

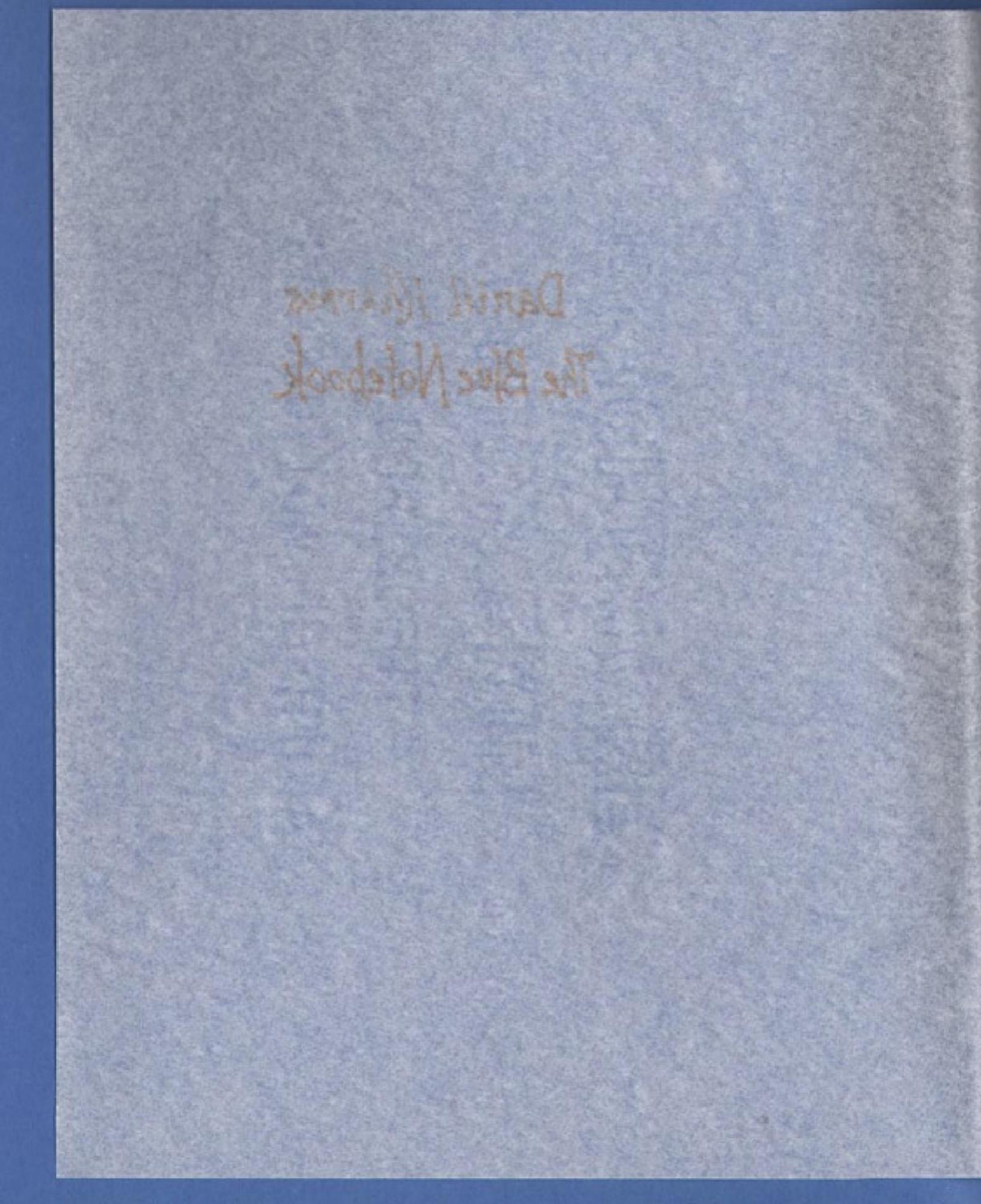


# Daniel Marms The Blue Notebook

For the scrapbook

I once saw a fly and a bedbug get into a fight. It was so frightening that I ran out into the street and ran as far as I could. The same thing goes for the scrapbook: do some dirty thing and then it's too late.

Kharms Aug. 23, 1936



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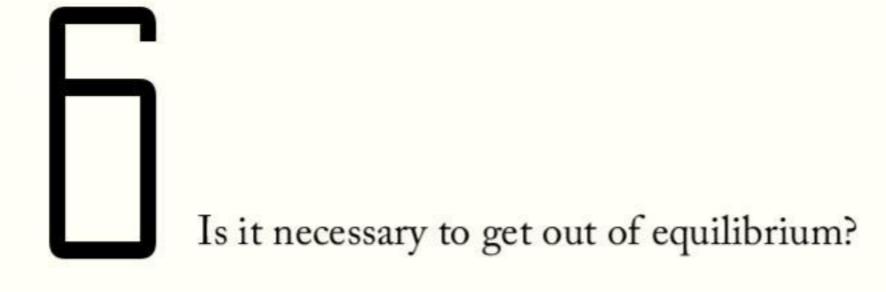
Kharms Aug. 23, 1936 My opinion of traveling is succinct: when traveling, do not go too far or else you might see something that will even be impossible to forget. And if anything settles in the memory too stubbornly, a person first starts to feel uneasy, and then it gets quite difficult to keep up the vivacity of the soul.

So, for instance: one watchmaker, Comrade Badaev, could not forget a phrase he heard once long ago: "If the sky were crooked, it wouldn't make it any lower." Comrade Badaev didn't really get this saying, it irritated him, he found it unreasonable, even lacking any kind of sense, malignant even, because its claim was obviously incorrect (Comrade Badaev felt that a knowledgeable physicist could say something regarding "the height of the sky" and would question the expression "the sky is crooked." Were this phrase to get to Pearlman, Comrade Badaev was certain, Pearlman would tear its meaning to shreds, the way a young pup tears up house slippers), obviously antagonistic to the normal pattern of European thought. If indeed the claim contained in this saying were true, then it was too unimportant and worthless to speak of. And in any case, hearing this phrase just once, one ought right away to forget it. But he couldn't make that happen: Comrade Badaev constantly remembered this phrase and suffered greatly.

It is healthy for a person to know only that which he is supposed to. I can offer the following incident as an example: one person knew a little more, and another a bit less than they were supposed to know. And what happened? The one that knew a bit less got rich, and the one that knew a little more lived his whole life with simply adequate means.

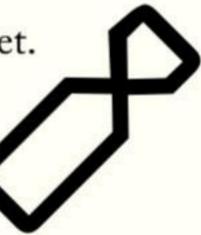
Since ancient times, people have wondered about what was smart and what was stupid. In that regard, I remember this incident: when my aunt gave me a writing desk as a gift, I said to myself: "Well now I'll sit down at this desk and the first thought I come up with at this desk will be especially smart." But I could not come up with an especially smart thought. Then I said to myself: "Okay. I wasn't able to come up with an especially smart thought, so I'll come up with an especially stupid one." But I couldn't come up with an especially stupid thought either.

Everything that's extreme is difficult. The middle parts are done more easily. The very center requires no effort at all. The center is equal to equilibrium. There's no fight in it.



While traveling, do not give yourself over to daydreams, but fantasize and pay attention to everything, even the insignificant details.

When sitting in place do not kick your feet.



Any old wisdom is good if somebody has understood it. A wisdom that hasn't been understood may get covered in dust.

There lived a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears. He didn't have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily. He couldn't talk because he had no mouth. He had no nose either. He didn't even have arms or legs. He had no stomach, he had no back, he had no spine, and he had no innards at all. He didn't have anything. So we don't even know who we're talking about. It's better that we don't talk about him any more.

January 7, 1937

One grandma had only four teeth in her mouth. Three teeth on top, and one on the bottom. This grandma couldn't chew with these teeth. Truly speaking, they were useless to her. And so grandma decided to pull out all her teeth and insert a corkscrew in her lower gums and miniscule pliers on top. Grandma drank ink, ate beets, and cleaned her ears out with matches. Grandma had four rabbits. Three rabbits on top, and one on the bottom. Grandma used to catch rabbits with her bare hands and put them in little cages. The rabbits cried and scratched their ears with their hind legs. The rabbits drank ink and ate beets. Shaha-ha! The rabbits drank ink and ate beets!

A certain Panteley hit Ivan with his heel.

A certain Ivan hit Natalya with a wheel.

A certain Natalya hit Semyon with a muzzle.

A certain Semyon hit Seliphan with a washbasin.

A certain Seliphan hit Nikita with an overshirt.

A certain Nikita hit Roman with a board.

A certain Roman hit Tatiana with a shovel.

A certain Tatiana hit Elena with a pitcher.

And a fight broke out.

Elena beat Tatiana with a fence.

Tatiana beat Roman with a mattress.

Roman beat Nikita with a suitcase.

Nikita beat Seliphan with a serving tray.

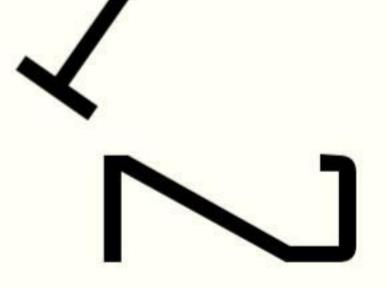
Seliphan beat Semyon with his bare hands.

Semyon spat into Natalya's ears.

Natalya bit Ivan's fingers.

Ivan kicked Panteley with his heel.

Ach, we thought, good people fighting each other.



One little girl said: "gvya." Another little girl said: "hphy."

A third little girl said: "mbryu."

And Yermakov chomped, chomped, chomped on cabbages under the fence.

Meanwhile, evening was already setting in.

Mot'ka got tired playing in shit and went to bed.

It was drizzling rain.

The swine ate peas.

Rogozin was peeking into the women's bathhouse.

Sen'ka sat on Man'ka in riding position.

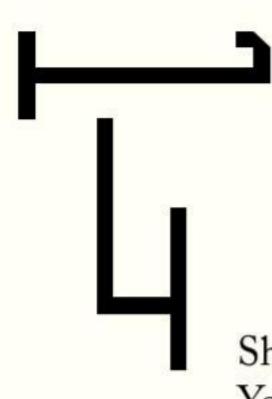
Man'ka, meanwhile, drifted off to sleep.

The sky grew dark. The stars twinkled.

Some rats chewed up a mouse under the floorboards.

Sleep, my little boy, and don't let silly dreams scare you.

Silly dreams come from the stomach.



Shave your beard and your whiskers!

You ain't goats, so don't wear beards!

You ain't cats, so don't wiggle your whiskers!

You ain't mushrooms, so don't stand around in your hats!

Hey, ladies!

Trim down your hatsies!

Hey, little beauties!

Trim down your skirtsies!

Come on you, Man'ka Marusina,

Come and sit on Pet'ka Elabonin.

Cut your braids off, little girls.

You ain't zebras, so don't run around with tails on.

Chubby little girls,

Invite us over for the festivities.

Lead me on with my eyes blindfolded.

I won't go with my eyes blindfolded.

Untie the blindfold from my eyes and I'll go by myself.

Don't hold me by the arms,

I want to give my arms freedom.

Step aside, stupid spectators,

I'm going to start kicking.

I'll walk down one floorboard and I won't lose my balance,

I'll run across the drainpipe and I won't collapse.

Don't get in my way. You'll be sorry.

Your cowardly eyes are unpleasant to the gods.

Your mouths open at the wrong time.

Your noses don't know vibrating smells.

Eat your soup - that's your business.

Sweep your rooms - that's what the age demands of you.

But take those bandages and stomach straps off me,

I live on salt, and you live on sugar.

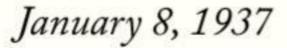
I have my own flower gardens and vegetable gardens.

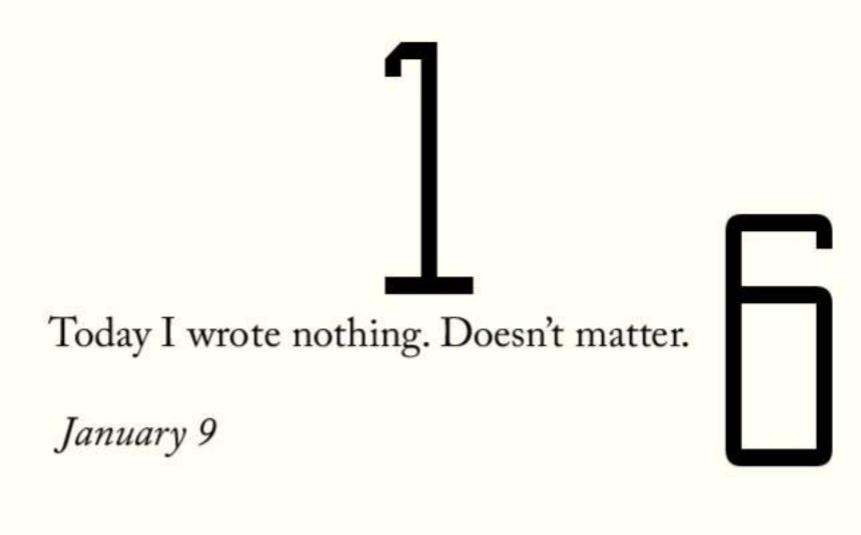
In my garden a goat grazes.

In my trunk lies a fur hat.

Don't get in my way, I stand on my own, and you are only

a quart of smoke to me.





Dmitri eked out pathetic noises.

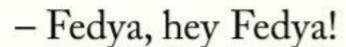
Anna was weeping, with her head in a pillow.
Manya cried, too.

- Fedya, hey Fedya!
- What sir?
- I'll show you what sir!

Silence.

- Fedya, hey Fedya!
- What's the matter?
- Now you son of a bitch! And you ask what's the matter.
- What do you want from me?
- D'you see that? What do I want from him! You know what I could do to you, you scoundrel, for words like that... I'm gonna throw you so hard you'll fly into you know where!
- -Where?
- Into the pot.

Silence.



- What now, auntie, have you lost your mind?
- Oooh! Oooh! Say that again, come on!
- No, I won't.
- Now that's better! Know your place! Or else! Enough!

February 23, 1937

I choked on a lamb bone.

I was taken by the arms and brought away from the table.

I lost myself in thought.

A mouse ran by.

Ivan ran after the mouse with a long stick.

A strange old woman watched from a window.

Running by the old woman, Ivan hit her in the face with the stick.

Returning home after my walk,
I suddenly exclaimed: Oh my God!
I've been walking four days in a row!
What will my family think of me now?

We've died on the fields of the everyday.
No hope is left to lead the way.
Our dreams of happiness are naught—
Now poverty is all we've got.

Apr. 3, 1937



To have only intelligence and talent is too little. One must also have energy, real interest, clarity of thought and a sense of obligation. Here I write down the events of the day, for they are incredible. In truth: one of the events is particularly incredible, I will underline it.

1) Yesterday we had nothing to eat. 2) In the morning I took 10 rubles out of the savings bank, leaving 5 in the passbook, so as not to close the account. 3) Stopped by Zhitkov's place and borrowed 60 rubles. 4) Went home, buying food on the way. 5) The weather is wonderful, spring. 6) Went with Marina to the Buddhist pagoda, taking a bag of sandwiches and a flask of wine mixed with water. 7) On the way back we stopped at the pawn shop and there we saw a pump organ, a Jadmeyer double-manual, a copy of the philharmonic's. The price was only 900 rubles! But half an hour ago it was sold! 7a) At Alexander's we saw an excellent pipe. 85 rubles. 8) Went to Zhitkov's. 9) With Zhitkov we found out who bought the pump organ and drove to the address: Pesochnaya 31, apt. 46, Levinsky. 10) Couldn't buy it off him. 11) Spent the evening at Zhitkov's.

April 4

Enough of laziness and doing nothing!

Open this notebook every day and write down half a page at the very least. If you have nothing to write down, then at least, following Gogol's advice, write down that today there's nothing to write. Always write with attention and look on writing as a holiday.

This is how hunger begins:
In the morning you wake lively,
Then weakness,
Then boredom,
Then comes the loss
Of quick reason's strength—
Then comes calm,
And then horror.

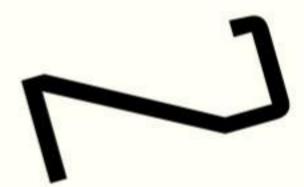
Daydreams will be the end of you. Your interest in this harsh life will vanish like smoke. At that moment The herald of the sky will not descend.

Desires and lusts will wilt and then Youth's ardent thoughts will pass you by... Abandon them! Leave off your dreams my friend, Make free of death your mind.

October 4, 1937

The Day Amphibrach

And a little fish flashes in the river's cool wave,
And a little house stands far far away,
And a barking dog barks at a herd of cows,
And Petrov rides a barrow racing down a hill,
And a little flag flutters on top of the house,
And nourishing grain grows ripe in the field,
And the dust shines like silver on every leaf,
And the flies with a whistle fly everywhere,
And young girls lie in the sun to get warm,
And the bees in the garden buzz over the flowers,
And the geese are diving in shadowy ponds,
And the day passes by in its usual labors.





# Afterword: On Colors and Numbers in The Blue Notebook

- Daniil Ivanovich Kharms (1905-1942) saw only two of his poems appear in print, both of them at the very outset of his literary career: "Incident on the Railway" in 1926, and "The Verse of Petr Yashkin" in the following year. He published in children's journals, and at one point even that stopped. He kept writing poetry, prose, drama, theoretical tracts, and diaries, using cheap school notebooks, large ledger books, library cards, loose pieces of notebook and wrapping paper, and even blank spaces on personal documents. He wrote through the years of poverty, hunger, and political oppression. He did not stop even after it became obvious that there was no prospect left of having any of his works published. If writing for the public is publication, what then should we call this writing in private? Privation?
- 4. The present title of this collection refers to the color of the silky fabric on the cover of the notebook in which these twenty-nine notes were originally penned. Though Kharms

never personally titled this work, he included the tenth note under the title "Blue Notebook, No. 10" in his most well-known "album," *Sluchai* (translated as *Incidents* or *Events*). Even though privileged, blue is by no means the only color in this notebook.

X. In comparison with the rest of his manuscript archive, the blue notebook seems like a special occasion, a holiday in a messy stream of the everyday written. While on the outside the binding is blue, on the inside it is gold. In his "Letter to the Philosopher, No. 3," (written during the same time period as *The Blue Notebook*) Kharms associates blue with reason, and yellow/gold with "infinity" and "Divinity." As "Blue Notebook No. 10" shows so pointedly, in Kharms every blue comes with a golden lining.

The opening words of *The Blue Notebook* are, literally, "for the album." The word album comes from Latin *albus*, white. An album is a book of blanks. "Blue Notebook No. 10" provides the central insight of this notebook, and probably of Kharms' entire work: by gradually eradicating its protagonist body part by body part and word by word, it asserts that the task of writing is not to fill a blank page,

but to write its blankness. Kharms' friend and idol, the painter Kazimir Malevich, incorporated into one of the tracts he wrote after painting the *White Square* a fable about Nature as a teacher and her three students. The first student thought that the teacher gave a lesson in pragmatism, the second student, in existentialism. "The third student understood nothing [...] The teacher didn't give him anything, because only a thing can be given. The teacher did not have hands, or legs, or a head, or a tongue, or anything that could be perceived, experienced, learned. There wasn't anything that could constitute an object of reasoning: the teacher was a liberated nothing." In Malevich and Kharms, Nature had the third student, twice.

3. Numbers fascinated Kharms. For him, to number does not mean only to enumerate or to order. "A Sonnet" from *Incidents* opens with the narrator's realization that he has "suddenly forgot which comes first, 7 or 8," and soon this mathematical dilemma spreads to all of his neighbors. In his tract "Null and Nil" Kharms explains that humans invented only the order of numbers, not the numbers themselves. Curiously, he refrained from the practice of his older Futurist colleagues, who completely disregarded the

orderly progression of numbers in the numeration of points in their 1913 manifesto, "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste."

Instead, Kharms invariably used conventional numbering. The entries in *The Blue Notebook* advance quite logically from 1 to 28 (with the single exception of a note written on a loose piece of paper and inserted into the book). If we look at his other writings, we see that Kharms enumerates two things: texts and days. It is not important to have these two series coincide: twenty-eight entries (plus an inscription) in The Blue Notebook are spread over the period of fourteen months. What is important, however, is that the writer never puts an end to these progressive series. In diary entries from the early twenties we find Kharms prescribing to himself a strict diet of reading and writing. Written a decade later, *The Blue Notebook* is a document of his unique way of sustaining life with writing, not for publication, but for privation.

- Branislav Jakovljevic

#### Notes on the Text

For the scrapbook The word "scrapbook" is my translation of the Russian al'bom, which would literally mean "album." It signifies not a family album or photo album, but rather a private exercise in collecting thematically unified material. This term acquired specifity with the artistic underground in the Soviet Union in the 1960s. It has been used by Russian artists including Ilya Kabakov and the Moscow Conceptualists to refer to a specific sort of artist's book, often a one-of-a-kind bound book which contains writings and drawings by a single author.

#2 Most likely Kharms is invoking I.A. Perelman (1882-1942), author of a popular physics text book.

**#24** Boris Zhitkov (1882-1938) was an author of children's stories and a friend of Kharms. Marina Malich was Kharms' common-law wife.

Thanks to Eugene Ostashevsky and Anna Moschovakis for their invaluable editorial advice and to Branislav Jakovljevic for sharing his thoughts on the theoretical underpinnings of Kharms' manuscript production.

## The Eastern European Poets Series

Daniil Kharms' *The Blue Notebook* is Number Six in the Eastern European Poets Series from Ugly Duckling Presse.

The series publishes books by émigré poets, contemporary poets of the Eastern European avant-garde, and influential poets of the past whose work is not widely available in English.

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The Blue Notebook by Daniil Kharms, Fourth Edition, December 2005

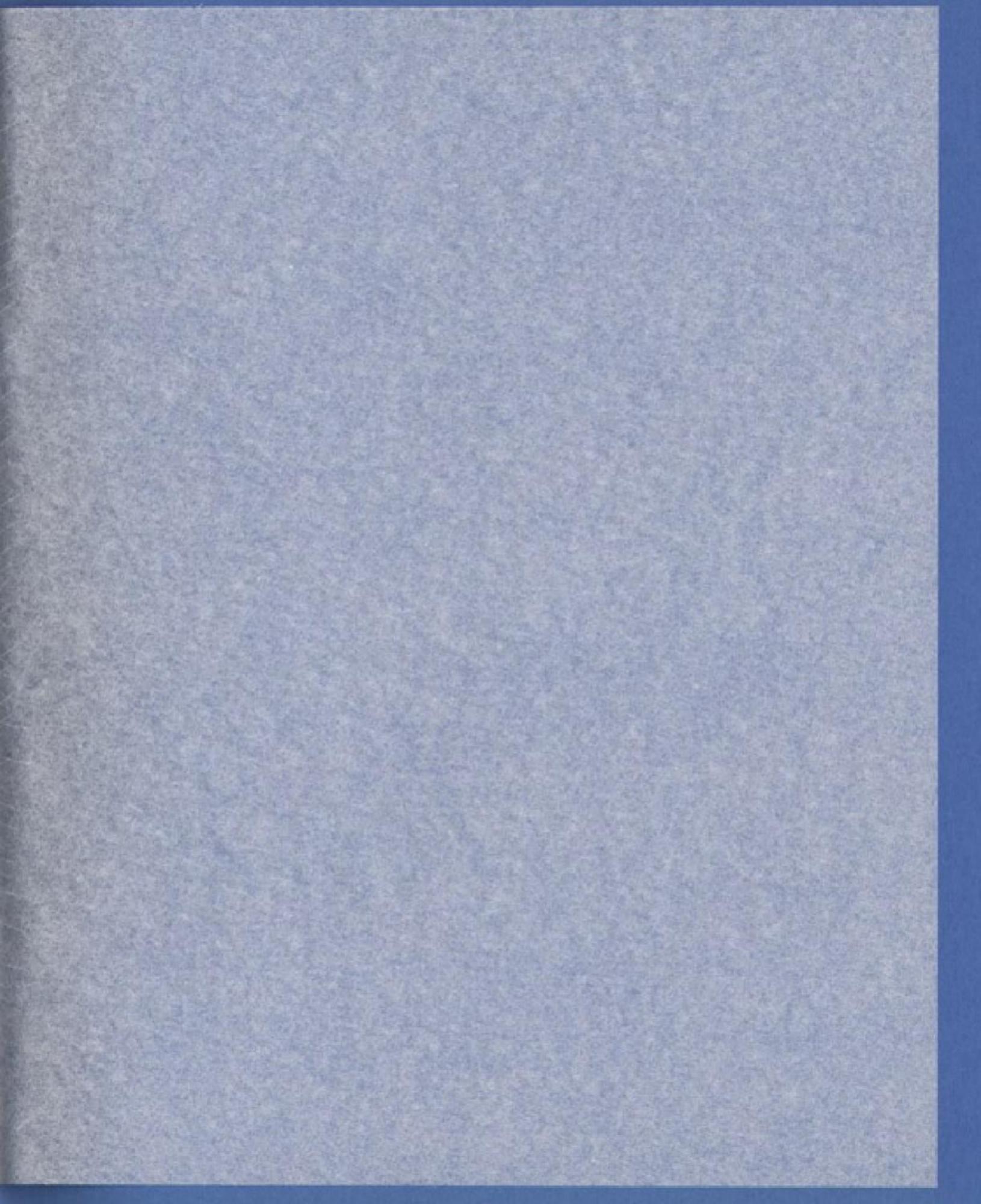
Translation (c) 2003, 2004, 2005 by Matvei Yankelevich Afterword (c) 2003, 2004, 2005 by Branislav Jakovljevic

This is a special Birthday Edition of *The Blue Notebook*, printed in honor of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Daniil Kharms (1905 - 1942).

The first edition of this chapbook by Daniil Kharms was printed on the occasion of an evening dedicated to OBERIU poetry and plays sponsored by Balaklava and the Eastern European Poets Series at the Bowery Poetry Club, New York City, in the fall of 2003. Thirty-three copies were printed and the titles were hand-inscribed. Each copy was assigned a letter of the Russian alphabet.

Book design by Anna Moschovakis and Matvei Yankelevich Typeset by Anna Moschovakis using Caslon and Kashmir Printed and assembled at Ugly Duckling Presse in Red Hook, Brooklyn

Acknowledgments: A few of these translations have appeared in Watchword and Octopus. The whole of The Blue Notebook will be published as part of the anthology of OBERIU writing from Northwestern University Press, edited by Eugene Ostashevsky.



The Blue Notebook by Daniil Kharms, Second Edition, Fall 2004

Translation (c) 2003, 2004 by Matvei Yankelevich Afterword (c) 2003, 2004 by Branislav Jakovljevic

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