unbridled passion, Pushkin’s is evocative of classical beauty, and that of Fedor Tiutchev—one of Russia’s preeminent Romantic poets (1803–1873)—is associated with the cosmic struggle between order and chaos.

“Incantation by Laughter” Khlebnikov’s best-known and most frequently anthologized poem was born of his experiments in “coradication” (*skornenie*), the creation of large nests of words based on the same root. His two most extensive examples are based on the roots of *liubov*’ (“love”) and *smekh* (“laughter”).

“Bo-beh-oh-bee is the lipsong” Some twelve years after writing this poem, Khlebnikov composed the following gloss: “*B* signifies bright red, hence the lips are *Bo-beh-oh-bee*. *Veh-eh-oh-mee* is blue, and therefore the eyes are blue; *Pee-eh-eh-oh* is black.” From other texts, we can decipher the remaining two colors in the portrait: *l* signified white and *gz* a silvery gold. This is Khlebnikov’s earliest attempt at sound-painting, a form of neology that became increasingly important for Russian poets in the postrevolutionary years.

“Grasshopper” The word for grasshopper in Russian, *kuznechik*, is also a dialectism that means “titmouse.” Another dialectism for the same bird is

zinziver, which also appears in the poem. Khlebnikov plays on this ambiguity and adds a third and more ominous hidden meaning by encoding the name of the seventeenth-century peasant rebel Stanka Razin in the bird's name and cry ("Pin' pin' pin' tararakhnul *zinziver*," conveyed here in the lines "Zin! Zin! Zin! / sings the raucous racket-bird"). The description of the grasshopper, a traditional symbol for the poet, is thus transformed into a hidden incantation to insurrection, both poetic and political.

"*Neward, we praise thee!*" The poem "paganizes" a well-known prayer sung during the anaphora in the Russian Orthodox divine liturgy.

"*I swam across the Sudak Gulf*" The Sudak Gulf is an extension of the Black Sea on the southern side of the Crimean Peninsula. The poem contains a number of biographical references and self-citations. The couplet beginning "Russia has perished." is from an early satire, "Before me the water boiled." "Hlaha! Uthlofan, laufings!" is from "Incantation by Laughter" (also in this volume). The slogans referring to the Hapsburgs and Hohenzollerns are taken from "Slavs!" an article Khlebnikov published in 1908 condemning the hegemonistic pretensions of the Hapsburg monarchy and calling on the Slavs to unite in a holy war of liberation against their German overlords (see *Collected Works* I: 226). The line "I walked by the shore of a beautiful lake" echoes the poet's self-portrait in "The I-Singer of Universong" (*Collected Works* II: 12). The reference to a photographic portrait-with-skull is borrowed from a letter Khlebnikov wrote to his sister in 1909 (see *Collected Works* I: 45). The closing lines refer to geological expeditions Khlebnikov made in 1903 to Dagestan, on the Caspian Sea (Petrovsk is now named Makhachkala), and in 1905 to the Ural Mountains.

"*The Tangled Wood*" The poem first appeared in the miscellany *The Impressionists' Studio* in 1910. When he republished it in his *Selected Poems (Izbornik, 1914)*, Khlebnikov added the note, "The hart metamorphosed into a lion is an image of Russia."

"*We want to be familiars of the stars*" A more literal translation of the opening line would read, "We wish to say 'thee' to the stars," i.e., to be on sufficiently familiar terms with the stars to address them using the familiar personal pronoun (cf. *du* in German or *tu* in French). The models Khlebnikov selects for himself and his audience are all men of valor drawn from the annals of Russian history or Russian folklore. Iakov Petrovich Baklanov (1809–1873) was a Cossack hetman renowned for his military prowess in the Caucasian wars. Stepan Ostranitsa, or Ostranin (d. 1640s) was a Cossack hetman who distinguished himself in the battles of the Muscovite state against Poland in the seventeenth century. Count Matvei Ivanovich Platov (1751–1818), a veteran of the Turkish and Persian campaigns under Catherine the Great, achieved his

greatest renown during the Napoleonic Wars. As hetman of the Don Cossacks and commander-in-chief of all the Cossack border troops, he played a vital role in Russia's victory over the French. Morozhenko is a semi-legendary Cossack hero whose exploits against the Tatars are described in Ukrainian historical songs. Yermak Timofeevich (d. 1584) was a Cossack adventurer who initiated the conquest and pacification of Siberia during the reign of Ivan the Terrible. Rodion Oslibliya was a monk of the Holy Trinity Monastery who distinguished himself in the Battle of Kulikovo (1380), Russia's first major victory against the Tatars after two hundred years of subjugation. Sviatoslav Igorevich (942?–972), was Grand Prince of Kiev and son of Russia's first Christian ruler, Olga; he refused to convert to Christianity and devoted most his energies to military campaigns. His son, Prince Vladimir (978–1015), was responsible for consolidating the Kievan state, subduing its principal enemies and adopting Christianity as the state religion in 988. The Dobrynia of the poem's closing line is a legendary hero encountered in Russian folktales; his historical prototype is a military commander who served under Prince Vladimir.

“People in love, casting” The closing lines allude to Aleksandr Pushkin's poem “To Natasha” (1814). Natasha was the maidservant of Princess Varvara Mikhailovna Volkonskaia, Empress Elizabeth's maid of honor in the Russian court.

“The eyes of the Black” In the original Russian, the body of water referred to is the Oka River. Khlebnikov plays on the folk-etymological link between the name of the river and the Russian word for “eye” (*oko*).

“Qua-People” Russian critic Valentina Morderer has argued that the poem is a thinly veiled anti-Semitic diatribe, a by-product of Khlebnikov's militant Pan-Slavism in the prewar years.

“I don't need much!” The poem was subsequently incorporated into “The Stone Woman” (also in this volume).

“In periwinkle potion” Khlebnikov remarks in a footnote to the poem, “An infusion of periwinkle is used for casting spells.” In both Russian and western European folklore, the plant is associated with spells designed to awaken or reawaken love. The actual recipe for the potion concocted in the poem, discovered by Henrik Baran, appears to have been drawn from a Russian translation of Paul Sédir, *Les Plantes magiques* (Paris, 1907; Russian trans. St. Petersburg, 1912).

“I am borne on the back of an elephant” According to V. V. Ivanov, the poem was inspired by an Indian miniature depicting Vishnu borne on the back of an elephant. The elephant is drawn as a composite of several female figures intertwined to form the body, limbs, and trunk.

“The Song of One Come to Confusion” The poem was dedicated to Anna Akhmatova (1890–1965). According to A. Parnis, it may have been inspired by Natan Altman’s famous portrait of the poetess.

“Rue: A Fable” Like so many of Khlebnikov’s poems, “Rue” is based on a homonym. The poem’s title in Russian is “*Bekh*,” a noun which designates a plant (*Circuta virosa*) used for medicinal purposes; it is also the aorist tense of the verb “to be” in Old Russian (“I was”). The plant thus expresses the plaint of the bones buried on the ancient battlefield. There is a fortuitously comparable homonymy in the English “rue”—“to regret,” but also a medicinal plant of the genus *Ruta*. The major subtexts of the poem, as Henrik Baran has determined, are Sédir, *Les Plantes magiques* (Paris, 1907; Russian trans. St. Petersburg, 1912) and an entry in N. Annenkov, *Botanical Dictionary (Botanicheskii slovar’)* [St. Petersburg, 1878], which reads, in part: “There is a particular Ukrainian legend about the origins of the name of the *bekh* plant: a battle took place between Tatars and Cossacks, and from their bones grew an herb which cried out, ‘*Bekh*.’”

“A quiet perfume from the orchard” *Bismullah* is the opening word of the Moslem invocation, “In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful.” Yaroslavna was the second wife of Igor Sviatoslavich, the hero of the twelfth-century Russian epic *The Song of Igor’s Campaign*. Her lament constitutes one of the most moving sections of the poem. The Pechenegs were one of several tribes against whom the early Russians fought in establishing their hegemony in the southern steppes. Khlebnikov is probably confusing them with other tribes, especially the Kumans, who were more directly involved in the battle against Igor.

“Beast + Number” In the second stanza, Khlebnikov alludes to a conversation about numbers in Plato’s *Timaeus*—a discussion between a priest and Solon. The poem was written on the first anniversary of Russia’s entry into World War I, and reflects Khlebnikov’s belief in the possibility of predicting major historical events on a mathematical basis and thereby averting catastrophes of the sort Russia was confronting.

“A Vague Memory” The image in the opening lines is based on a wholly mundane allusion to a then-popular brand of shoe polish with the picture of a bear on the can. Khlebnikov transforms the image into the *Ursa minor* constellation.

“Herd of hoofsteps, ingots of elephants” The Chartomlyk (or Chertomlyk) vase is one of the most striking artifacts unearthed during mid-nineteenth-century excavations of the Chartomlyk mound, a Scythian royal tomb of the 6th–4th centuries B.C. Among the images on the silver vase are those of Scythian warriors pasturing their horses.

“My elbow brushed” “Young girls, young men, remember!” and “Hey!’ the wolf cries out in blood” These poems are all responses to the outbreak of World War I and the carnage of the first year of battle.

“Hey!’ the wolf cries out in blood” “A man who once wrote ‘Last Deer Songs’”: Probably an allusion to a book by the avant-garde artist Pavel Filonov entitled *Prophesalvos of a Branching Universe* (*Propeven’ o proroslji mirovoi* [Petrograd, 1915]). It contained among its illustrations a picture of a deer, which caught Khlebnikov’s eye.

“Bad News, April 8, 1916” On this date Khlebnikov received notice of his conscription into the Imperial Russian Army. “Anti-Onegin”: An allusion to Aleksandr Pushkin’s famous novel in verse, *Eugene Onegin*. “365 × 317 regular heartbeats a day”: Khlebnikov had determined that a typical infantryman, marching at the standard pace of 80–81 steps per minute, would take this number of steps in a twenty-four-hour period; the figure corresponds, in his early theory of historical cycles, to the number of days that separate events of political and military significance. “The 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.” “The King of Time”: On December 20, 1915—less than four months before his conscription—Khlebnikov’s fellow Futurists proclaimed him the King of Time at a gathering in Moscow. In the Russian, Khlebnikov plays on the etymological link between *korol’* (“king”) and *krolik* (“rabbit”).

“The King is out of luck” and “I am in Tsaritsyn, where” Both poems were written at a military camp outside Tsaritsyn (now Volgograd) shortly after Khlebnikov’s conscription into the Imperial Army. The first poem was jotted down on a postcard and mailed to Khlebnikov’s friend and fellow Futurist, Dmitry Petrovsky, as a plea for assistance in obtaining a discharge. “The King”: See note to “Bad News, April 8, 1916,” above.

“Battle in the Comics” *The Igor Tale*, or, more precisely, *The Song of Igor’s Campaign*: Russia’s only surviving epic, presumed to have been composed in the twelfth century. “These triangles”: An allusion to the geometric figures in cubist paintings, which dominated avant-garde art exhibits at the time. “*Bouvet*”: A French war-ship that was sunk by the Germans in 1916, resulting in the death of 600 men. Khlebnikov also mentions the incident in his story “Dream” (*Collected Works* II: 83).

“Someday I’ll forget about Swanland” Swanland: In Russian, *Lebediia*, the ancient (9th–10th centuries 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 Sea, where Khlebnikov spent his childhood. The Kalmyks were expert horsemen, and it was probably due to their influence that

Khlebnikov speaks so reverently about horses in his poetry. “The cruel prophecies of language”: Language’s prophetic potential is a function of “internal declension,” a theory elaborated by Khlebnikov according to which vowel shifts within words (e.g., prance/prince) create lexical-semantic paradigms that may provide a key to the structure of time and space.

“*Tatlin! Poet of propellers*” Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953), one of the Russian avant-garde’s leading artists, made a powerful impression on Khlebnikov with his “counter-reliefs,” three-dimensional abstract constructs made of various industrial materials, exhibited at shows in Moscow in 1915–1916. The poem was composed in May 1916, when Tatlin visited Khlebnikov in Tsaritsyn. Together with Dmitry Pokrovsky, they organized a Futurist seminar entitled “Cast-Iron Wings.”

“I” When, in imitation of Tolstoy: As the editor of the Russian *Collected Works* indicates, the manuscript is indecipherable in places. Hence the ellipsis between the first thirty-five lines of the poem and the closing section (“but you are tall and slender, elegant”).

“*On a Hill*” The night-riding demons—*mavy* in Russian—are naked, witch-like figures from Galician folklore: from the front they appear as beautiful maidens, but from the rear they are a mass of exposed entrails. Khlebnikov frequently employs the image as a symbol for war.

“*Unbending as Boris Godunov’s boyarina*” This poem is addressed to Maria Siniakova, an accomplished artist and one of the three sisters whose estate outside Kharkov, Krasnaia Poliana, was a favorite retreat for Khlebnikov and his fellow Futurist poets. Her historical prototype is Ksenia, daughter of Boris Godunov and wife of the last surviving member of the Rurik dynasty. She was renowned for her beauty and intelligence. “*Rusalka*”: See note to “The Poet,” below.

“*Is it the voice of the goddess of foam*” The poem is addressed to another of Khlebnikov’s loves, Vera Budberg. When revising the poem in 1922, Khlebnikov added the line, “It’s the figure three, staring from storm clouds!” The figure “3,” rotated counterclockwise ninety degrees, resembles a bird in flight; it also symbolizes the relationship between event and counterevent in Khlebnikov’s *Laws of Time*.

“*The trumpets never squealed a signal for defeat*” “The banner of the beautiful Savior” probably refers to the standard carried into battle by Russian imperial troops. It bore the image of Christ’s face as depicted on the icon known as the “Image not Made with Human Hands” (the Orthodox counterpart to the image of Veronica’s veil in Western iconography). The references to the

Nieman River call attention to one of the earliest theaters of World War I. In August 1914, Russian troops crossed the river on their march toward Königsberg. They were driven back with severe losses two months later. It is possible that in this poem Khlebnikov is reacting to chauvinistic verses composed by Mayakovsky for propaganda posters in the early months of the war. One of these poems depicts the corpses of German soldiers floating down a river and reads: “In the glorious forest of Augustus / there are a hundred thousand beaten Germans. / The enemy is decimated and then / set to floating down the blue Nieman.”

“Their faces by Maliavin” F. Maliavin (1869–1940) and K. Korovin (1861–1931) are painters known for their depictions of Russian peasant life. Red tones dominate in many of Maliavin’s renderings of peasant women, leading Khlebnikov to associate his works with the Revolution.

“You whose mind flowed” “Skull”: See note to “Cracking the Universe,” below.

“Yesterday I whistled: Coo! Coo! Coo!” The “ghouly witches” are the same creatures (*mavy*) that appear in “On a Hill.” The word “Veles” constitutes a typical refrain in West Slavic ritual songs and may be related to the name of Veles, the ancient Slavic god of the herd.

“The shining shower dripping from the oar” Commentators generally indicate that the poem describes Stenka Razin, leader of a peasant rebellion that came close to toppling the monarchy in the seventeenth century. Recently discovered manuscripts suggest that Khlebnikov has in mind the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen (1861–1930), whose Arctic expeditions captured the imagination of Russia in the first decades of the century.

“When Freedom comes, she comes naked” The poem was written in response to the first Russian revolution (February 1917), which brought Kerensky to power.

“The people raise the rod of sovereign power” The speaker of this lyric monologue is Nicholas II. In the third stanza he mentions his own abdication, which took place in the salon car of the imperial train that brought him to Pskov from Petrograd. In the fifth stanza he alludes to the events of Bloody Sunday (January 1905) and, by way of contrast to the horrific picture of demonstrators lying bloodied in the snow, to his mistress, the ballerina Matilda Kshesinskaja (see also the longer poem “Lightland,” below).

“Freedom” The earliest version of this poem was written to commemorate the first anniversary of the October Revolution. The proclamation of universal resurrection in the third stanza reflects less the influence of the Gospels than

that of the Russian philosopher Nikolai Fedorov, whose utopian thought is centered around the potential for universal resurrection across time and space, engineered by a technologically and spiritually advanced society of the future.

“Wind whose song” The play of “sword” and “word” in the translation finds its Russian counterpart in the paronomastic attraction of two words with opposite connotations: *mech* (“sword”) and *miach* (“ball”). This poem is one of the earliest expressions of Khlebnikov’s personal propheticism.

“Warrior! You choose a cue from heaven’s rack” Jan Sobieski: King of Poland (1674–1696), who led his army to victory over the Turks near Vienna in 1683. Minkowski (1864–1909): Hermann Minkowski, German mathematician who first postulated the idea of a four-dimensional universe in which the fourth dimension is time.

“The land where Izanagi” *Monagatori*: any one of several prose collections of romantic or fantastic tales (e.g., *Ise-monagatori* or *Takatori-monagatori*) in early medieval Japanese literature. Perun: The Slavic god of thunder. Shang-ti: Yu-hüang-shang-ti, literally August Supreme Emperor of Jade, the Father-Heaven of Taoist mythology. Maa emu: The earth-goddess in Estonian mythology. Tien: Tien-Kwan, the agent of heaven in Taoist mythology. Indra: god of battle in ancient Indian mythology; Khlebnikov transforms him into a goddess here. Quetzalcoatl: Aztec god of the sun and air. Unkulunkulu: a Zulu god, the progenitor of mankind, identified by Khlebnikov elsewhere as a thunder god.

“Why are these eyes forget-me-nots?” *Ay* is a Russian folk designation for the month of May.

“My Campaigns” The poem juxtaposes two “campaigns”—one historical and the other personal and private. The former centers around the figure of Yermak, a Cossack adventurer of the sixteenth century who opened the Siberian frontier for colonization during the reign of Ivan the Terrible. His incursions into Siberia represent for the poet the threshold event in Russia’s eastward expansion. The personal campaign is one involving “Vera”—probably Vera Demianovskaia (née Siniakova), a cousin of the three Siniakova sisters and one of Khlebnikov’s most intense infatuations (see note to “Now that the lilt of nightingales,” below). The poem explores the reality of countermovements to both campaigns in accord with the poet’s theory of historical progression—that events reverse their political and geographic orientation at intervals of $\frac{1}{3}$ days.

“Now that the lilt of nightingales” The addressee of the poem is Vera Demianovskaia (see note to “My Campaigns,” above). She was married to a Soviet bureaucrat and at the same time was the mistress of A. N. Andrievsky,

a young mathematician who befriended Khlebnikov while he was living in Kharkov during the Civil War. Andrievsky was also an interrogator for the Red Army Tribunal based in Kharkov, and in this capacity had the power of life and death over his prisoners. (He is also the “Chairman of the Cheka” in the longer poem of the same name; see note below.) The danger of Khlebnikov’s infatuation with Andrievsky’s mistress is conveyed by the allusion to Pushkin’s unfinished story “Egyptian Nights,” in which another poet recounts how Cleopatra offered a night of love to any man on condition that he forfeit his life for the pleasure of such a liaison.

P. P. Sushkin (1868–1928) was a well-known ornithologist, but not the author of *Birds of the Kharkov Region* (a similarly titled book was written by another ornithologist of the time, N. Somov). His presence in the poem is dictated by considerations of rhyme (Sushkin/Pushkin) and etymology (“Sushkin” derives from *sukhoi*, “dry”).

“It was in the merry month of Ay” Ay is a Russian folk designation for the month of May.

“The City of the Future” This poem is one of several works that Khlebnikov devotes to his urban utopian visions (see also notes to “The Moscow of the Future” and “Cresting spines,” below, and “Ourselves and Our Buildings” (*Collected Works* I: 347). These visions are informed by a change in perspective: they take as their perceptual and architectural starting point the city as seen from above rather than from the side: the vertical axis, and a concomitant concentration on the relations between the cosmos and the individual, are accentuated. “Here public dwelling-places . . . / like pages of glass”: Khlebnikov once described a hypothetical structure in the form of an open book: “this one consists of stone walls set at an angle, and glass sheets of living modules arranged fanwise between these walls” (*Collected Works* I: 354). “Clear glass honeycombs”: Khlebnikov envisions domiciles consisting of a framework of steel bays to accommodate individual glass living units that can be docked and undocked, allowing residents to move from one building, and from one city, to another simply by undocking and moving their apartments—by rail or steamship or, for self-propelling units, by air. “Blue strands of smooth glass homesteads”: “The filament-building consisted of single rooms connected in a single strand stretched between two towers . . . Transparent because of the glass sun-spaces, it had the appearance of a filament or film” (*Collected Works* I: 354). “Tall pillar blossoming with dwelling-spaces”: Elsewhere Khlebnikov refers to such a structure as a “flower-building”: it “rose gracefully to an unattainable height; it had a dome of reddish matte glass, lacy railings that formed the edge of the calyx, and staircases of beautifully wrought steel” (*Collected Works* I: 355).

“Asia, I have made you my obsession” Maha-vira (ca. 540–468 B.C.): A contemporary of the Buddha and founder of Jainism. Sivaji (1627–1680): A chieftain

of the Maratha people, who led a successful rebellion of the indigenous Hindu population against their Mogul overlords in the seventeenth century.

“The One, the Only Book” “Where they sing the Razin songs”: Stenka Razin was the leader of a peasant rebellion that came close to toppling the monarchy in the seventeenth century.

“The Present Day” Written in Kharkov during a period when the city fell alternately into the hands of the Reds and the Whites, the poem conveys the conditions of marshal law, starvation, and summary execution that characterized the rule of both parties. This variant of the poem may be only a fragment of a more extended version (see “Asia Unbound,” *Collected Works* II). “Kruchonykh’s editions”: Khlebnikov’s fellow Futurist Aleksei Kruchonykh (1886–1968), published numerous books (his own and others) in handwritten, lithographed editions.

“Two Moscow imagos” The poem was occasioned by a meeting between Khlebnikov and two Imagist poets, Sergei Yesenin (1895–1925) and Anatoly Marienhof (1897–1962), when they came to Kharkov from Moscow in 1920. In the Russian original the penultimate line of the poem reads, “God, calve a son!” a quotation from Yesenin’s poem “Transfiguration.” The line became particularly notorious when the Imagists scrawled it in large letters on the wall of Moscow’s Monastery of the Savior in 1919.

“To Alyosha Kruchonykh” “A Game in Hell”: A poetic burlesque coauthored by Khlebnikov and Kruchonykh and published in 1912. See notes to “The Present Day” (above) and “Kruchonykh” (below).

“Someone wacky, someone nutty” The poem was inscribed in a notebook (probably on graph paper) belonging to Aleksei Kruchonykh, beneath a sketch of Kruchonykh walking nervously down a city street. The author of the sketch was Sergei Gorodetsky (1884–1967), an Acmeist poet and rival of the futurists. All three poets had come to Baku in late 1920, shortly before the city came under Soviet control.

“Like a flock of sheep peacefully grazing” The juxtaposition of the two exclamations “God is with us!” and “We are with us!” carries a particular resonance because the former, a quotation from Isaiah 8:10, serves as the refrain to a well-known hymn sung during the compline service in the Orthodox Church.

“The Neva knows the look” The poem’s toponyms are all related to Petrograd: the Neva River, the Stroganov Palace on Nevsky Avenue between the Moika River and the Kazan Cathedral, the equestrian ensembles further along Nevsky Avenue on the Anichkov Bridge, and the Peter and Paul Fortress, which houses

“the graves of the tsars”—the tombs of Peter the Great and his successors. The Stroganov Palace is of particular significance for the thematics of the poem: situated near the Kazan Cathedral, it is adjacent to the scene of the workers’ demonstrations which led to the downfall of the monarchy in February 1917.

“*Easter in Enzeli*” Enzeli is situated on the southern shore of the Caspian, in the Iranian province of Gilan. Khlebnikov arrived there from Baku in the spring of 1921 with a contingent of Red Army troops that Lenin had dispatched to aid a local revolutionary movement. This was Khlebnikov’s first encounter with Asia, and he sprinkles the poem with Farsi words to add local color to his description: *portoghál* means “orange tree”; *naránj* means “laurel cherry tree”; *ji-ji* is vodka distilled from grape juice. “The song about Razin’s Persian princess”: The song, by D. N. Sadovnikov, is one of the most popular in the Russian folk repertoire (see note to “I saw the young man, the young prophet,” below). “In Zorgam’s canyon”: Khlebnikov’s responsibilities as a propaganda officer were minimal in Iran, and he was allowed to wander about on his own. For a time he hired himself out as a tutor to the daughter of a local sultan named Zorgam, who lived in the mountain village of Khalkhal northwest of Enzeli. The daughter figures in several poems as an idealized object of the poet’s affections.

“*Iranian Song*” The two men are the poet and his friend M. V. Dobrokovsky, an artist who painted propaganda posters for the Red Army troops in Iran.

“*Night in Persia*” “Samorodov”: Boris Samorodov (1897–1942) was a set designer and sailor whom Khlebnikov met in Baku in 1921. He led a mutiny against his White commanding officers on the *Australia*. His sisters, Olga and Julia, also figure in the poet’s biography (see note to “Babylove, don’t your eyes ever get tired,” below). Mahdi is the name of the promised Messiah in Islamic eschatology.

“*An Oak Tree in Persia*” “Mazdak”: A Persian archimage of the sixth century A.D. whose revolutionary doctrines—among them the equitable distribution of property and the community of women—incited the population against the Sassanide monarch Kobad. “Batu”: Batu Khan (d. 1255), grandson of Genghis Khan and leader of the Golden Horde when it overran the Kievan state in the thirteenth century.

“*I saw the young man, the young prophet*” In the early days of the revolt against Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich, Stenka Razin (see note to “The shining shower dripping from the oar,” above) engaged in wholesale brigandage along the Caspian coast. On one occasion he was attacked by a Persian fleet, which he routed completely, taking as prisoners the son and daughter of the fleet’s

captain. He kept the daughter as his concubine for several months, until his men began to grumble that his devotion to her was interfering with his responsibilities as leader of the brigands. According to popular legend—and at least one reliable historical witness—he threw her overboard into the Volga, saying, “Here you are, Mother Volga! You have given me much gold and silver and other goods, showering me with glory and honor, and I have not given you anything in return.” In the poem, Khlebnikov draws a parallel between, on the one hand, himself and Razin, and, on the other, the Persian concubine and Zorgam’s daughter (see note to “Easter in Enzeli,” above). Whereas Razin sacrificed his princess to the waters, the poet has turned his beloved into a *rusalka*, a mermaid.

“I am a wave, I roll down” “Was printed out on the doubled”: the manuscript becomes illegible at this point. “A ray struck me and gave me *P*. / I rose like a wisp of steam”: In Khlebnikov’s “Alphabet of the Intellect,” *P* designates the growth in distance between two objects or the general movement of several objects away from one another, such as molecules of water when it turns to steam (*par* in Russian).

“The smell of night, inhaling stars” Written upon his return from Persia, the poem is a reflection on Khlebnikov’s spiritual encounter with the Orient. The teacher mentioned in the second stanza may be Sayyid Ali Muhammed of Shiraz (1819–1850), founder of Babism, whom Khlebnikov held in great esteem as a teacher and prophet. He was executed in Tabriz by the Islamic authorities. (See also notes to “Lightland” and “The Gul-Mullah’s Trumpet,” below.)

“A stream of icy water” This poem appears to be based on an incident that occurred after Khlebnikov returned to Baku from Persia in the summer of 1921. The area had only recently come under Soviet control, and the Cheka (the secret police) was alert to all suspicious activity. Given Khlebnikov’s peripatetic lifestyle and his utter indifference to matters of bourgeois order and propriety, he probably attracted the attention of the authorities while wandering about the environs of Baku without proper documentation, and was escorted to a Cheka interrogation point. A part of the text that was subsequently deleted speaks of the poet’s being “persecuted” by the Cheka, and a later, incomplete reworking of the poem begins with the line, “Freedom’s gone! / Galloping off to an interrogation.”

“Ra, who sees his own eye” The poem is a profound exercise in folk etymology. Khlebnikov analyzes the name of Stenka Razin (see note to “The shining shower dripping from the oar,” above) as a compound consisting of two elements: *Ra* and *zin*. *Ra* is associated with the name of the Egyptian sun god and also with the name given to the Volga River in ancient geographic treatises. *Zin* is linked paronomastically with the Russian dialectisms *ziny* and *ziry*, which mean “eyes.” The recurring mirror images in the poem are associated in turn

with Khlebnikov's "Alphabet of the Intellect," according to which the sibilant *z* signifies reflection and angle of vision.

"Attentively I read" The version of the poem in the Russian edition (V: 22) contains two additional lines. An examination of the original manuscript reveals them to be part of a different poem. "Old Walt": Walt Whitman, whom Khlebnikov read in Kornei Chukovskii's translation, and whom he regarded as one of his visionary forebears.

"Russia and Me" Khlebnikov provides a gloss for the poem in "A Cliff out of the Future" (*Collected Writings* I: 397), where he explains that human happiness relates directly to the degree of accord between the microcosm of the human body and the macrocosm of nature. The glorification of the naked body also relates directly to Khlebnikov's interest in Jainism (see note to "Asia, I have made you my obsession," above), which preaches nudity as an ascetic discipline.

"Kruchonykh" The poem reflects Khlebnikov's mixed feelings toward Kruchonykh. While recognizing his genius as a Futurist proselytizer, he was uncomfortable with the way Kruchonykh borrowed others' ideas. In the margins of the manuscript, Khlebnikov wrote "dangerous," and in 1922 he wrote a poem openly accusing Kruchonykh of plagiarism.

"Burluk" The poem describes David Burluk (1882–1967), poet, painter, tireless promoter of Futurism, and friend of the poet. He was born in Kharkov and studied in Moscow, Odessa, Paris, and Munich. "Didn't Balashov put a nice slash": In January 1913, a mentally disturbed A. Balashov slashed Ilya Repin's famous painting of Ivan the Terrible.

"Weary wings of the dreamstead" A longer and considerably different version of this poem was incorporated into the supersaga *Zangezi* (*Collected Works* II: 351), where it is clear that the poet is speaking about the "twilight of the gods," their gradual recession and disappearance.

"Babylove, don't your eyes ever get tired" The poem is addressed to Julia Samorodova, an artist whom Khlebnikov met in Baku in 1920. Upon his return from Persia he stayed for a time with Julia and her sister Olga in the Caucasian resort of Zheleznovodsk, where he composed the poem. In her memoirs Olga indicates that Julia was a shy, otherworldly creature, and that Khlebnikov once said to her, "We both descended from the clouds"—a clear paraphrase of the lines, "You and I are alike, I fell from the sky / just like you."

"The year the girls first called me 'Gramps'" Narzan is a well-known type of Caucasian mineral water. The spring Khlebnikov is speaking of is located in Zheleznovodsk, where Khlebnikov resided for several weeks with the Samoro-

dov sisters in the autumn of 1921 (see note to “Babylove, don’t your eyes ever get tired,” above).

“*The lice had blind faith, and they prayed to me*” and “*Russia, I give you my divine*” These two poems have consistently been printed together as a single poem. Manuscript evidence suggests that they are two independent, though related, texts.

“*When I was young I went alone*” In the manuscript, the poem is followed without a break by a somewhat more extended version of “People stared in horror” (see following note). The reading of the poem presented here is based on a reexamination of the manuscript and does not correspond precisely to any of the versions in print. The poet’s “spontaneous combustion” reflects his preoccupation with the searing drought that led to the Volga famine. Fridtjof Nansen’s name is mentioned in this connection because he was instrumental in bringing the famine to the attention of the world community and organizing international relief efforts.

“*People stared in horror*” and “*Hunger*” Khlebnikov was an eyewitness to the horrors of the Volga Basin famine of 1921–1922, which are described so graphically in these poems.

“*The Tree*” “Here Yermaks lead their leafy troops”: See note to “My Campaigns,” above.

“*Today Mount Mashuk is a hound dog*” Mount Mashuk is one of five peaks that surround the resort town of Piatigorsk (see note to “Autumns Passing in Piatigorsk,” below). The closing stanza reflects Khlebnikov’s concern about the reversion to free-market exploitation associated with Lenin’s New Economic Policy.

“*The Solo Actor*” In the opening lines the poet contrasts his poetic mission with that of Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966), a leading Acmeist poet from St. Petersburg. Among her early poems are several devoted to Tsarskoe Selo, the summer residence of the tsars and, more importantly, a place associated with the young Aleksandr Pushkin, who attended the imperial lyceum there. He is also evoked in the line, “I . . . dragged myself like a drowsy corpse through a desert,” which paraphrases a passage from Pushkin’s famous poem “The Prophet,” and in the closing image of the “sower of eyes,” which recalls another of Pushkin’s poems, “A lonely sower of liberty.”

The image of the Minotaur is doubly symbolic. On the one hand, the “curly head” (*kurchavoe chelo*) is itself evocative of Pushkin, whose portraits invariably accentuate his curly hair. On the other hand, textual evidence points to the bull as a symbol of war: an early draft of lines 10–11 reads: “The curly head of that subterranean bull, / like war, kept chomping and devouring men.” In his

role as a new Theseus (or rather as an actor playing Theseus), Khlebnikov makes himself out to be a victor over both the traditional literary order represented by Pushkin and Akhmatova, and the old social and political order that feeds on young lives.

“At the backwoods whistle-stop” Written en route from the Caucasus to Moscow. “Past three years” refers specifically to the years of the Civil War. “Wind, wind!”: These words open Alexander Blok’s masterpiece, “The Twelve,” an evocation of the early days of the Revolution. Word of Blok’s death in August 1921 reached Khlebnikov not long before his departure for Moscow.

“Dinner” “The shadow of Razin”: See notes to “The shining shower dripping from the oar” and “I saw the young man, the young prophet,” above.

“Don’t mess with me!” This poem, written shortly after Khlebnikov’s return to Moscow, reflects his dismay that the cause for which so much blood had been shed in the Civil War was being subverted by Lenin’s New Economic Policy, which was opening the door to a new generation of capitalist entrepreneurs. In old Pugachev’s coat: Pugachev was the leader of a major peasant rebellion against Catherine the Great in 1772–1773. His coat figures prominently in the plot of Alexander Pushkin’s tale, “The Captain’s Daughter,” the fictional autobiography of a young officer during the Pugachev Rebellion.

“Let the plowman leave his furrow” The image of city sites marked in waves of dust is taken from the experiments of August Kundt, a German physicist who devised a method for measuring the speed of sound by means gas-filled glass tubes (“Kundt tubes”). The vibration of a membrane at one end of the tube produces standing waves registered by a fine coating of dust inside the tube. Lumps of dust that form at the nodes of the waves—the point of least vibration—represent for Khlebnikov the points on the surface of the planet where people are lumped together like the particles of dust.

“Suppose I make a timepiece of humanity” This poem served as a preface to the first fascicle of Khlebnikov’s *Tables of Destiny* (see *Collected Works* I: 417), which provide the mathematical foundations for Khlebnikov’s belief that his discovery of the Laws of Time would render war an anachronism. “I’ll reveal the drowned city of Kitezh”: According to Russian legend, the city of Kitezh was saved from the invading Tatar hordes of Batu Khan by sinking into the earth and being covered by a lake. Pilgrims visiting the site claim that one can still, on occasion, see the cupolas of the churches beneath the waters and hear the pealing of the church bells. Kitezh is a common symbol of Russia’s idealized pre-Petrine past.

“OK, Graylegs” The poem begins with a line from “The Plowman’s Song,” a lyric in the folk style by the Russian romantic poet Aleksei Koltsov.

Khlebnikov deliberately contrasts his cosmic plow horse with that of his nineteenth-century forebear. The contrast is accentuated in the closing lines, where Khlebnikov evokes the image of Leo Tolstoy behind a plow as depicted in Ilya Repin's famous painting. "‘OURS,’ say letters of clouds in the sky": The Russian word *nash* ("ours") is also the code word for the letter *n*. In the Russian maritime signaling system, *n* means that explosives are being loaded and weapons prepared for firing. Khlebnikov deleted three lines at the end of the poem. Addressed to Vladimir Mayakovsky, they read: "Hey, Vova! / Someone's knocking at the stars! / Friend! Let me shake your noble hoof."

"Three V's, three M's, three words" The first line describes the name of the poem's addressee: Vladimir Vladimir[ov]ich Mayakovskiy. Khlebnikov plays on the fact that the poet's Christian name is the same as his father's (Vladimirovich, or "Vladimirich" in spoken Russian, means literally "Vladimir, son of Vladimir").

"Who?" This poem is a portrait of Vladimir Mayakovsky.

"Acknowledgment" The word for "slob" in Russian is *kham*, which Khlebnikov reads as an acronym consisting of the first letter of his surname and the first letter of Mayakovsky's (Kh + M). The word also figures in the title of a well-known essay by the symbolist poet Dmitry Merezhkovsky (1866–1941), in which he expresses his disdain for the "slobs" who threaten high culture. Khlebnikov defiantly accepts the appellation on Mayakovsky's and his own behalf. The opening lines diverge from the Russian original in T 171, following a more compelling reading based on an examination of the manuscript. Jan Sobieski: See note to "Warrior! You choose a cue from the rack of heaven," above.

"To You All" This poem is addressed to Khlebnikov's Futurist colleagues in Moscow. One of the poet's chief concerns upon returning to Moscow in late 1921 was to recover and publish a large number of manuscripts that he had left with Mayakovsky three years earlier. The poem expresses his distress over manuscripts lost or inadvertently destroyed during the three years he spent wandering across Ukraine, Persia, and the Caucasus. "And then I'll collapse, like Kuchum / on the lances of Yermak": Yermak (see note to "My Campaigns," above) defeated the Siberian khan Kuchum in 1581 and drove him from his capital, the city of Isker. Ultimately, however, Kuchum returned to defeat Yermak and was finally subdued only in 1591. "Everywhere you look, the bodies of murdered tsareviches": in 1591 Ivan the Terrible's ten-year-old son, Dmitry, died under mysterious circumstances in the town of Uglich, where he and his family had been exiled by Dmitry's half-brother, Tsar Fedor. The real power behind the throne at the time was Boris Godunov, and rumors were widespread that he had ordered the tsarevich's murder.

“*Hey, holy man!*” This poem borrows extensively from the Vita of Saint Mikhail Klopsky, a fifteenth-century Novgorodian monk who, upon joining a monastery, refused to reveal his identity, repeating rather than answering the questions posed by his interlocutors. “Glagolitic letters”: The original alphabet of the Slavs, introduced by Saints Cyril and Methodius in the ninth century but subsequently replaced by Cyrillic.

“*Zoo*” Dedicated to the symbolist poet Viacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949), whom Khlebnikov met in 1908, and who encouraged him in his early poetic efforts. The poem is based on the poet’s observations in the St. Petersburg Zoological Gardens. “And feel like taking revenge on him for Port Arthur”: At the onset of the Russo-Japanese War the Japanese attacked Port Arthur, which fell on December 19, 1904, after a siege of 148 days. Khlebnikov’s decision to devote his life to the discovery of the laws of time was precipitated, in part, by his reaction to Russia’s humiliation in the war. “Like the codex of the *Igor Tale*”: The sole existing manuscript of Russia’s national epic, *The Tale of the Host of Igor*, was destroyed in the fire that consumed Moscow when Napoleon occupied the city in 1812.

“*The Stone Woman*” Rough-hewn stone statues of male and female figures, usually six to eight feet tall, are scattered over the southern steppes of Russia. They are frequently found atop burial mounds and are believed to represent the ancestors of those who originally erected them: non-Slavic tribes, among them the Scythians, who occupied these areas as far back as the Iron and Bronze Ages.

“*The Poet*” This poem was written at the request of V. Ia. Anfimov, a doctor working at a psychiatric facility outside Kharkov, where Khlebnikov sought refuge from mobilization during the Civil War. As part of his examination, the doctor proposed that the poet compose pieces on a variety of themes, among them “Carnival”—the title given to an early version of the poem. In his notebooks, Khlebnikov also refers to it by such titles as “Vernal Holy Days,” “*Rusalka*,” and “*Rusalka* and the Poet.” The image of the *rusalka* is critical to an understanding of the poem as a whole. She is a mermaid-like figure, usually associated with rivers, who in classical Russian folklore is most frequently regarded as the incarnate spirit of a child who died unbaptized or a woman who drowned. Khlebnikov’s *rusalka* is a figure perceived partly through this folkloric filter, but also through the filter of nineteenth-century Russian literature, where she is portrayed less ominously as a beautiful maiden who emerges from the water at night and combs her hair while reclining on a riverbank. For Khlebnikov she is first and foremost a symbol of language and thought in their “beyonsense,” their prerational manifestations. Together with the Virgin Mary and the poet himself, she represents an anachronism in the positivist world of modern science and secular ideology. “Blue-petaled flowers

. . . Lada's devotion": Lada is the goddess of love, joy, and merriment in the largely artificial pantheon of Slavic gods created by nineteenth-century Russian ethnographers. "A diamond known as *Kizel-E*": an inexact rendering of the Arabic *almaz-e kizil*, "red diamond."

"*Night in the Trenches*" This poem describes the prelude to battle and a brief skirmish at an early stage in the Civil War. The setting, the broad steppe lands of the south, takes on particular significance because this same land in pre-Christian times was a site of battles and burials, marked by the presence of large stone monuments, rough-cast female figures who stand as silent observers (see note to "The Stone Woman," above). This juxtaposition of contemporary and ancient reality is particularly significant in light of Khlebnikov's cyclical theory of time, transforming a political tableau into a meditation on the tragedy of historical recurrence.

"Who once was nothing / will now be all": Khlebnikov is quoting here from the *Internationale*, mentioned a few lines earlier. "Driving out the chanting monks": Following the victory of the Bolsheviks, scores of monasteries were closed, the monks were dispersed, and the buildings were turned over to the military or municipal authorities for their own use. "His face has a Mongol cast": A portrait of Lenin, whose voice is dramatized in the monologue that follows. "I sent a team of scientists": In their attempts to discredit the Church, the Bolsheviks organized official disinterments of saints to prove to the local population that, contrary to the Church's claims, their bodies had not been miraculously preserved. "Your own *rusalka* blood": See note to "The Poet," above. "Our crowded Maidenfield": A Moscow region known for its medical facilities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rogneda: The pagan wife Prince Vladimir, Christianizer of Russia, known for her extraordinary beauty (d. ca. 1000).

"*Lightland*" In the Russian the poem is titled "*Ladomir*," a noun that conjoins *lad* ("harmony," "concord") and *mir* ("world"). Khlebnikov originally titled the work "Insurrection." It is his most expansive utopian vision, born of an antipathy toward the prerevolutionary past and a faith in the potential of poetry and technology to reform the world. "Let Lobachevskian space / stream from the flagpoles of night-loving Petrograd": The "reformed" space of Lobachevskian geometry—those spatial configurations that would permit the full logical elaboration of non-Euclidian geometry—functions as a metaphor for Khlebnikov's own "reformed" concept of time. "The Time of the Takers . . . the Might of the Makers": In the Russian original, Khlebnikov creates a new word, *tvorianin* ("creator"), on the model of an existing word, *dvorianin* ("nobleman"). "This is the havoc that Razin unleashed": See notes to "The shining shower dripping from the oar" and "I saw the young man, the young prophet," above. "Let its building blocks be only the beats of your heart": Khlebnikov's utopian projects included proposals to "effect the ex-

change of labor and services by means of an exchange of heartbeats. Estimate every task in terms of heartbeats—the monetary unit of the future, in which all individuals are equally wealthy.” He also suggested the use of heartbeats “as the units of measurement for the rights and obligations of human labor” (*Collected Works I*: 357, 360).

“Workers in Hungary stretched out their hands to us”: For a very brief period of time, from March 20 through August 1, 1919, a Communist regime existed in Hungary, raising hopes among the Russian Bolsheviks that a world revolution was imminent. “Like Perun, to be pieces of wood adrift in the Dnieper”: Perun is the ancient Slavic god of thunder. Following the Christianization of the Kievan state in 988, his idol, situated on an embankment overlooking the Dnieper, was torn down and thrown into the river. “Like the chest of the tsar, the last Romanov”: On July 16, 1918, Nikolai Romanov and the entire royal family were executed by firing squad in Ekaterinburg. “How a castle of lace was the prize of a girl . . . Now the dancer’s private residence / beats out a call to arms”: The girl is Matilda Kshesinskaia, a well-known St. Petersburg ballerina and Tsar Nicholas II’s mistress. In return for her services, she received a palatial residence from the Tsar. Following the February Revolution, the palace was nationalized, and became the headquarters of the Bolshevik Military Organization.

“Germany’s *G* fell away from its name”: The removal of the “head” letters from Germany and Russia signify not the demise of the nations themselves but the removal of the political heads—the Romanovs in Russia and the Hohenzollerns (“Gogentsollern” in Russian) in Germany. The “rise and extension of *L*” signifies not only the rise of Lenin, but also the establishment of a new “kingdom,” Lightland. “The violin of Planet Earth”: An unpublished entry from one of Khlebnikov’s notebooks of this period reads, “For me the planet Earth is Picasso’s violin made up of dark figures.” “The face of Razin, sculpted by Konenkov, / like a holy book in the Kremlin”: S. T. Konenkov’s sculpture of Stenka Razin, unveiled in May 1919, stands before St. Basil’s Cathedral on Red Square. The “holy book” may be a reference to a bas-relief entitled “To Those Fallen in the Battle for Peace and Brotherhood among the Nations,” sculpted by Konenkov for the wall of the Senate Tower on Red Square and unveiled on the first anniversary of the October Revolution. Both works of art are examples of the monumental propaganda sponsored by the new Bolshevik regime. “And Shevchenko, who no longer fears the day”: An allusion to an autobiographical tale by the great Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko. It describes how a peasant lad who wishes to become an artist sketches the statues in St. Petersburg’s Summer Garden at night, by the light of the midnight sun, in order to avoid being expelled from the grounds by those of higher social status. In Lightland, Shevchenko’s peasant would not fear the light of day.

“Qurrat al-‘Ayn”: A Persian poet and follower of Sayyid Ali Muhammad (the Bab), founder of the Bahai faith. She was executed in 1852 by Persia’s conservative Islamic authorities on account of her revolutionary views. Her

real name was Fatima Zarrin Taj Baraghani. “Qurrat al-‘Ayn” is a traditional term of endearment used by teachers for exceptionally gifted students, and means “Solace of the Eyes.” “The sayings of Tsong-kha-pa”: A Lamaist leader (1357–1419), also known as Tson-K’a-pa, who was responsible for the reorganization of the major Lamaist sect founded by Atisa. In the *Tables of Destiny*, Khlebnikov describes him as the “great teacher of the Mongols,” the “Socrates of the wilderness of Asia.” “To the land where Izanagi . . . beside Astarte, who worships Hokusai”: See note to “The land where Izanagi,” above. “At Volkonsky’s great house on Ostozhenko: The Volkonskys, one of Russia’s wealthiest families, owned a palace on Ostozhenko Street in Moscow; following the Revolution, it became the headquarters of the People’s Commissariat for Education. “In our retreat at Krasnaia Poliana, / the burning spark of Nosar’s revolution”: Krasnaia Poliana was an estate outside Kharkov belonging to the Siniakova family (see notes to “Unbending as Boris Godunov’s boyarina” and “My Campaigns,” above)—an estate frequented by Khlebnikov, Nikolai Aseev, Boris Pasternak, and other prominent figures in the Futurist movement. G. S. Nosar (1870–1918) was a Russian revolutionary who chaired the Petersburg Soviet during the abortive revolution of 1905. “The *rusalka* hidden at the roots of the tree”: See note to “The Poet,” above.

“*Night Raid*” The “raid” is most probably set in Petrograd following the Bolshevik coup. The protagonists are a group of Red marines looking for members of the White resistance. In the upper right-hand corner of the manuscript, Khlebnikov wrote: “7.XI.21. $3^6 + 3^6$.” The date of composition marks the fourth anniversary of the revolution, and the fact that Khlebnikov chose to express the passage of those four years in terms of the formula $3^6 + 3^6$ (1,458 days, or almost exactly four years) is highly significant. According to his theory of historical cycles, politically and ideologically opposing events occur at intervals of 3^n days. The poem presents a microcosmic instantiation of this theory: the murder of the young White sympathizer, Vladimir, is eventually followed by the revenge taken on the murderers by Vladimir’s mother. The fiery death of the Red Marines at the end of the poem, in turn, stands in opposition to the revolutionary conflagration that brought the Bolsheviks to power in 1917. The fact that the poem presents this picture of historical retribution without commentary made it ideologically suspect, and following its initial publication in the *Collected Works* it was excised from every subsequent collection of Khlebnikov’s verse until 1986. “A *rusalka* laughing”: See note to “The Poet,” above. “The Pugachev Sea”: Emilian Pugachev was the leader of a major Cossack rebellion (1772–1773) during the reign of Catherine the Great.

“*The Chairman of the Cheka*” This poem is profoundly autobiographical. Following the occupation of Kharkov by the Red Army in early December 1919, Khlebnikov was released from the psychiatric hospital where he had taken

refuge to avoid mobilization by the Whites. Returning to Kharkov, he met A. N. Andrievsky, a young mathematician and interrogator for the Red Army tribunals set up to deal with counterrevolutionary elements in the city. Khlebnikov took him to be an agent of the Cheka. For a time he lived with Andrievsky “in a communal room [with] five windows,” along with the latter’s mistress, Vera Demianovskaia, the wife of a prominent Soviet official (see note to “Now that the lilt of nightingales,” above). Andrievsky’s schizophrenic character, described in term of the Nero/Christ opposition in the poem, was reflected in the ambiguous nature of his activities: on the one hand he was responsible for defending the new revolutionary order, and on the other hand his apartment was a center of black-market operations. The words he sings while Russia burns (“We’ll turn the Old World upside down, and then . . .”) are from the *Internationale*.

The references to the Cheka headquarters “at the end of a street named after a great writer” (Pushkin Street) and to the Cheka’s activities are historically accurate. The reoccupation of the city by the Bolsheviks in 1919 was followed by a reign of terror directed by a local Chekist, S. A. Saenko, who had a reputation for pathological cruelty. In later years Andrievsky vigorously denied ever having been associated with the Cheka, insisting that Khlebnikov had confused the Cheka with the Revolutionary Military Tribunal on which he served.

“*Cracking the Universe*” “When many men died in a great deep of water . . . I made a promise”: The son’s vow repeats a pledge that Khlebnikov made when he learned of the Tsushima disaster. He writes in “Self-Statement”: “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” (*Collected Works* II: 8). The depiction of the universe as a skull (see also in this connection “You whose mind flowed,” in this volume) can be traced to ancient Jainist cosmogony. The influence of Jainism can be detected in other poems as well—see, in particular, “Russia and Me” and “Asia, I have made you my obsession.”

“*The Gul-Mullah’s Trumpet*” There is no genuinely canonical version of the text. In addition to one complete rough draft, there are fair copies of various sections of the poem reworked by Khlebnikov following his return to Russia. The version translated here (T 348) is a composite that unites all known revised sections of the text with the unrevised passages of the rough draft. The title assigned to this version in *Tvoreniia* is “Tyrant without the T: Encounter” (“Tiran bez T: vstrecha”), but Khlebnikov refers to this poem most frequently as “The Gul-Mullah’s Trumpet.”

Khlebnikov wrote the poem during his sojourn in Iran as a propaganda officer for the Red expeditionary force that Lenin had dispatched to assist local revolutionaries. According to the memoirs written by Khlebnikov’s compatri-

ots on the ill-fated expedition, the poem is heavily autobiographical. Sections 12 and 13 treat his wanderings on the Caspian Sea coast around the port city of Enzeli; sections 15–18 cover the expeditionary forces as they marched east through the province of Mazanderan toward Shahsavār on their way to Teheran; section 19 describes the retreat toward Enzeli. Khlebnikov intended at one time to include some or all of the sections of “The Gul-Mullah’s Trumpet” in *Zangezi*.

The numerous non-Russian phrases that appear in the poem are transcriptions of what Khlebnikov would have heard in the provinces of Gilan and Mazanderan, along the southern coast of the Caspian Sea (northern Iran). The indigenous population speaks a dialect of Turkish, creolized with borrowings from Persian and Arabic. It is not always apparent from Khlebnikov’s own transcriptions what a given word’s linguistic provenance is. The title of the poem in the rough draft is “The Gul-Mullah’s Trumpet.” *Gul-mullah* means “flower priest” or, more precisely, “flower theologian” in Persian. Apparently the Iranians gave Khlebnikov this name because, with his unkempt beard and tattered clothes he looked very much like a Sufi holy man or dervish.

“*Hak! Hak!*”: In Persian and Arabic, an exclamation meaning “truth,” as in “God is truth,” repeated by dervishes collecting alms. “*Çok pul! Çok şai!*”: “Much money, many coins” (Turkish, Persian). “*Oçana! Moçana!*”: An exclamation signifying joy or delight (Turkish). “The *Kursk* went chugging toward you”: The *Kursk* is the ship on which Khlebnikov arrived in Enzeli in April 1921. “I am Razin read backward”: Khlebnikov means “backward” both literally and figuratively. Razin’s name in reverse reads *nizar*, a Russian dialectism meaning “hoi polloi”—characterizing the disenfranchised whose cause Razin championed. Metaphorically, Khlebnikov sees himself as Razin’s antipode: whereas “Razin threw his bride overboard,” he intends to rescue his beloved (see note to “I saw the young man, the young prophet,” above).

“Qurrat al-‘Ayn . . . Tariha”: See note to “Lightland,” above. Tariha (“the pure”) is another name for Qurrat al-‘Ayn. “Your bridegroom” is probably a reference to the Bab, whom Tahira never met, but who, in apocryphal accounts of their lives, is represented as her betrothed. The Bab was strung from a pillar and executed by firing squad in 1850. “A tower of dark-blue stone . . . by the bridge”: The scene has now shifted from the port of Enzeli to the city of Rasht, a few miles to the southeast; here Khlebnikov describes the Parde Arak Bridge. “Only one *şai!*”: A coin of low denomination (Turkish). “*Rais tumam doniya*”: More properly, *Rais tumam-e-donya*, Khlebnikov’s rendering in Persian of “President of Planet Earth.” “Ali became a President”: probably a reference to Ali Razi, one of Khlebnikov’s Persian comrades who worked for the divisional newspaper of the expeditionary force *Krasny Iran* (Red Iran). “A land where all men are Adams”: The word *adam* means “man” in Persian. “*Shira*”: Opium dregs (Persian). “Where they give the silent moon / a resounding name— / *Ay!*”: *Ay* is the word for both “moon” and “month” in Turkish; it is also the Russian folk designation for May (see notes to “It was in the merry

month of Ay” and “Why are these eyes forget-me-nots?” above), the month when Khlebnikov found himself in Iran. “*Uruss dervish!*”: “Russian dervish” (Persian).

“A shaggy lion . . . holding a scimitar”: The entire section describes the royal seal of Iran. “Your friend’s eyes” is an allusion to Khlebnikov’s early mentor, the symbolist poet Viacheslav Ivanov (see note to “Zoo,” above). “Khalkhal”: See note to “Easter in Enzeli,” above. “*Chai-khané*”: “tea-house” (Persian). “Marienhof and Yesenin”: These two imagist poets were present in Kharkov in 1920, where they arranged a mock inauguration of Khlebnikov as President of Planet Earth. “A porcupine’s quill gleamed in the light of Ay”: The quill, which Khlebnikov used as his writing implement in Iran, becomes a metonym for his whole encounter with the culture; see “The Willow Twig” (*Collected Works* II: 150). “*Kardeş*”: Turkish for “comrade,” “brother.” “A black kettle, spitting in my face? / Black water? No, just Ali Mohammed”: “Black water” is the euphemism for glaucoma in Persian. “*Kerji*”: Persian word for operators of large flat-bottomed boats used on the Caspian Sea. “We row from Enzeli to Kazyan”: Murdab Bay divides the port of Enzeli into two parts, one of which is Kazyan.

“*Autumns Passing in Piatigorsk*” Piatigorsk, where Khlebnikov lived in November and December of 1921, is a well-known spa located in the central Caucasus, on the southern slopes of Mount Mashuk. “Piatigorsk” itself means “Five Mountains”—a reference to the five peaks that surround the town, which are among those mentioned in the course of the poem (Beshtau; Mashuk; the twin peaks of Yutsa and Dzhutsa, called the two “Beetles”; Gold Kurgan; and Dubravny). The images of death throughout the poem are motivated not only by the seasonal context, but also by the common association of Piatigorsk with the Russian romantic poet Mikhail Lermontov. He was killed in a duel at the foot of Mount Mashuk in June 1841.

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