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### **The Eyes of Arthur Rimbaud**

After the International Day of the Ditch Digger, I managed to find a twopenny apartment in the Poopshoot section of Moscow. Behind the oven stood a solid wall of trash. The fridge leaked, the tap was dripping, the floor teemed with cockroaches, beams of polished timber were strewn about the room. And yet I felt like I was in a five-star hotel.

Just before nightfall, at the start of Shittember, the sun broke onto the tiny square full of kiosks selling cat-meat patties. Late afternoon clouds were parting, the light sprawled about in stains. Like silent specters of lightning balls, they passed through the cigarette paper of birch trunks. My mouth felt dry. Somewhere at the other end of the city twinkled my darling Vegetable Ghost. When darkness fell, bubbles of cold light stayed suspended between five-storey overcasts of deathly brickness.

Back then I thought a person didn't need possessions. I knew nothing about money. We spent much of our lives in concrete ruins. Indoor dirt matched the dirt on the street. The hostess -- a crude beanpole of Krasno-Presnian stock, who came and went in

the most illusory hours -- didn't notice it either. Nor did anyone else, since they all subsisted on spirit. Above all, as my old friend Chervisnky would put it, "In every Soviet home, floating in every room corner, were fluffy apparitional dust ships." A thick layer of dust covered all things: books, buildings, food, birds and clouds. In the winter, the dirt took on new qualities -- it bloated and bloomed, transforming into a boggy swamp. All we could do was dream of a time when human gaze would turn not toward the future or the past, but the present. So we hid in the dirt awaiting a new life, awaiting the real.

And when youth became just about unbearable and the world, at the edge of collapsing, loomed above like a springtime graveyard, a small curly-headed divinity, seventeen years of age, materialized in my roach-filled flat. He announced that his was "a visitation," one litterateur to another. He said it just like that: "a visitation."

- Hello, Elephantina, I brought you a letter of recommendation.

- From who?

- Who the hell knows. Mostly likely, myself!

This creature, who trailed me by only a year, was named Lavrik. Looking back at me was a pair of emerald eyes, the eyes of Rimbaud. He held a fiberboard vintage valise, the type carried by old village doctors. A stack of scribblings spilled out all over the floor and we both rushed to collect them.

Back then we were all in love with each other, in love with air itself. Magnificent creatures, such as we were, we couldn't make sense of our own sublime about the world. And yet my friends were more sublime still, especially Lavrik! As for me, my face was as special as Jane Birkin's in *Je t'aime moi non plus*. What's more, I was afraid of water and despised the material world, despised any corporality. And like Jane Birkin, I was

completely devoid of gender. After all, what gender are angels? If inanimate objects ever had gender, that was exactly the one I had.

My guest expressed himself in a proper, old-fashioned way. He was a retroholic.

- Well then, Madame, kissing your hand.

- My cigarette supply is in crisis, sorry. Tea?

- The whole country is in crisis, so please don't apologize.

Coughing to the point of tears, we smoked the black Ceylon tea. It was disgusting. Neither of us knew how to smoke. Then we drank the same tea, its yellow branches floating over the boiling pond.

Meanwhile, in some parallel reality my guest seemed to inhabit, a deceased Akhmatova was sitting across from him. In fact, it soon became clear that we were surrounded by the dead.

It started out as an unforgettable evening, filled with a sense of pre-war farewell. We blabbed about poetry, strolled along all manner of iambs and trochees, converged on our mutual love for Zabolotsky and uncovered nonsense in Pasternak ("...but you, my dear, are lovely without twists"). But more than anything else, I was tempted to read to him a few poems by the Great Tomatnik. I was convinced that from the very first lines he would appreciate the depth of that tomato talent, forever sealing our sudden friendship. Dipping into a tiny loophole between Zabolotsky and Pasrernak, I recited a few lines from the tomato patch -- and, just like that, the tiny sparkle frolicking between us went dark.

An awkward silence settled. Outside, in the blue fog, the dogs howled, the collective rattle of human bones was everywhere -- air itself tightened into a lump of fear

which had lived its entire life in the struggle against circumstance -- a lump that consumed the metro and, incontinent as ever, went on to shit it out far and wide across the far-flung bedroom communities.

For a moment the young man sitting before me resembled a mummy. Finally, with an exceptionally haughty grimace, he tossed back his head.

- This, to tell you the truth, is sheer trash!

With a shrieking realization that he grasp nothing of poetry, I grabbed him by the hair and for the next three minutes we rolled around on the floor chocking with rage. We broke the hostess's vase, tore up the carpet, and overturned the bookshelf full of telephone directories.

Thanks to his old- fashion valis -- his virtuoso blather and masterful lies -- Lavrik ended up living on my small kitchen sofa, abiding by the genderless rites of a cannery.

### **Beautiful Creatures**

This year, Moscow was engulfed with an amazing epidemic. Even trees, which refused to turn yellow and shed their leaves, stayed green in the winter. Old ones spread their buds. Early marijuana purred beneath the ground. Hormones bloomed, striking with curiosity and lust, and the graves of Novodevichy, Vagankov and other cemeteries went to rock concerts!

While the country was crumbling, we matured. I was now one ripe pear, lived independently, smoked like hell and didn't sleep at night.

As of late, my Vegetable friend and I hardly saw each other. One time, accompanied by Glum and Humpback, we ate up rubber chicken downtown. On that day

he brought me a blind copy of Nabokov's "The Gift." The second time, when I returned that novel, our paths crossed in the company of an elderly intellectual harridan, and our magical encounter, attended by the rumbles of heart and the grind of eternity, lasted for the entire fifteen minutes.

Thanks to the trills produced by the roach-filled five-storey brickslab, it was soon apparent that an all-promising composer named Dürer lived one floor up. He genuinely loved new music, the most substantial filth: crashing, rustling, styrofoam against glass, the clinking of water, the shrieking of whales, white noise, frequencies and amplitudes. Out of sheer rage, Pistol-Olga nicknamed him The Bladder (though she herself resembled a wood beam with pigtail aiguillettes!).

Guests would soon start coming to my new place. These were a select bunch of metropolitan nimrods: Cucumberio and other tyrant kin, winners of honorary daggers, a paper carbon copy of Eva Brown once removed, some fourth cousin kittens of Roman Caesars and me -- The Queen-Herring. At such gatherings, Lavrik reigned unchallenged.

- I shall feed myself on the meat of angels! - he spoke in a ferocious voice of the innocent, gazing into the eyes of drunk girls - Angels are bred at the Elysian collective farm Fields, they create steaks out of them. Actually, all poetry stems from liturgy. We can't even fathom its importance. We, people deprived of religiosity, take for religion completely different things. But it is possible to believe in everything, in anything! We must believe! We believe in culture! That is our religion. But why? Culture is nothing but a key to life in a zoo. That's all it is! It can be very cruel. Yes, it is very cruel indeed. It's the utmost expression is the Third Reich!

The girls giggled foolishly. Young men didn't listen, treating him with condescension. Back then, no one could imagine that many years later, after the end of our epoch, Lavrik would move to Rome and become Catholic -- obviously not for any religious reasons, but out of pure aesthetics. No one thought that he would graduate from Pontifical Gregorian University, that he would become a Jesuit, and then an archivist at the Vatican, an expert in Eugenio Pacelli and the Pope's right hand.

In those horrific, heavenly, foul, cacophonous, symphonic and bizarropolitical times, all of us -- girls, philosophers, drunks and even Dürer himself -- were blindingly beautiful. We were brighter than the stars and our faces were illuminated by the euphoria of blissful ignorance and permissiveness. We resembled dessert sweets: fruit-topped blancmanges, syrupy streams and sugary divinations. And if you were a young woman, a little caramel, you would inevitably be surrounded by manure flies bent on soaking up your vitality like candied Mao Zedongs. Such is the law of nature.

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But our main hero would come later. It was Lidochka. She was sixteen, frail body, a heavenly face of a little demon.

- Soul – that's the most important sex organ!

She spoke with the urgency of drowning, lips wet, voice hoarse, but more than anything, a rebellious spirit yearning for an immediate breach of morality.

On the very first day, armed with a bottle of champagne, she read to me her "Futuristic liturgy", liquid jumping out of the glass, Lidochka out of out her armchair. In conclusion, she launched into a discourse about shame, moved on to callousness and inquired if I had ever kissed anyone on the lips.

- I don't remember – I said thoughtfully.

Pigeons roamed the adjacent roof while a pigeonette retreated further and further away in tiny coquettish steps toward a plump pompous pigeon, who, with his pathetic feathers cocked, wanted to pass for an eagle.

- I don't remember if I ever I kissed anybody on the lips, - I hesitated. – but I am in love with this one person, who...

- You mean Lavrik?

- No, this one person, who...

At that moment I couldn't wait to tell her everything. Surely, she'd understand. She'd certainly appreciate it. I would tell her about Kiev, about the letters, the poems that have struck me to the very depth of my soul. I would induct her into the culinary avant-garde, the vegetative futurism, tell her about the little gears of writing and everything else!

But Lidochka wasn't listening to me at all. Tall, beautiful and very gracious, as indelible as a punctuation mark, or like...I couldn't find the right words, she stared the pigeons. She interrupted my mulling over the right words to point out that kissing was like eating snails.

- Raw ones too. Or like slugs! – she added victoriously.

I was upset at her for not listening to me. Both of us drunk, we saw one pigeon walk in tandem after another two, attempting to disrupt their rendezvous, and suddenly I found myself, once again, thinking about my Tomatnik and about how lovely it would be if...

- We are all doomed!

Having at first missed what Lidochka said, I suddenly began to laugh. Or maybe I heard everything, but it came to me just a second later. I laughed either for no reason or because "doomed" was spoken so incongruously. What did it have to do with anything?

- We are doomed to lose our wholeness, independence, power!

The restless oracle spoke severely, quivering her shiny, perfectly undented lips which looked like a pair of little rosy paint rollers.

-Hahaha!

I nearly fell off the armchair and dropped my glass. Lidochka started to sing something ungodly and waltz like mad all over the room, so much that her skirt rose like that of a twirling dervish. She tore me off the chair and, with our hands locked, we began to spin together. Her curls were springing, the room grimacing.

- To commit an abomination, an experiment with one's own morality! - She laughed maniacally.

We collapsed on the sofa from dizziness and suddenly I came face to face with cockroach frozen in amusement, staring me right in the eyes. Once again, I broke into laughter.

- Go, my friend. Today I am setting you free.

The cockroach took off running.

- It's a shame that we have no pistols. - Lidochka suddenly came to, pulling her neck in a funny way. At that moment, with her sharp nose, she looked like a young ostrich.

- If we had pistols, we could shoot them every which way. But where could we get them? Where do people get weapons?



- In normal countries they're sold everywhere.

- That's right, in America, you go to a bakery and it's full of guns, can you imagine?

- Here, only in the army. They're all crazy in the army. They cut the boys' balls off.

- If I had a weapon, I would kill... Who should I kill...- she hesitated.

That's when I took out from underneath the sofa a slingshot, which I found there a few days ago.

- Look!

And it was at that moment that I felt the touch of her mouth. It was a strange feeling, as though I was forced to eat meat without salt. Something inside me was burning with disgust, and, at the same time -- with attraction. Her tongue felt chilly.

- You are so funny. - Lidochka said tenderly, suddenly spitting out my mouth and pushing me away. - As for dying, we too will die, without any guns! And I will never touch you again!

After that, we both dove into absolutely hysterical laughter that quickly turned into the howling of dogs from the nearby street. And when the barking ceased, a blue streak of early evening glow already lay over the city.

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My suffering didn't end there. The next morning I was painfully awakened by a familiar voice. It was streaming from the radio. On the program, called "The Poetic Notebook," which all the inhabitants of the cockroach heaven tuned into, their mocking

faces contorted by breakfast chewing, Mr. Tomato Souse shamelessly recited his poem, "Six Hundred and Sixty Six."

In the following days, regardless of what was happening, I was constantly shadowed by the Tomato Poison. It pecked away at me, springing to life in the depths of my mind's ear, tearing at the soft and tender flesh of memories. That's when I understood that the most frightening, the most obsessive thing about love is voice.

It was the moment when the one thing I wanted more than anything else in the world was to bury that voice, to silence it!

Taking it literally, I announced to my neighbors that I was going to the library, but instead headed to the Vagankov cemetery. When I got there, I caught a lucky break: a brass band were blowing copper sausages; women sniffled their sorrows into the toilet bowl corollas of graveyard callas -- cemetery flowers whose names, as I soon realized, incited an urge to go to an actual toilet.

Joining the funeral of a stranger, I struggled to imagine my little Tomatik in place of the deceased. In ebbs and flows, I was actually able to do it. When I did, I felt a pinching in my nose, but just as quickly it went away. The sheer futility of imagining his absence drained me of all my strength. By some imponderable force of will I was able to visually squeeze him beneath the lid of the casket and push him underground with my gaze. But as soon as the first handfuls of earth crashed raucously against the wood, he would leap up, obliterating everyone and everything with the all-conquering love!

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On the 7th of Fishtember of 1985, the Central Committee of the Communist Party adopted a resolution to "combat alcoholism." All the Party, administrative and law

enforcement agencies were mandated to intensify, vigorously and widely, the fight against drunkenness. The measure provided for a cut in the production of alcoholic beverages, as well as places and times of sale.

On the very first day the anti-alcohol law went into effect, coriander rockers, religious leaders, dissidents and black-market operators decided to celebrate. A bonfire went up on the roof of one of the highrises, a crowd gathered. Soon after dusk everything was consumed by predatory darkness. Reflections of fire in mirror-stirred eyes floated between the abyss of the city and the black liquid of sky. Musicians sang like goats. It smelled of weed. The flame was blown about violently. Scarves and rucksacks were carried away in the air, but under the safeguard of alcohol no one noticed any of it. Meanwhile, the wind howled above the city: "Elephantina, my love! Where are you? I am waiting!"

They all came: the Humpback, the Clumsy, the Glum, all of them. But no matter how much I searched for my Tomatik, he was nowhere to be found.

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And it was then, at that ill-fated roof, like a fly buzzing around manure, I was surrounded by an art critic named Cockbeetle. He was an ancient old man (of about thirty).

- There is nothing more wonderful in the world than Great Stallions.- he began to rustle, cordoning the wind.

This introduction was unexpected, even striking.

- Stallions?

Cockbeagle nodded eagerly. He was covered from head to toe with an invisible but very potent ointment, the kind on a sticky tape for catching flies. At once, he leaned close to my ear and began to speak, quicker and quicker.

- You see, in Moscow a man loves nature lodged between bricks, between adorned buildings of stone, under bridges and alleys. A great many wooden structures are hidden there, smelling of Old Russia's dust.

- Why yes, - I agreed.

- On the outskirts of Moscow you can still find beautiful old huts with hand-carved verandas. And there is also velvety golden manure, and blue little bells, and fat geese, and by October there is already a sharp crust of ice. And there are apples and roosters! And best of all, I'll show you...

- Really?

He looked embarrassed.

- So what are you going to show me?

- A collection of modern art. My own collection.

That's when drunk Dürer interrupted our conversation and began to ape this Cockbeagle. Sometimes, when he acted like a fool, he was magnificent.

- Myth has it that in those Moscow dachas people die, burn up, drink, hang themselves, lose their minds, bask in lust, execute each other in the ravines by firing squads and walk barefoot in the snow!

At that moment, just when I was ready to break down laughing, somebody shouted:

- Okay gamebirds, spread out!

- Gamebirds?

- Get out of here!

It was the first time I saw a gun. One of the guests held it up, hand raised high in the air. It all seemed like movie.

- This is not your roof! Who is in charge here?

Glass started tinkling. The musicians went silent and everyone's attention suddenly shifted to a tall drunken blonde who was swaying at very the edge of the roof.

The sky already rippled with the grayish dye of dawn. The bonfires were burning out.

- People, lions, eagles and partridges, geese, spiders, silent waterborn creatures, starfish, and those not visible to the naked eye! - she wailed, - Hear me, see me, for I am a seagull!

Her performance as a Chekhovian heroine was at that moment more than out of place.

- You are a rat!

The sound of stomping came from below, the crowd began to move, and a certain agent of authority appeared on the roof. With not even a chance to say goodbye to Cockbeetle, I darted to the staircase right in front of the cop's nose. Quickly-quickly-quickly, picking off stairs under my feet, I conquered five thousand zigzags. Another minute -- and I stood outside in the courtyard. The sky was already white. Windows were clapping. And from the roof, her wings spread out, slowly and murderously, flew a drunk girl.

And so came the historic day when Lidochka got ahead of me in everything.

Lavrik paced the room, occasionally standing up on the chairs and even the table flailing his arms.

- Ancient Indian poems never mention the erotic kiss, only the maternal one, while the latest Hindu poems offer descriptions of as many as twelve kinds of kisses.

While he was speaking, Lidochka walked in on tiptoes and leaned against the doorframe.

- Which points to the fact that in the times of antiquity in India and Greece, a kiss was not an expression of erotic love.

In the meantime, Lidochka had the look of someone who had just found a million in cash. She wanted terribly for us to start nagging her about whether or not she killed somebody. Ordinarily, she spilled everything right at the doorstep. But it was as though everyone had conspired stay silent at all cost. That's when she opened the window, leaned over the ledge, and roared across the entire yard:

- Long live the Great Socialist Deflowering! Hooray!

We all nearly threw up.

- Long live the Great Socialist Deflowering! - she roared again.

We pulled her back in the room and set up an interrogation. Lavrik didn't participate, too busy with his face in a book.

- It isn't that scary at all, in fact it's quite interesting. It's a scientific experiment. In the past, hero-doctors injected themselves with horrific diseases in the name of science!

Sitting on the floor in tears, she shimmered with festive radiation. She looked awful: eyes bulging over her forehead, shirt collar dangling, hair sticking up like barbed wire, and the tip of her nose shuddering with sobs.

- It had to be done. Had to be -- period. I thought about it for a long time and realized that losing virginity is purely a technical problem.

At that point Lavrik tossed his book in the corner, got up, put on his coat, and walked right out without saying a word.

Later that evening we celebrated this momentous occasion in Lidochka's life, Pistol-Olga baked a cake. We invited old man Dürer, having agreed never to tell him exactly what we were celebrating. He sat among us, like woodpecker among oysters, diligently blowing into his saxophone until the neighbors ratted us to the cops. They were the same neighbors that daily caused ruckus on the staircase. And as soon as the cops left, we heard the eternal call:

- Drunk as a skunk again!

- You wretch!

- I wish they cut your balls off!

...

### **Three Feet in the Grave**

In 1983, somewhere in some faraway world, a company called ARPNET, changed the primary protocol from NCP to TCP/IP, which lead to the formation of modern Internet. The Kilauea volcano erupted on the island of Hawai'i. An Anti-Zionist Committee of Soviet Public (ACSP) was established in the USSR. American astronauts performed the first ever spacewalk. A Soviet spacecraft Soyuz T-8 was launched. Loans by The International Monetary Fund were increased. Apple released a personal computer. A Nazi criminal Klaus Barbie was arrested in Bolivia. In Geneva, talks were underway

about the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in Central Europe. The DNA standard was developed. Reagan called Russia “the evil empire.”

In Moscow there was a dry and sunny September weather. Dead clam reigned over boulevards, leaves smelled of gasoline and I overheard the grinding of angel wings.- Eh, listen, want to go with us to the village, to Peredelkino? We are meeting with a world-renowned literary figure already one foot in the grave. Then, we’ll go drink something.

In response, I blurted out something unintelligible and, from that minute, set out to stupidly rock back and forth in a chair. The house rocked. So did the whole street and all the houses while a turbine bubbled inside me:

- We are headed to a classic! We too will be standing one foot in the grave!

Just who that classic was didn’t interest me at all, I didn’t give a damn about any of those classics. Mainly, we were going to stand three feet in the grave: that is, me, the classic and my Tomato Sauce. And after that, if that classic started to bother us too much in that grave, we’d just throw him out and spend the rest of our happy life (death) together amid the coffins and bones!

We had to leave right away, do or die! That’s when the chair, upon which I’d been rocking so successfully, buckled. My nape gave off a whistle of departure. Neither concussion nor any other small matter, like a sudden death, mattered at all at that moment.

I tried on everything in my wardrobe. The mirror turned over in spots: neck—a rope, ribs sticking out through the coat. My God, since I showed up in Moscow, I turned into hell knows what! I ran outside in my, as I later realized, very “Sex Pistols” attire, fell



flat into a puddle, tipped over a trash bin and send an old woman spinning like a peg top.

But none of it mattered.

A crowd seethed at Belorusskiy Terminal, a crowd out of which suddenly popped out a sparkling cloud of tomato photons.

- It's good that you weren't late. Attagirl! I want to introduce you. Barbara-Cornstack.

Cornstack, wearing strictly cut boots, ruffled my hand with wetness. Bleached braids flowed down over the skimpy vest, lips – leeches. Nausea crept up to my throat.

-Varya also writes verse.

-Macropoetical! – she clarified.

Ms. Cornstack stepped ahead of me. We shuffled after her.

“Such youth are born, live and die in vain!” – everything about her was vulgar. From each Tomato glance in her direction, I experience the feeling of boiling and cold. My head was starting to spin.

I couldn't squeeze out a sound.

- P-poetry – is the damnation of h-humanity! – I finally exhaled at some intersection. There was in my words an undeniable challenge of a small, but powerful firebrand creature. The woman shrugged her shoulders, as if to shake off dusticles. For a second, Tomatik closed his eyes. Whatever was happening under his eyelids was unknown. He coughed and sharply broke into laughter.

At the Kievsky Rail Station, Plain was already waiting for us. He began to smother my hand. Humpback materialized from the crowd with his camera and tripod, along with two others, both known as Faceless, and a certain someone called Scrawny.

Conrstack the cunt peeled off, winking in farewell to my bridegroom, and a shaky peace once was again restored between us.

While we were all rocking on the train, poets discussed German beer. Each time HE entered the discussion, I wanted to sob.

-You are still here? – Plain would ask me from time to time.

-To drop her or stab her to death, that is question – joked Humpback.

Small villages stretched outside the window, the train knocked its aching joints. Humpback feverishly talked about how he was able to push one of his articles into a magazine. Scrawny sat moping next to me with his droopy (like ink) mustache. Whenever Humpback went silent amid the barely discernable knocking of wheels, Scrawny complained about life.

The whole way, I looked out the window at the dusty way stations, warehouses and little woods, while inside my head thumped words spoken a long time ago, in a different life: “Sweet little Elephantina, you are a good, smart little princess. As a poet, you are developing quite well, I expect miracles from you.”

-Doctor, doctor, tell me, what’s happening to me? Why doesn’t the Vegetable Tomato love me? Why is everything so awful?

-We should run some tests. Check the blood. – frowns the doctor.

-Well? What is it? Will I live?

-You’ll live, alright, but the first one hundred years will be terrible.

-Then what’s wrong with me? Have you been able to reach a diagnosis?

-Everything points to YTH.

-What?

-YOUTH. It's a very serious condition with terrible complications and side effects. Unfortunately, it leaves wounds for the rest of life. Sometimes, the consequences are lethal.

The second half of the journey was way more interesting. The talk was all about the classic. Turned out, he was a hundred and fifty years old. In distant youth, he was an SR, jumped from trains, was friends with Mayakovskiy, charged barricades, lived abroad and wrote books which I was yet to read. They said that he returned to the USSR for some absolutely preposterous reason, that he was a shard of the avant-garde and a pillar of Russian Formalism.

Springtime reigned in Peredelkino as well! Every cow around here was a writer, every stray dog a stray writer. But above all, this village had a writers' cemetery. Rumor had it, that a small badger was often seen at the grave of B. Pasternak. Hence badgers were seen as the embodiments of souls of dead poets. They were spared and not killed.

Tomato also wanted a dacha at the Peredelkino cemetery and a little badger of his own upon the grave, he too wanted to mature, to assume the posture of a great poet. He also wanted a monument in place of Pushkin's. This trip was to contribute to all this. Such visits to historic figures were known as "succession."

Finally, we ended up in front of a large wooden home. Tomato went ahead to conduct negotiations, to infiltrate it, and came back out very much content:

- He is there!

Soon, the door stirred, *littérateurs* became alert and the nurse rolled out a wheelchair to the veranda.

- That's it, it is HIM!

A quail egg in deepwater goggles emerged from under the blanket and Tomatik began to introduce us one by one.

- Behold the new Mandelshtam. – he introduced Plain and the classic stirred.

- And this, Viktor Borisovich, is the new Mayakovskiy, - meaning Humpback, - and here, the new Orpheus... (referring to Scrawny).

The thinnest otherworldly little paw appeared from underneath the blanket and shook their hands.

Then Tomatik nudged me toward the bedspread.

- And here is a young gift, Elephantina. That is to say, our new Akhmatova.

It would have been silly to get offended. At that moment, I forgot about lady Cornstack along with all the other resentments in the world. It was hilarious and fun, and the old man was terrific. He feebly shook his head. Two electrical charges shot from under the glasses, flashing with excitement of the past, and he beckoned me with his finger.

- Once upon a time, I adored girls. – a voice rustled in my ear.

In his eyes shone the abyss of a lifetime. From the bottom of that abyss came music and laughter, and I got hit in the nose with the scent of tobacco.

- Let's light up and smoke to all that holiness. – the voice of Humpback lowered itself into the other ear.

Then came the elderly ultrasound.

- Did he say something?

- Something important?

- Everyone stretched up anxiously while Tomatik leaned close to him.

- What did you say, Viktor Borisovich?

The classic's lips barely twitched.

- What did he tell you? – the poets queried intensely.

Tomatos started to whisper into each of their ears what the classic said.

Truth be told, I didn't care. But others – they obviously did.

- Now we are going to take a photograph for Mother-History!

Humpback rumbled with his tripod, got mixed up in its metal legs, fell down and instantly jumped back up to his feet. A stampede formed around the blanket, even though it seemed like there was plenty of space everywhere – forests, fields, lakes! Yet everyone was trying to creep up to the forefront.

-Viktor Borisovich has been squashed! The lens does not see the culprit! - cried Humpback, setting up the automatic shot.

He then ran back to us, shoved me aside and froze. There was a faint click. Only my nostril passed into history. However, the rest of the images peeled away from their biological carriers before my eyes and flew right into the world archive.

After the visit to the classic, everyone caused an awful raucous all over the train car, drank vodka, clinked glasses, hugged and kissed as though at a monkey wedding, and then somebody, suddenly breaking the jubilation, announced:

- Is it true that Shklovskiy said THAT?

- Yes, yes, he did say that!

At that point I also let myself squeak and asked what the classic said. And that's when even I was suddenly heard, even though I wasn't drinking vodka.

- His last words were...

A pause hung over us and, once again, I thought about how cute and witty Tomatik was.

- His testament to mankind were these words...

The train knocked peacefully, the car swayed. Everyone raised their glasses, which also swayed in the air.

- Thank you for coming! – the words suddenly thundered to our collective roar.

- He said to us: “Thank you for coming!”

- And this is what we will be telling our grandchildren!

- And great-grand children, and girlfriends!

- And waitresses, and cashiers!

- In other words, to all those dear to the heart!

Then they all hooted demonically, ran up and down the walls of the train car, poured vodka over each other and repeated the eternal phrase: - Thank you for coming, as in, for visiting the old man, - and said that even though he was one foot in the grave, he was still a man of iron will etc. And then some invalid came into the train car, demanded money, and Tomatnic, after turning his pockets inside out, gave him his last.

Many years since, I read “Zoo, or Letters Not About Love” and other different things and learned that Shklovsky was in truth an extraordinary person, and I completely reevaluated the phrase “Thank you for coming,” which at the time seemed to me trifling at best.