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Living Pictures

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THE FORGIVER

Mounds of snow kept growing until they grew into white chickens. One shook itself off and turned out to be a rather small drunk holding a plastic bag. Sticking out of the bag was a geranium.

The drunk walked straight up to the girl and stared into her face. This face, dripping wet, was made up like it had to be visible to nearsighted patrons in the gallery of an opera house: enormous eyebrows, enormous lips, drooping dog eyes exaggerated by greasy black shadows. "You warm enough? Waiting for your sweetheart, are you?" "Can I have some matches." "My wife kicked me out tonight. Quite a story, let me tell you." He belched and then whispered in a scary monotone, looking into nowhere: "Behold...

Behold: the hawk prepares his strength:
Now with beat of wounded wing,
He'll swoop down, soundless, on the field
To drink his fill of living blood..."

"Ha," she laughed, almost not surprised, "it's a real Greek chorus. May I have some matches? Would you please be so kind? Would you by any chance happen to have some?"

It was clear Father Frost would be moved only by excess politeness.

After three hours in the snow her matchbook had gone limp.

"Sorry, no, but take this flower."

Distracted, obedient, she grasped the bag filled with snow and walked off.

From the right, out of the bright, turbulent sky, one of Klodt's famous horses bore down on her, rearing its tensed body but already prepared to submit, malevolent.

II

While his latest sweet young thing was recovering herself, catching her breath, covered in a light sweat, the Professor, his forehead pressed against the windowpane, was trying hard to remember and then got it word for word (his exceptional memory!):

"Not far from the stage, blocking the entrance, stood a man.

Taller than average, with a noticeable stoop, he kept his arms crossed over his chest.

He was strangely, even unsuitably dressed for the period, which was 1913, right before the war: he wore an impeccably clean white wool sweater: a skier just back from the slopes, the impression enhanced by his wind-blown look and slightly curly, vaguely reddish hair; his eyes were bright and glassy, like a bird's.

People walked past him, even grazing him in the crush, but no one suspected they were walking past Blok himself.

A famous photograph of the poet had informed all Russia what he looked like – an overexposed photograph: black curls, sensitive mouth, half-closed peering black eyes, the very image of a demon in his high-collared velvet jacket – but the main thing was that this demon resembled a character from the opera!”

The Professor preferred to imagine Blok as the light-eyed, windblown, unrecognized changeling, and not as everyone expected him to look.

The Professor imagined himself as such a changeling; no one really knew him or his true voice, and their not-knowing was his mainstay and his consolation.

III

The melancholy – the languor – the charm of the archive: the sensation of working a brainteaser, a mosaic, as though all these voices could make a single voice and yield a single meaning, and you could surface from this fog in which there is no past, no future, only guilty anguish. “No one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten” – you can’t help anyone, and everyone is forgotten.

Does that then make me Charon?

A late-night ferry in Petersburg, a flock of rowdy foreign girls: “Can you take us?” “Can we have a ride?” “How drunk are you?” “Hey, come on” – cajoling, high-pitched chatter. We step onto the boat, and I notice near the captain’s seat a bulging magnum, more like a jug. It’s hard to do Charon’s job sober: the souls keep up their lament.

The archivist ferries souls from one folder to another, from the type of folder where the voice never will be heard to the type where it might be heard by someone, at least for awhile.

The reader herself becomes an archive so she can produce more readers, this is the physiology of it, you can’t stop reading.

Sometimes it seemed the only way to get things read was to copy them out like Gogol’s clerk, letter by letter, concentrating so hard your tongue sticks out: like a cat’s, or a boot’s. To trace the fading scrawls and restore them, thus carrying into the present the very act of across-over-writing.

Word by word, declensions conjugations vanishing like lard and sugar in November. Commas and dashes blanch and collapse, stop making sense, can’t breathe and melt away. Exclamation points were the first to die in blockade diaries, superfluous marks like those superfluous people, refugees without ration cards from Luga and Gatchina.

The main thing is to withstand time: time will do its best to crush you.

But the point of the whole exercise is to keep the other's time from permeating the time you carry inside yourself, for yourself.

IV

And now another voice shoves its way forward, rises to the top, arranges itself and begins to recite.

Katya Lazareva, six years old in 1941, grey-eyed severe quick to laugh.

She and her mother would play a rhyming game. Mama would go first:

There goes a bleary-eyed dystrophic,

His basket holds a human buttock.

Then Katya would finish like this:

The dystrophic's walking down the street.

See how swollen are his feet.

Or this:

The dystrophic reached the end of the wall:

He sways and thinks: now I'll surely fall.

And in the evenings they would play charades.

“First syllable: a poet with black curls, a sensitive mouth, half-open peering black eyes, the very image of a demon in his velvet jacket.

Second syllable: papa in his long nightshirt acts out a sinner whose demon-mama fries him in a pan.”

The complete word was represented this way: a sled with a bucket of water and jars for rationed kasha being dragged by dystrophics staggering from weakness. BLOK-HADES.

V

And another voice.

For his entire life the Italian Jew Primo Levi, with the zeal of a tactless noxious insect madman, wrote about his unfortunate experience.

A nonplussed world literary establishment kept awarding him prizes and titles, which at that point, thank god, was not hard to do. Every time he got a prize, for a half a year afterward he would digest it like a python and then disgorge another volume.

He could never write about anything else, or speak about anything else; he had dreams about it, went at his frail nondescript wife about it, and gave his interminably dying mother hysterics about it.

In his case proceeding from one book to the next meant magnifying the shot, refining the details:

*while being tortured the feeling is more “really, is this what it’s like”
now it stank more than during the two weeks of dysentery*

Like all people endowed by nature and history with this timbre, he could not angle himself to catch time’s racing current, so it pushed him out – and down the stairwell.

A nonplussed world literary establishment declared it an unfortunate event and accorded him another prize – for the speed and elegance of his fall, for liberating them all from his memories.

VI

When they liberated the camp, the first thing he threw himself on was books, and these were his books: textbooks on gynecology, a French-German dictionary, an anthology titled “Magical Animal Tales.”

When he started writing his own books, his best friend – also, by the way, one of those who returned – hurled at him a word warm like a gob of spit: forgiver!

In truth, Primo no longer wanted the death of those characters in his terrifying dreams, did not want revenge, did not want them led out and dragged to the scaffold.

He couldn’t not think about them, couldn’t not write about them, but he did not have the strength to desire their beautiful, rightful demise.

Tales about magical animals – foxes, kites, jackals and wolves.

VII

His fleshy aging hands furiously grabbed the doors of the elevator. Father did not let them close, as though the elevator were an enormous seashell or a sea monster biting onto Andromeda's succulent body full of tender bits of gristle and dragging her down down to the bottom.

Never one to resist his own impulses, or to remember them afterward, Father now had to shriek his absurd condemnation through these doors, and that meant she had to hear and absorb what is best never incarnated in words.

Now he would say it, and her life would burn down, turn to rot and go hollow.

And this hollow rotted disinhabited space would fill up with depression.

When at last he had fully exhaled his lines, she turned into sight itself; she looked into the face she knew as well as she knew her own, the face that was, in fact, her own:

Enormous brows, enormous lips, dog eyes, perfect asymmetry – an overexposed photograph.

He was the secret everyone knew, a secret that interested no one but her and which lit up her shame from within.

“Secret”: what you carry inside yourself.

In this sense she was now the secret of the elevator in the hotel “October,” and the raging old man was attempting to pry her out of this cherished position. A secret is what you carry inside yourself unseen, and all the while it is producing you, transforming you into something monstrous. A secret is radioactive.

VIII

The Professor always remembered these lines:

She hoists her spider-zeppelins
They float above the citizens
They hang their heads above the land
And nets cast by the spider heads
Trace strange outlines overhead

How he loved his lullabies; in that dark fatal time they would swaddle/cuddle him like a baby (“spiders” were civil defense balloons) so he wouldn't up and lay hands on himself (and what do you know about suicide during the blockade? Thousands and thousands and thousands).

Those lullabies lived in him always, like a cancerous lump, like a fruit, like the pit of a fruit.

They would crowd around and press in on him, whether he was shaving, or lying lying to his wife as he allowed a fresh new diligent student to touch him there, and her dry pink scalp surged below like a clump of seaweed.

And the more his little songs filled and exhausted him, the more he understood he would never spit them out.

The thought that his poems might crawl out of him and into someone's sight embarrassed and repelled him.

That someone would get the idea they needed to understand or not understand them.

That someone would discern in them not their grotesque music nor their unclassifiable utterly individual forms and fossils, their crags and crevasses, but only the crude fact stolen from the times they lived through, which were frozen inside them.

The only thing people would see would be the misprint, the mistake, the oddness, the wrong thing altogether.

"I have been writing poetry all my life. The volume titled *Poems* came out in Switzerland under the pseudonym Ignaty Karamov. However, this edition, published without my supervision, abounds in crude errors and misprints. Suffice it to say that on p. 23 two stanzas of the poem 'Insult' were reversed." The stanzas were reversed, the insult floods his vision, and through all of November and December, with its forked dragon tongue, it licks at the tender commas, the scrupulous exclamation marks, so that by January there's nothing left, just blinding white.

IX

And wasn't that the injury-insult and bag-and-baggage of that winter, that it still required burying: how cheerily the trucks then ran along February's streets, collecting January's little bundles.

They called them "flower pickers" (corpses were wrapped in brightly colored sheets to make them visible against the snow).

The corpses were called "snowdrops" (for good reason – in anticipation of April's marvels).

A war correspondent there on a three-day assignment, fueling his writerly and quasi-ethnographic labors with American spam, dedicated a special section of his notebook to the topic: SIEGE JOKES.

And it was true – that winter they looked like they were laughing. They bared their scurvy, bleeding gums; smiling, dark-faced like monkeys, they – the dystrophics – made their way through the city.

The ones who survived put on weight far too quickly, grew bloated, introverted, and later, whenever they would meet, they were silent as conspirators.

To speak or even think about that winter was forbidden.

That winter was their shared secret, as though they had performed an unnatural act.

X

“Ignaty Karamov” – what could be sweeter than to invent yourself from scratch, the whole of you?

To attach to yourself new hands, ears, eyeballs.

For instance: cushiony white burning feminine strong papery hands, moist round eyes.

Above all a completely new soul with no cracks, no caries – just virginal blue enamel.

Ignaty Karamov does not know the crushing unceasing anguish of Ivan Ilyich doomed to keep not dying aaaaaaaah

But inside him the memory of what he was then, the shame of it, is always stinging, throbbing
you lick the bowl clean weep scan the table howl lick again

Like all connoisseurs of pleasure, the professor was craven and fragile. His pleasure was always full of little sounds – he had his own distinctive *kleine musik*. Sighs, moans, whispers, feigned pleas and rebukes, unheard-of diminutive suffixes, shudders, astonished discoveries – all bubbles on the surface of his strange core motion, so easily thrown off.

He had a lizard neck and very languid, very dark eyes that went completely dead when he was coming and when he was leaving, trading one girl for another just as faceless and tender-mouthed.

Even his pupils rolled back.

To the poor anemic princesses who hovered around him, his sweet young things, he seemed at first to be a kind old man, but once they had attached themselves to him, once they had succumbed to his viscous icy fascination, they writhed and struggled, surrendering their vital warmth.

As he swallowed he would whisper – the swallower to the swallowed:

“Behold: the hawk prepares his strength:/ Now with beat of wounded wing,/ He’ll swoop down, soundless, on the wood/ To drink his fill of living blood...”

Back then they would move on top of him like sea stars anemones like tender seaweed in the tide back and forth back and forth

Then arthritis plated his bones like ice, and the movement of sea stars or any other kind of sea creature got more difficult.

XI

Those not privy to his secret were amazed by his success with young women.

After all, he moved like the tin woodman at the beginning of the story, and his hands were starting to look like a falcon's claws.

He was as compelling as he was ludicrous: whether he was sharing with colleagues his shiny, newly acquired English, or placing on the table, like trumps from a crudely marked deck, the names of the long extinguished literary stars he had occasion to witness, all of them swallowed up by various abysses.

From the surface from the outside it was impossible to feel the magnetism of what was hidden inside him exerting its pull: inside was a Void, filled with time, time's container.

XII

To spit them out (the poems) would be to forgive.

To expel and forgive – would be like liberation.

But whom should he forgive? The frozen city? The frozen century? The self frozen inside that century?

Forgiving took a whole lifetime.

Life became a suitcase magically shrunk by rushed packing: Other than the work of forgiving, nothing could fit into it. Forgiving somehow got strangely broken, twisted, and became almost a yearning for the past.

I never could understand it – here you have a professor with a crushed laurel wreath around his bald spot, affected, cowardly, someone everyone made fun of, even his silly girls would smile whenever he...

And the whole time this ice was living inside him:

Siege had cleaned our bowls,

And emptied out our souls,

Our grannies and our daughters

Are curled up into doughballs.

Forgiving is just that, forgiving, and it doesn't matter what episode you are unable to forgive, whether it is ordinary, private and colorless or on the scale of Bluebeard.

The mechanism is the same, and it is broken.

XIII

Can you spit out that blustery white night twenty years ago, when you definitively established that the person from whose head you were hatched, damp and pitiful, was not an interested party to your life?

That your past – which is to say, your future – puked you from its mouth?

That by roaring, vomiting, into the elevator the words from the aria IL PADRE TUO! – he freed himself from them, from the name PADRE PADRE.

He'd given some thought to the freedom they sing all those songs about.

He doesn't show up for a meeting requested by his own daughter, who had just lost her stepfather.

But as a consolation prize, divine providence sent down upon Nevsky Prospect a prompter-angel-geranophile – so you wouldn't do something stupid.

The waters of the Fontanka in winter are welcoming.

The work of forgiving crowded out love satisfaction recognition of the problem it crowded out language rather it consisted in the constant production of your own exclusive language

The person engaged in the work of forgiving is monoglot.

XIV

“Memoirs of life in Leningrad during the siege, however paradoxically, have an aura of enchantment,” wrote the engineer-optician, an observant disciplined person probably not inclined to self-deceiving fantasies.

On the same page of his diary, lower down, there is a detached account of the death of a girl, a neighbor, who was fired from her job in the fall of 1941 (the city was reserving ration cards for workers), and who begged for food up until the end, in vain.

So what was this enchantment? A kind of madness?

Spiritual “enchantment” (from “incantation”, “chant”) is the highest and most subtle way to flatter, that is, to deceive a person. In Russian Orthodoxy, it is defined as “the perversion of man's nature by the lie.” A state of enchantment is present in the person who believes he has attained a high level of spiritual perfection up to and including personal sainthood. This state may be accompanied by the conviction that he is communing with angels or saints, that he sees visions and even that he is capable of performing miracles. A person who has fallen into this state may be visited by “angels” or “saints,” who, in actual fact, are demons feigning to be angels and saints. Moreover, the person in a

state of spiritual enchantment may indeed have visions, but these are concocted by demons or are simply run-of-the-mill hallucinations. The spiritually enchanted person readily takes lies – lies instigated by the devil (the evil spirit) – for truth.

To the forgiver, “enchantment” is the power of the old abyss, the catastrophe, the darkness to rule her life. In Russian there is no word for “survivor” – the one who survived, who came back.

I am trying here to invent a word, to portray-convey such a creature, and more importantly, the process-means of living daily with the memory of her experience.

The forgiver struggles to shove words into the blackness, like shoving wads of paper into a wet boot.

The more words you can cram in there, into the dark, the gloom, the weaker the enchantment.

But these words go inside and not out, with words you feed the monster.

The forgiver-fanatic.

She takes her intricate fragile dreamlike abjection and turns it into a pamphlet

How do you pick out a forgiver in a crowd?

A forgiver neatens graves.

But graves are chancy things – some people never get the privilege, while others, even in the grave – what better opportunity for spiritual growth.

There’s a Po-Po for you – Edgar Allen.

Maximov – Zaltsman – Gor – Voltman – Spasskaya – Krandievskaya-Tolstaya – Gnedich...

How many more of them were there, people who survived, or somewhat survived, inside whom pulsed the shameful enchanting black lymph of secret poems.

From one perspective, it’s not a big thing: a person has a whole life a whole life before after besides that little notebook, the shelf of publications, the four wives, the darting sparkling shoal of traitor-acolytes (*school of fish*), the dacha!

Even so, it must be noted that for your whole life you will know – and death agrees: There never was anything but that notebook.

That notebook is your dried sediment, the only thing left of you – your forgiveness.

XV

I’ll never have to say this to your face, so I’ll say it this way.

Like I spoke to you on the phone once a year on February 4, when a broad deep impatient hearty voice would ask, how are things Po-Po-Po-lia? (As a rule he doesn’t stammer, but occasionally he stammered.)

What kind of nickname is that? There is no such nickname.

And with no interest whatsoever in how I answered, because a poem had started humming – that didn't surprise me, either. Anything can happen in this world! There are Father Frosts Yury Gagarins there are BrezhnevLenins (until age three I thought they were one person)

And then that voice – like it was coming from Cocteau's scarlet flower.

The voice, just the voice. So I'm telling you, Voice, I'm sorry all this is true, I'm sorry you did not have the imagination to come see me.

But that bright raw juicy twisting chunk of meat in the form of which once upon a time your indifference lived inside me is starting to turn grey like a Petersburg morning settles and fades

Soon I will forgive you

BROTHERS AND THE BROTHER DRUSKIN
A Tale of Aggravation

M. S. Are you asleep?
Ia. S. Are you asleep?

Their temperaments didn't go together

Being brothers, I suppose, means having identical memories you can't share with anyone else. Nobody wants to share them, and nobody can. Mikhail and Yakov always remembered the same thing: a redheaded hot-tempered quick-witted fragile woman – their mother, a quite musical person, always whistling, humming or making strange sounds. “A barbaric organ,” their father would joke, loving her with the kind of love from which there is no exit. After she died (damaging the brothers to differing degrees of intensity, meaning that for the one it was an earthquake of, say, a 4 on the Richter scale – cracks in the wall, broken glass, dust – while for the other it was an 8), he turned to rubble. I'm writing this in my rented apartment in San Francisco, where there's a table explaining the Richter scale pinned above the garbage can.

What were they if not converging arteries of memory.

In their memory it's the beginning of summer. Dacha life: They would catch pollywogs and keep them in jars, and lizards, and crickets and frogs. They would hold the frogs in their palms and stroke their bellies, ballooning from terror; we weren't afraid of toads, though people said they gave you warts.

A dim humid dacha night: They lie in their damp grey room and exhaustedly stare at each other like two malevolent owls. One has eyes that are green like gooseberries, the other's are brown like cherries. We've looked at the very same things for so long, we can't distinguish between the things themselves and our own words about those things: we told each other the same stories thousands of times.

The older brother gets up, goes to the table improvised from delivery boxes and starts to write. “Hey, what are you doing writing,” the younger one sleepily grunts (capricious little prince). His eyelids fall together, and the first and brightest clearest sweetest dream begins – the wallpaper pattern, tangled bouquets, withered bunches of leaves...

“I'm writing whatever I feel like.” And the older one writes: dark depart daughter don't fret wed don't regret.

Aggravation is acknowledgment, it's the memory of shared fits of laughter. Aggravation is a kind of bonding. But it's also always a desire to get up, get out, run away.

To continue: the one was a dandy, the other, an ascetic. The one a voluptuary and a gourmand, the other saintly and celibate, and on it goes: smooth-talker and stammerer, pedant and daydreamer, life-of-the-party and wallflower, authority on Bach and authority on Bach. Brother and brother.

The younger brother Mikhail loved watching steamboats on the Neva (especially as they were leaving or approaching the dock), loved ballerinas (their icy polished extremities and mini-faces of royalty from a deck of cards), loved walking home on Nevsky Prospect at 4 in the morning (in general, he was fond of darkness), loved the smell of sweat from the hippodrome (the distinct smells of human and animal), loved the pause his teacher always took before dropping some unbelievable vulgarity and then, by means of a punning, macaronic alchemy, magnifying it kaleidoscopically in the twenty-six dialects at his disposal. (Twenty-six? Are you *serious*?). The younger brother loved when his name appeared above or below an article or review in a volume or a journal (his heart would give a light, satisfied knock), loved to turn on the radio and listen to lies and to know they were lies, and to know that the lies themselves knew he recognized them, and continued to listen.

The older brother Yakov loved when a hangnail came off, or an eyelash-midge fell into his eye, or a filling came out – these were reliable signs that he existed, otherwise he wasn't entirely sure he did. All the humiliating requirements of existence – losing keys, knocking a lens out of your glasses, forgetting your briefcase and going back to get it (and doing this four times in a row) – seemed to him a legitimate penalty, a reassuring punishment for *something*, though it wasn't clear what.

The older one also loved to extremes his grotesque garrulous wizard-friends – arrogant, mannered, vicious and completely unaware of him, aware of him only when he was making his music.

When he sank his fingers into the harmonium, these friends would drop their performance and just melt – like they would in the presence of a beauty softening her fingers in warm rich milk.

Once a girl with a distracted aristocratic face said, “I think Yashka plays the piano better than Misha.” “True,” her companion said, “a lot better.”

But the main reason they parted for good and lost all trace of each other was that Mikhail and Yasha loved the times in completely different ways.

Mikhail liked experiencing himself as something like a pimp for the era (pockmarked, with a gold-capped tooth and gleaming different-colored eyes) – he knew how repulsive it was, the era, but he also saw how entertaining it was, this era that belonged to him, and he expected it to drop rewards at his feet like a hunting dog. He was canny and cynical, at once extremely cowardly and extremely brave. He expected success from his era, expected victory in battle, wanted to get as “muuuuch” as possible. That extra Petersburg flourish.

Yakov would be appalled by the very suggestion that the era had any non-abstract nature. It came down to an obvious, painful distinction: past present future. They did not touch, and he was the one charged with ensuring they never touched.

When Yakov Druskin writes in his diary about the Leningrad siege, he writes as a perplexed, hapless scholar who hasn't quite realized he's writing about deadly time – as though the diarist were observing it from far away, from above, from outside. Or maybe the diarist can't actually see – maybe he's gone blind?

Yes, that's probably how it all started, with their "time difference," and then each had to calculate how much interior space to assign to God. Yakov gave *almost* the entire space, and Mikhail "resettled" God (he liked to salt his speech with *their* words) into Bach's room – close, but not too close for comfort. Mikhail just didn't let God into his own room. (Squeamishness? Selfishness? Shame?)

Simply put: Were they the similar?

They weren't at all the similar!

The one wore a bowtie and silver hat. He would suck the traces of tar from his cigarette-holder and speak in a moderate bass: that is, his voice was just deep enough to induce a ballerina to sink into it like it was the Neva at its shallowest, four meters from shore, and to look around at him over her bony tanned shoulder – sand-filled curly head you are no goddess you are just a Leningrad *piece of ass* he shouted at her she gave it back to him, laughing, and when another turned up in her place, he pasted the image of the previous one onto his heart like you paste a dot of gauze on a pimple sliced while shaving.

He would report to Solertinsky on the changing of the ballerinas; Solertinsky would throw open his window, laughing, and lean out to see the new one.

Such was the state of his healthy round heart and his big clean lungs that it became clear he would never die (he died suddenly and horrifically before age fifty, you can hear the howl of protest in Shostakovich's telegram). For the time being, Mikhail looked at Shostakovich with tears of appreciation and envy.

The other brother sniffed ether to help prop up his broken-down existence until he became a fifth-grade teacher in the boondocks; he'd completed three degrees in night school – philosophy, mathematics, pounding the keyboard – and could master just about anything.

His voice was weak and papery, he chirped when he laughed – and, yes, his fingers were long, as though someone had loosened a glove, letting the clasp dangle sadly, anxiously.

So were they similar, or not? (Their mother would carefully lay their glossy photos out on the table, like a game of patience.) Watch them smile at each other – light mud-colored eyes gaze into red-

brown eyes: a grimace, the eyelids twitch, the mouth twists to one side. One eye is narrower than the other: the asymmetry of resemblance. From the side, you'd think you're seeing an actor rehearse in front of a mirror.

Are they rehearsing themselves or each other? We look hard, trying to perceive how one of the faces becomes a version of the other, an extreme version of *his own* face's experience.

Yakov, looking like an angel-orangutan.

Mikhail, looking like a person, an extraordinary fruit dripping juice, but then the wormhole closed up, and a drop of sap congealed there.

Face Down

Once Kharms said to Yakov while they were out on a walk, "You know, there's no way around it, your parents are going to die someday."

Yakov's eyes bulged out even more than usual, he made a sound like "ehhhh", shuffled his feet and disappeared behind the fence on Nadezhensky Street.

Kharm's made a face like he was feeling dizzy.

He threw his head back, opened his eyes as wide as possible and started watching the sky.

His eyes were the kind of blue you find only when you open a fresh tube of light blue watercolor paint made by the factory "Leningrad."

"The coffin carrying the remains was transferred to the city in an open truck. The whole way his brother lay on the coffin, face down. I was there holding him."

The brother writes the brother. The brother writes love. He tries to call back from the void a being whom he spent most of his life not understanding. Mikhail struggled for order, *comme il faut*, brilliance, acclaim, possessions, meaning.

Yakov strove for renunciation, disappearance, oblivion.

One of them wanted to live, the other wanted to not want to live.

The math teacher writes figures on the board – his fingers are dry from chalk.

His teaching duty is one step on the ascending path to invisibility.

There he will be saved, while everyone else, the visible ones, will expire in flames, filth and ice.

It was the phrase "face down" that sparked my comforting and painful (in the sense that there is a kind of pain that arrives just in time) desire to think about him – about Yakov Druskin, our champion and star student, our saint and our lamb, who saved and readied our paradise and bestiary for us –

“Yasha Druskin lived with his mother, who stooped a bit.

She put a bowl of soup in front of him and said: ‘This is for you. It’s the last bowl.

He said: ‘No, mama. Give it to Marina. Let her eat.’

His mother hesitated...”

Fifty-five years later, taking a drag on her cigarette, the Venezuelan exile Marina Durnovo added that the soup they gave her was made from dog meat, but how it happened that she ended up giving Danny’s manuscripts to Druskin, she could not remember.

Yakov, you surrounded yourself with losers, people with heavy faces expelled from the times like children expelled from school.

Brother, did I know you?

The younger brother looks at the older before they leave the apartment – the ritual of packing up and leaving behind, excruciating and prolonged as a toothache.

Ok, let’s just go.

(Then I would leave)

Blindly, hopelessly and forever devoted to the great German composer Johann Sebastian Bach, the brothers, when they grew older, couldn’t stand each other’s playing.

“I never heard him play the piano after his graduation concert at the conservatory: he wouldn’t play around me. When we were studying Bach together, I would sit at the piano and he would sometimes pick out the vocal line, but we couldn’t play duets – our temperaments didn’t go together. He went about forty years without a piano. At first he would come to my place to play (then I would leave).

Brother, did I know you?

I would leave the room: at the time, I thought I was leaving because I was being tactful.

Later I thought it was from jealousy, or annoyance. Now I sometimes think it was from something more serious – from indifference.

Mikhail, pursued by his brother’s chords, that is, Bach’s chords in his brother’s interpretation and understanding (non-understanding!), which he disagreed with, would run down the stairs and out into the sun-blazed city. Petersburg’s fog and gloom were invented by degenerate literary types, he thought to himself – anyone who’s seen Smolny Cathedral in the April sun wouldn’t dare write such drek. Mikhail took off, light and empty; Bach’s chords, his own and not his brother’s, filled him to bursting and drove him on. He ran through the city, getting as far from that place/moment/action

where the person who was closest, most intimately known, most like him in the world, was professing something alien to him.

The prelude was alive in him like a fetus growing in a pregnant woman, twitching and smiling – and to hold it exactly like that, the younger brother vowed never to allow himself to hear his older brother's playing: tempestuous and instinctive. Mikhail ran all the way to Liteinyi Avenue and stopped to catch his breath, his mouth dry and salty.

REAPER OF LEAVES

For Mark Lipovetsky, with gratitude for lessons in loving Soviet literature

Where will the starlings make their nests, the ones without a nesting box?

I want to see all the way through him, as though he were a frozen January frog or a newborn eel, and reacquaint us with him, though we'll hardly welcome the renewed acquaintance. I mean to peer inside that machinery of word-production, the machinery which goes by the name "Bianci," and glimpse what has never been seen before. Influenced, perhaps, by his belief that hidden, invisible life is always more enthralling, more impressive, more elaborate than what submits to the indifferent eye or hasty conclusion, I find it comforting to think that nature is not what we imagine—nature not in the lofty sense of the great and lofty poet but in the plain sense of the poet who never developed, the clumsy poet.

It turns out that while we're floundering in snow and finding ice everywhere, underneath, far under, spring not only has quickened but is gathering-growing in earnest. Down in the burrows, in darkness and stench, a new harvest's offspring are crawling, water is pooling, dead plants begin to stir and roots spread to clutch at a new spring.

But where do we look for him, this observer of nature? And how will we recognize him when we meet him? The man who is my subject today did everything he could to cover his tracks, to draw predators and hunters away from his lair—both those who surrounded him back then and those who came later. The first predators and hunters were the kind who by means of flattery, cajoling, torture and forceful personal example pressured and seduced suppliers of words to assimilate, to change their nature for the sake of the things of this world—publishing and publicity, material comfort and a peaceful corner. Although the corners these lower-echelon wordsmiths got were fairly dank, the ceiling dripping into a saucer, drops

splashing onto the cat's nose—he fastidiously shaking them off his whiskers, twitching his ears.

Whereas today's predators and hunters—from afar—are we, his readers, vigilant dividers of the wheat from the chaff (the hawk's pursuit, from up high) trying to consign to oblivion, to thoroughly douse in Lethe's sterile, uncreative solution, to judge and separate out the second-rate, the third-rate, the writers hopelessly trying to light a fire under the word. But the task of those writers was simply to stay alive and, if they succeeded, to preserve some small part of their real selves. Whatever that mirage meant to them—"realness"—this real part was hidden in a desk drawer, pickled in alcohol or—and this was the most effective approach—openly displayed at the hunting grounds to deflect the interest of hounds and predators by its very availability, as though this real part were "carrion":

One of our forest correspondents reports from the Tver region: yesterday while digging he turned up, along with the dirt, some kind of beast. Its front paws have claws, on its back are some kind of knobs instead of wings, its body is covered with dark-yellow hairs like thick, short fur. It looks like both a wasp and a mole—insect or beast, what is it? The editorial view: It is a remarkable insect that looks like a beast called a mole-cricket. Whoever wants to find a mole-cricket should pour water on the ground and cover the area with pieces of bark. At night mole-crickets will seek out the damp spot, the dirt under the bark. That's where we'll find him.

Let's take a peek at the dirt under the bark—and see what there is to see.

Dueling Storytellers

Vitaly Valentinovich Bianci lived for work and drink, and toward the end of his life his voice reached its zenith, became almost a squeak, a mosquito falsetto, while he himself grew heavy and legless, but still he could not stop himself and kept tapping out his tracks on the typewriter with one finger. Contemporaries recall his Bunyanesque strength along with Bunyanesque slowness, the fading aristocratic charm of his gradually swelling face, looking like he'd been attacked by midges. Of these contemporaries, the one most inclined to observation wrote,

Bianci grabbed me by the legs, turned me upside down and held me like that, laughing, not letting me go. Such an insult! It took me a long time to get over it. I wasn't physically weak but this I couldn't handle. Humiliating! The worst thing was his strength seemed rough and way beyond mine. A useless feeling that wasn't quite envy and wasn't quite jealousy consumed me. Eventually it passed. Bianci was simple and decent. But the devil had done his work . . .

But the devil had done his work.

The ethnographer of *belles lettres* repeats the phrase several times; it seems she likes it, it helps her diagnose the decline of her subject—a strong and benign creature warped by his own interpretation of affairs. Enter Evgeny Lvovich Shvarts, a dwarflike man with a head the shape of an egg, hands shaking from Parkinson's (sometimes he would leave the telegraph office with nothing accomplished, his hands shook so much that tracing a caterpillar of letters with the capricious rusty nib turned out to be impossible, with the line of people behind him simmering, irritable-resentful). A dwarf who utterly lacked the gift of forgiving and forgetting, of looking the other way, probably the most perceptive and

fastidious member of a generation covered in spiritual sores. (And that's a sanitary way of putting it. When I try to imagine that generation's spiritual condition taking visible-palpable form—oh, what it would look like! . . .) Shvarts was venomous (from a monstrous capacity to feel wounded) and recklessly brave—he was one of those rare “valued persons” who refused in the fall of 1941 to be airlifted from Dystrophy City (the name is one of Bianci's later witticisms). By the time winter arrived, they had to drag him out of there, psychotic, demented from hunger.

Photographs of him, and especially photographs of him in the company of women, stand out sharply in the general current of the time—the angular, mocking, delicate faces glow like seashells lit from within. Evgeny Shvarts was painfully large-spirited: in the “inventory” of his notebooks, he does not name the friends who made denunciations, scandalmongered, went into hysterics, blackened reputations. When you look at the minutes of official meetings where his friends acted the fool, attacking him as a talentless saboteur, and compare them to Shvarts's memoirs about these same people, you stop short in amazement—did he actually forgive them? Or did he cut off all feeling for them?

Like all the jokesters who in those golden years made careers rhyming, crowing, meowing and bleating for *The Siskin* and *The Hedgehog*, Shvarts was a libertine; he took his own and his companions' sins allegorically. Hence his choice of genre—after all, we're talking about fairy tales and fabulists. Hence also the refrain: the devil had done his work. Shvarts was interested—and following him, so are we—by the allegory of the human soul's duel with the devil of the times, the pitiful stratagems used by those who inhabited those times as they tried both to placate and to hide from the devil. Bianci, soon after his second stroke, said to Shvarts, “If you want to know what it's like when it hits you, just put on those glasses.” On the table was a pair of black glasses, the lenses made the world look dim. Black light enveloped the fabulist Bianci toward the end. The fabulist Shvarts witnessed and grimly confirmed this.

How to Translate White

Bianci's grandfather, an opera singer, had the last name Weiss. This gentleman, at his impresario's request, translated himself from German into Italian to go on tour in Italy—the sound, the tune, changed, but the color remained. The sound was now weightless, lofting upward like a bubble—a bubble floating over a white, white field with just the tracks of small, tired paws along the edge: Take a guess, children, who can it be?

A young boy, darting up and down, passes dioramas of mounted animals—under the silver hoof of an agitated, dead-eyed deer with flared nostrils (if they really shoot it up, does it make the taxidermist's job harder?) sprouts a dead mushroom. For some reason these little glass mushrooms are pinned all around the animals' legs—so we won't have any doubts, just recognize these forms of non-life with a guilty tenderness. Above the deer's head they nailed a woodpecker stuffed with shavings. Observe how the bird's eye knows no fear—it is open to the world and keenly focused.

The mounted animals were hideous, the aging Bianci recalls near the end of his story. “How can we bring them back to life?” old man Bianci asks in his child's voice. What you need are some good, strong words. “What you need is poetry”: that unwieldy, cardboard word he carried around all his life, to no avail.

Before he discovered ornithology, the young boy was driven on another sort of hunt—soccer. He played for the storied clubs Petrovsky, Neva, Unitas. He was the winner, incidentally, of the Saint Petersburg season trophy for 1913. The season trophy—in April the wind from the Neva fills with the scent of dun-colored, crumbling ice. Rostral beauties raise to the wind their buoyant, erect nipples.

Tall for his age, wearing gaiters, with a sweaty forehead and gritty, salty hair, the adolescent Bianci pursues the ball: his breathing grows sharp, with the occasional pleasurable

ache.

His father, a famous ornithologist, the very one after whom the young boy trotted along the large-windowed, empty halls of the museum, did not approve of soccer—he wanted to see in his son a replica of himself, naturally. His son obediently enrolled in the natural sciences section of the Department of Physics and Mathematics at Petrograd University, but he never finished, since things finished of their own accord.

Cold-blooded?

Almost a graduate, almost a poet, almost a scholar. “People touched by fire are sensitive, fragile.” Those touched by fire, Shvarts observed, not wanting to observe anything, and those abandoned on the ice.

Now what should/shall I do? Stop dead? Go quiet?

Encased in ice, shall I pretend to be ice? Take the form of the coming winter? Freeze over, like a frozen dream: in the white-pink night the river Fontanka flows like tomato juice from a broken jar into a puddle, when actually it’s your hands covered in blood. And I, who up to this moment have accompanied you at a delicately maintained distance and with respect-ful aloofness, bow down to lick those idiotic bloody smashed huge fingers. Fighting off drunken surprise, you sternly say, “That doesn’t give you the right to act familiar.”

Yes—I think I’ll pretend to be ice.

Bianci himself, by the way, writes magical (that is, good and strong and useful) words about turning to ice. He spits on the end of his stubby pencil and writes not poetry but the diary of a naturalist. The onset of autumn’s chill he depicts either as torture or as the act of love, there’s no distinguishing:

The winds—reapers of leaves—tear the last rags from the forest. Having accomplished its first task—undressing the forest—autumn sets about its second

task: making the water colder and colder. Fish crowd into deep crannies to winter where the water won't turn to ice. Cold blood freezes even on dry land. Insects, mice, spiders, centipedes hide themselves away. Snakes crawl into dry holes, wind around each other and go still. Frogs push into the mud, lizards hide under the last bark left on the tree stumps and enter a trance. Outside there are seven kinds of weather: it tosses, blows, shatters, blinds, howls, pours and sweeps down from the sky.

To become a motionless snake curling up against other motionless snakes, to hibernate—that is my task today. The leaf-reaping season is one you can survive, can overcome, only by metamorphosis: by changing your nature so you become part of the background, be it snow, dirt or night.

A Tunnel and a Certain Someone

How can you make out white against white? Bianci hoped he could see it, while hoping others couldn't see him. Now for perhaps his most terrifying story.

Mr. Fox and Mousie

Mousie-mouse, why is your nose so black?

I was digging in the dirt.

Why were you digging in the dirt?

I made myself a burrow.

Why did you make yourself a burrow?

To hide, Mr. Fox, from you!

Mousie-mouse, I'll keep watch at your door!

Oh, I've a soft bed in my burrow.

You'll have to eat—then out you'll sneak!

Oh, I've a big cupboard in my burrow.

Mousie-mouse, I'll dig up your burrow!

Oh, I'll run down a little tunnel—

And off he goes!

It's likely Bianci was arrested by organs of the Soviet secret police more often than most of his literary colleagues—a total of five (5) times. Five (5) times in a row he repeated the drill: the awful wait for the inevitable, the awful relief when the awful event itself begins, the humiliation, the hopelessness, the hope, the despair, the weeks and months of paralysis, the miracle.

A local historian who got access to the archives reports:

While digging around in the files of the former archive of the regional committee of the Soviet Communist Party, I came across an interesting document completely by accident—a summary of charges written up on February 23, 1925, by the Altai office of the State Political Directorate to bring to trial a group of Socialist Revolutionaries living in Barnaul and Biisk. (All of them had arrived “from Russia,” as they said back then.) It included several references to Vitaly Bianci. They are: “In November 1918, there arrived in Biisk one Belianin-Bianci Vitaly Valentinovich, an SR and writer for the SR newspaper *The People*, who

was active in the Committee on Education and who around that time, fearing Kolchak's reprisals, changed his real name from Bianci to Belianin. The said Belianin-Bianci, upon arriving in Biisk with his wife, Zinaida Alexandrovna Zakharovich, stayed at the apartment of local SR and member of the Constituent Assembly, Liubimov Nikolai Mikhailovich. It was through him that Belianin-Bianci began to make contact with the local SR organization . . . He entered the employ of the Biisk Agricultural Board as a clerk of the second class . . .”

In 1921 the Cheka in Biisk arrested him twice. In addition, he was imprisoned as a hostage for three weeks.

In September 1922 V. Bianci received word of pending arrest and, on the pretext of a business trip, left for Petrograd with his family.

At the end of 1925 Bianci was again arrested and sentenced to three years' exile in Uralsk for belonging to a nonexistent underground organization. In 1928 (thanks to constant petitioning by, among others, Gorky, who approached Cheka chief Genrikh Yagoda) he received permission to move to Novgorod, and then to Leningrad. In November 1932 came another arrest. After three and a half weeks he was released “for lack of evidence.” In March 1935 Bianci, as “the son of a non-hereditary nobleman, a former SR, an active participant in armed resistance to Soviet power,” was again arrested and sentenced to exile for five years in the Aktiubinsk region. It was only thanks to E. P. Peshkova's intervention that his sentence was commuted and Bianci was freed.

The bulk of his fairy tales are about the hunt and the chase, about deadly danger and struggle.

But what's most striking is his tone: not a trace of sentimentality, no sympathy for the

preyed-upon or the fallen. Each death, each act of cruelty, belongs to the natural order.

If you kill a bird with a metal ring on its leg, remove the ring and send it to a tagging center. If you catch a bird with a ring, write down the letters and numbers stamped on the ring. If not you but a hunter or birdcatcher you know kills or captures such a bird, tell him what he needs to do. No pity for anyone; the hunter is always justified in his desire to master and seize and sacrifice a life—and to turn it into a mounted specimen. Every victim gets his chance to escape, says Bianci, and it's a sorry fool who doesn't see it and grab it.

“A Gust of Wind”

At first all of these words and shadows of birds and fish, and the giant with the voice of a munchkin, were indistinct forms inside me, and when they first took hold, they looked like this (autumn had just begun, and in the Amherst dusk you could hear all around the moaning of owls arrived *en masse* from God knows where):

The massive-awesome Bacchus Bianci

Thrusts fat fingers into suspicious cracks in the

Frozen earth, and from there (from where)

He harvests miracle-solace-refuse-sense;

Tipsy sober timid bombastic, he knows each

Root-tangle, and he writes, he almost pounces.

The stilling forest thrusts the wind's damp shag

Down his throat—the black box of

Night sky on the verge of winter.

Ready for first frost are you now yourself?

Ready for first frost are you now an owl?

Ready for first frost are you now a widow?

Here the author dozes off, and the owls, too. The author dreams of the other author's poem:

The wind roared up the riverbank,

Drove waves upon the shore—

Its furious whistle gave a scare

To a red-throated loon.

It knocked the magpie from the grove,

Whirled and dropped into the waves—

There it took a giant gulp

And choked, and down it dove.

The thing he did best was tracking birds.

Notes of an Ornithologist

Why Vitaly Bianci went to Leningrad during the blockade, how he ended up there—

the explanations we have don't make sense. Either he went to bring food to his Leningrad friends, or he was trying to get food from his Leningrad friends (both versions astonish), or he went just to have a look, or to make an appearance, or to punish himself. When he returned, he lay down and did not get up.

That is what his diary entries show:

April 6: Stayed in bed.

April 7: Stayed in bed.

April 8: Stayed in bed.

Nevertheless, everything he had heard/seen he well described and well (meaning, up to the day of his death) concealed. I am prepared to state that among those who visited during the blockade, the naturalist-dilettante Bianci turned out to be the most well-qualified, perceptive and methodical: what was impossible to look at, he examined and categorized. Nevertheless, his notebooks—fully published now—have not, of course, found their reader.

They've winged past us like yet another repulsive salvo from 1941—one today's readers try to duck as frantically as their unfortunate predecessors tried to duck bombs on Leningrad's streets, so visible and familiar to the German pilot.

Bianci—an unsuccessful/unrealized scholar, but a scholar nonetheless—organized his impressions under phenomenological rubrics: blockade style, blockade humor, blockade consciousness, blockade smile, blockade language, blockade cityscape, blockade femininity, blockade Jews. This is to say that in two weeks he understood what we have yet to formulate for ourselves: that the blockade was a unique civilization with the characteristic features of all human societies.

This is how they smile here.

This is how they barter here.

This how they fear, and no longer fear.

This is how they joke here, and it is this subject—which is curious and handy for our script—which brings them together: Bianci quotes Shvarts as one of the best blockade humorists. Since we know that Shvarts left the city in December, we may conclude that his jokes lingered in the city into spring—they didn't melt (in general, nothing in that city melted).

Yes, here they meet—two utterly different fabulists of the Leningrad scene, two magic wizards and didacts. The one had a bear and a dragon, the other had fireflies, titmice, shrews—all metaphors for blockade life. The writers themselves were transformed by the era into clowning tall-tale-tellers forced to camouflage their brutal and piquant observations about human nature.

Shvarts the blockade comic eventually produced the most important book we have on the phenomenon of “Leningrad literature of the mid-Soviet period”—his “phone book” (variously, his “inventory”), a *Kunstkamera* of spiritual deformities and disasters. Among the era's victims is a cardiologist listed under the letter “D,” a man with hideously burned hands. His patient Shvarts, seeing those two pink, tender, shining hands, reflects: “During an experiment an oxygen tank exploded, the door was jammed, and he forced open the burning panels with his bare hands. They were so badly burned that he almost lost them. He was considered one of the best cardiologists in the city. He was beaten to death for reasons far removed from science, but whether there were parts of his soul as deformed as the skin on his hands—I could not discern.” That's precisely what he wanted to do—to discern, to see inside.

It turns out the blockade was the main event of Shvarts's life in Leningrad—though the whole time he meant, he prepared, to speak about the Terror, his main conscious task. He kept being swept toward the blockade winter that followed the Terror—he could not control himself, couldn't help speaking about it. For him that winter illuminated and explained everything and everyone, whereas the recent purges had made everything confused and unclear. Almost every topic, every figure, every character in his “phone book” reminds him of that winter, drags him back there. He remembers roofs, bombs, bomb shelters, the faces and conversations of his neighbors in the dark and, most of all, his failed intention to write about it, right then and there, in the wake of words just spoken—his failed play, in which he tried to render his strongest impression, the endless blockade night: “We descended to the bottom of the cage-like staircase and stood in a corner like a coven of witches, while the planes and their mechanical-animal whine would not relent, they circled and circled and with every pass dropped bombs. Then anti-aircraft fire—and when it hits its mark, there's a dry pop, and the smooth tin bird flaps its tin wings.” Only in this avian metaphor will their visions of the blockade coincide: Bianci calls his blockade notes “City Abandoned by Birds.” For him that's a euphemism, dialect for a curse, his “no” to hope.

Shvarts's notebook was a lamentation for his play that never quite appeared. But through the notebook's scattered, roughly stitched-together human plots the blockade emerges as the true home for the soul of the Leningrad intellectual who lived through the '30s. In other words, it was hell, the only vale where the coward-soul, slave-soul, traitor-soul, the soul in constant pain, never and nowhere not in pain, might abide—those Leningrad writer-survivors who, in front of the witnessing Shvarts, go out of their minds (then later, reluctantly, taking their time, come back into their minds), faint noiselessly as leaves on exiting the torture chamber of Party hearings, and continually hone their skill at slander. Shvarts buried, escorted off and lost one by one all his titans, his cherished enemies (nothing

matches the white heat of his elegiac and erotic hatred-passion for Oleinikov). All he saw around him now were Voevodins, Rysses and Azarovs and other small fry wiped out by the century: these characters were relieved to find themselves in the blockade—in what he called, narrowing his eyes, a *benign* calamity, the kind that kills you without implicating you.

Can we say that for Bianci, too, the blockade was a benign calamity?

Apparently there is a phenomenon called “precipitous birth”—the infant bursts into the world through a mother who has had no time to get accustomed to that degree of pain.

The precipitous blockade of someone who visits the city suddenly and briefly is the precipitous birth of knowledge. He sees everything—not accustomed to the situation, not fused with it, he does not experience the slow, daily disappearance of meaning and God. On the wings of an airplane (which he immediately compared to a bird, Bianci was incapable of doing otherwise), he is transported to a place of blank, universal desolation—until then, he had only heard of it from the pitiful, apologetic letters of his dying Leningrad friends.

Shvarts’s interest in the blockade was people, preferably the extras (the big stars for the most part nimbly made tracks to the east during the warm months of the year): children, old ladies, custodians, luckless local officials and spies, almost none of whom would live until spring.

But Bianci, hounded from childhood by the word “poetry,” is interested in metaphors, namely, hybrid monsters: birds and fish fused with planes, fireflies joined with phosphorous metal in the night sky. How do fragments of blockade existence camouflage themselves, what forms do they assume? Here the blockade becomes a natural phenomenon; here emerges a kind of *Naturphilosophie* of the blockade world. From the very start everything looks unnatural; the plane’s wings, unlike those of Bianci’s bluethroats and starlings, are rigid—and the plane isn’t even a bird but a fish, an *aerial fish*. Monstrous specimen!

All this he tries to discern in the blockade city—and can't find the direct words for (for which reason, most likely, he subsequently falls ill), so he reconstitutes it metaphorically. The dead city revives, acts like it's animate—like a museum diorama: *The city spreads out around us farther and farther. Slowly, as in a slow-motion film, slowly people wander. Not people: monkeys with noses. Especially the women: boneyfaces, caverns for cheeks—unbelievably sharp, elongated noses . . .*

As it was with that childhood diorama, it's impossible to make out what's dead and what's alive, what is a monkey with a nose and what a deformed blockade soul caricatured by dystrophy.

On returning from the dead city, he wrote down a terrible little poem; as often happened with him in moments of agitation, the words spilled out:

Unbearable: the cold like a wolf,

A growing list of deprivations,

A hammer going in my temples:

There people are dying, dying in vain!

Wagtails. The Language of Birds.

On returning from the dead city, he slept as long as he could, scribbled something in his secret diary and again took to walking deep into the forest and just standing there—his eyes sometimes open, sometimes shut, listening hard, sniffing, studying. The world Bianci inhabited is alien; his words are obscure and hence alluring, and they unsettle us even as they speak to us:

Bluethroats and brightly colored stonechats are appearing in the wet bushes, and golden wagtails in the swamps. Pink-chested fiscals (shrikes) are here, with fluffy collars of ruff feathers, and the landrail, the corncrake, the blue-green roller have returned from distant parts.

So tell me—what are all these creatures? What do we picture as we follow the phrase “the pink-breasted shrikes,” what sort of impossible, absurd marvel? It is perfectly obvious—perfect and obvious—that the author invented them all. Displayed before us is some other planet born from the imagination of a man who could not come up with a persuasive reason to inhabit his own.

Wagtails? What do you mean, wagtails? No, you’re wrong, Bianci insists, that’s us living on our planet, in our swamp—alien, blind, speechless, bereft.

We (meaning I) are not familiar with the bluethroat (bird of the thrush family, sparrow *genus*. Depending on classificatory approach, may, along with all varieties of nightingale, be ascribed to the family of flycatchers. In size somewhat smaller than the domestic sparrow. Body length about 15 cm. Weight of male is 15–23 grams, female 13–21 grams. Spine light brown or gray-brown, tail feathers reddish. Throat and crop blue with reddish spot in the center; the spot may also be white or bordered with white. The blue color below is edged first with black, then with red half-circles across the breast. Tail red with black sheen, middle pair of tail feathers light brown. Throat whitish, bordered by a brown half-circle. Bill black, legs black-brown.)

Whatever the throat and crop look like, when you descend into this prose, you descend into an invented, crafted world. The further you proceed into that crow-blue and green-azure language, the less you hear the waves striking University Embankment, and the farther all the hysteria-hypocrisy of the city—with its *literati* stinging one other and raising glasses of poison, and its ultra-literary sidewalks—fades into the distance. Bianci remains,

only Bianci, stepping into the slush of the frozen swamp, listening with his whole being— here you have the voices of birds, you have the voices of fish. That very same fairytale dunce who, scrambling to hide from the tsar, ran into a grove and suddenly understood the language of the forest. “I hope to create an explanatory dictionary of the language of local worlds.” A language not of this world! In periodic self-imposed exile in the village of Mikheevo in the Moshensky region, where he landed-hid during that first winter of the war, he does not stop collecting the magical words that protect him: a hidden, invisible language, a collection of real words—his article of faith.

A Happy Ending

Our forest correspondents cracked the ice at the bottom of a local pond and dug up the silt. In the silt there were a number of frogs who had gathered there in heaps for the winter. When they pulled them out, they looked like pure glass. Their bodies had grown extremely brittle. Their tiny legs would snap from the slightest, faintest touch, and when they did they made a light ringing sound. Our forest correspondents took several of the frogs home with them. They carefully warmed up the frozen juvenile frogs in their heated rooms. The frogs came to life bit by bit and began hopping across the floor.

And off they go!

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LIVING PICTURES

A Document-Fairytale

The Cast

Antonina/Totyia (37 years old)

Moisei (25 years old)

Anna Pavlovna, a curator at the Hermitage (70 years old)

SCENE ONE

LITTLE BUNDLES. NOVEMBER.

A table stands on a semi-dark stage. On the table two people try to arrange themselves, getting settled for the night. They are Moisei and Totya. Both are wrapped in dirty-white quilted bedcovers and whatever else comes to hand. Slowly the audience's eyes grow accustomed to the dim lighting, and it becomes apparent that the action takes place in one of the halls of the Hermitage. The floor is covered with broken glass and sand.

T: My darling, I'd just like to say... I'm fucking freezing!

Moisei and Totya flop around, trying to get closer, clumsily; their movement is reminiscent of sea lions on a beach.

M: How's that?

T: It's even colder...

M: Alright, now what?

T: *(quietly)* Now I'm afraid...

M: Say what? Totya! Totya! What did you say? *(Since Moisei is wrapped in a comforter and has several scarves and a knitted cap on his head, he can't hear very well. In general, their habit of calling each other's names, of calling out to one another, is important.)*

T: Goddammit, Musya, my sweet darling, I'm afraid! I'm A-FRAID!

M: Totya, don't shout, please... and don't curse. I don't like it. I love you – but I can't stand how you talk! And don't complain – you can't keep up good attitude like that... We agreed not to whine. And I thought you were never afraid. Remember when Irakly introduced us: “Moisei, may I introduce you to Totya, who has graced us with her presence – the most beautiful woman in Leningrad... And the most daring – she conquers mountains and hearts!”

T: He didn't say “the most shameless”?

M: That goes without saying.

T: *(playing it up)* “Virginal Moisei, may I introduce you to the conqueror of mountains, and of the most bulging crotches and armored zippers! Mount Elbruses of male vanity and lust! Compiler of the most intriguing sexual record in the city of Three Revolutions...”

M: Totya, don't be crude! I'll fine you... I'll make you pay... for each infraction – a kiss!

T: Well, of course, as many as you want – I was afraid you'd start demanding cigarettes or candy or something... my sweet little caramels... but a kiss – no problem, except every time I'll have to unwrap you ... and then rewrap you. So I'll be wrapping and rewrapping endlessly...

M: That's fine, I'm going to demand kisses! Otherwise we'll stop having feelings and start acting like animals! We're already becoming animals ... (*Excited/upset, he raises himself, loses his balance and tumbles/slides off the table.*)

T: Moisei!

A pause. Silence.

T: Musya... where are you? Where are you? Did you fall? Did you slide off? Are you hurt? I can't see you!

Moisei half-laughs and half-whimpers on the floor.

T: Moisei, are you ok? Where are you? (*Coughs.*)

M: Yes... I was just thinking, I slid off inside my cocoon and now I'm like our favorite mummy in the Egyptian gallery – the priest mummy! 1000 BC, in satisfactory condition.

T: You know, when I was younger people would visit that exhibit and call him “Fall-i-set.” I could never remember that word. At first, whenever I looked at him, I thought, why does he have that full lip, that salacious look – I always imagined he was laughing at me... when Misha was arrested and then released... and when Irakly was arrested and released... and when papa was arrested and released, and then arrested again... And now he's laughing at all of us... He's a mummy and we've all... become... like him... we'll become... (*She suddenly pauses hard.*)

M: Totya? Did you stop? Don't stop! I'm afraid when there's no sound... What is this, first she's quiet, then she's cursing...

T: “Fall-i-sets”... That's exactly what they call them now...

M: Call who? Where? What are you talking about?

T: I heard it from that, you know, our building manager... truly revolting face, I should say... unbelievably revolting! The sanitation workers call them candies, and mummies, and you know what else – get ready for this – flowers...they call them...snowdrops...

M: Flowers? Why flowers?

T: They get left... at hospitals... at entryways... under streetlights – in rags and blankets with loud colors, so you can find them... And the workers call them “flowers”... They say, “Time to pick the flowers....”

M: My god! But what do snowdrops have to do with it?

T: You have no imagination... When spring arrives: it all creeps out from under the snow, everything's visible... Though what spring? – it's been snowing since October.

M: It's amazing, Totya, these new expressions, like the siege had its own vocabulary...

T: Its own language, its own habits, its own values, its own laws...

M: Yes, and its own style!

Moisei finally manages to sit up under the comforter and for a long time tries to undo himself, to free himself, and we see that he's wrapped in whatever he could find: scarves, some sort of coat, a strange old-fashioned woman's cap; on his hands there's a muff, which he looks at fixedly, amazed...

M: Yes... if someone had said to me a year ago that I'd be sitting with my love, my own true love, wearing a lady's cap and muff... I'd be... I'd really be very surprised! Are you listening, sweetheart?! It wasn't often I went to a tryst in a muff and a bonnet.

T: Fact is, you didn't have many trysts to go to... Moisei, how did you even find it, that muff?

M: Totya, you're jealous... jealous of me? How perversely gratifying!

T: God no... jealous... no... I'm just thinking... about when I first heard the word "muff", how it first got into my head. Mama was reading us that story about the Snow Queen – me and Masha... You remember that book?

M: The yellow one, Ganzen's translation? Oh, I even remember how it smelled! Books smell so good...

T: (*declaiming in a "child's" loud voice*) Gerda and she got into the sleigh and raced across stumps and hillocks into a thicket of trees. The little thief was Gerda's height but much stronger, bigger in the shoulders and dark-skinned. Her eyes were completely black but somehow sad. She hugged Gerda and said:

"They won't kill you, as long as I don't get mad at you! You're a princess, right?"

"No!," Gerda answered, and explained what she had been through and that she loved Kay.

She looked at her very seriously, nodded her head and said, "They won't kill you even if I do get mad at you – but it would be better if I killed you right now!"

She wiped away Gerda's tears and then buried her hands in a beautiful, soft, warm muff.

M: And here I am hiding my skin and bones in this lovely muff... which is, by the way, totally moth-bitten... kind of disgusting.... But how do you remember that so well? How do you know it by heart?

T: Oh! That was my favorite game with Masha! We always acted out fairy-tales... and, of course... "The Snow Queen"... That was our favorite: we were always so scared of the beautiful dead girl. We would act it out – we called it living pictures from Anderson... *tableaux vivants*... We did it every evening... But I never knew who to play, I wanted to be every one of them: the little thief, Gerda, the Snow Queen. (*She tries to represent them as she names them.*) I understood them all, you know? I somehow thought when I was a girl that each of them was me, and I was all of them... and then Masha started to sing... she thought up a song... and was always singing the Queen's song. (*She sings the melody, but stumbles; Moisei tries to pick it up, but completely off-key.*)

M: No, Totya, the little thief is exactly who you are now... You're always cursing at me, losing your temper, any minute now you'll start a fight...

T: *(as though thinking aloud, speaking to herself)* I always used to wonder... the Snow Queen: Is she bad or good? Evil or benevolent? Will she kill him or save him? *(In an icy voice she performs the Snow Queen.)* I will no longer kiss you! Or I will kiss you to death!

M: Totya, come kiss me! Don't you know we're having a TRYST!.. We are having a rendez-vous, my love, nobody else is here, Totya. All those gloomy wraiths are down there in the bomb shelter...

T: Silly boy, what are we going to do at a rendez-vous like this?

M: I want to read to you from my diary, I want to smoke a cigarette with you, there are all kinds of things I want to do... if you can just help me... mmm... with the unwrapping...

T: Musya, we don't have any light, and then there's the eczema, the gingivitis, the bloody diarrhea... What kind of rendez-vous is this?

M: Well, we've got some oil-cake, some brown sugar and coffee grounds... And no one else is here, my dear Antonina Nikolaevna, we are alone at last! How nice – neither the living nor the dead!

T: Not much difference! And, Musya, please, don't take such a satisfied tone... It's not so clear what category we belong to...

M: Madame Tonya, you're wrong!

T. *(irritated and puzzled)* What's going on? Why are you getting formal on me?

M: I have a dear-Totya and a madame-Totya... You know, when I see you as a small, sweet angry child, then you're dear-Totya, and when you're forbidding and cold, then you're...

T: It's just the same, there's no difference... just the same now.

M: Tonya, you're wrong! We're alive, we're in the category of the living, and our ration cards are in the workers' category! We'll just hope those bastards won't dare fire us for using them... right now we are alive... and I don't see it, how can we possibly die?

T: Well, everyone around us is dying... And they used to be alive and talked just like you... Have you gone out into the city? Have you looked? Have you seen *them* laid out on the ice? Everywhere!

M: Stop! I see you, I hear you... I hear you breathing... I hear you walking! When I hear that, I know everything's still ahead of us! This is just the beginning...

T: *(damping his pathos)* Well, my breathing isn't so great: just listen... this stupid cold! Just listen. *(She takes a breath.)*

M: You breathe so beautifully, Totya... You breathe beautifully, better than anyone! Everything's just beginning, I know it!

T: That was before, when we were reading fortunes in the coffee grounds, Musya, and now we're eating the grounds... and consider it a privilege! Why is that? Because we don't dare read fortunes anymore... We don't dare think about the future...

M: (*proud, stubborn*) Everything's just beginning... I'm telling you!

T: For you everything's just beginning, but I'm thirty-seven years old... compared to me you're a child... my boy... the artist...

M: I'm not a boy, I'm a man! Will you take me as a husband, Tonechka? I'm a perfect match: he's a boy-artist, she's an art historian, a lady critic: I'll splash paint around, and you'll praise me, so my name won't disappear from the annals of history... (*in a flirtatious, capricious-pleading tone*) Antonina Nikolaevna, will you marry me?

T: You're no husband, you're a boy! Don't ask such silly questions, or I'll roll you back up!

Totya very slowly starts transforming/wrapping Moisei into a "cocoon," softly and hoarsely singing under her breath, as though she were lulling him to sleep.

SCENE TWO

PICTURE FRAMES. DECEMBER.

M: Who's there? Who's coming?

T: It's nice that no one's here, Moisei.. (*Dreamy, langorous*) You know what we should do now?

M: Mmm, yes?

T: Talk about Masha's soup...

M: But we have a rule not to talk about that! We can't talk about Masha's soup! That's not allowed, absolutely not, love! It's a good way to get depressed!

T: Mmmmm, *haricots verts* soup, with beans floating around in it, and little orange circles of fat, I just kept touching them with my spoon...

M: Fined! We agreed we wouldn't talk about food, only about afterward – I really want to talk about afterward, Totya! About when all this has passed... when it's over...

T: Musya, what are you saying, you don't understand – what "afterward"? This will never end!... I count every day but this will never end... Yesterday was day 100... I thought they might announce it on the radio, but they just go on about the same thing – victorious battles and the defenders' valor. Don't look here, look there!

M: Totya, everything passes – and this too will pass. I'll slap together a thousand amazing paintings for you, simple ones, scary ones, gorgeous ones, ugly ones... Whatever kind you like – and you'll like them all... You'll have a good laugh!

T: (*teasing*) You really think I'll like them all?

M: Well, that was probably dumb... But now and then you'll like one... you'll look at them with your icy blue eyes and speak in that icy cold tone! Your voice will tinkle... like the icicles in the bomb shelter... "This one was a waste of time, Moisei, this you just... farted out!"

T: It doesn't matter if you "fart it out" – I'll praise you, I'll praise you to everyone! I'll be so proud of you.

M: I know what your praise sounds like... I remember how you praised Picasso the first time we met. "You know, Moisei, he fucking knows how to handle a body!..."

T: And what was I supposed to say – I don't have any other words, love, for what he does!...

She trails off. In the darkness someone moves past holding an oil-lamp. All you can see is a flame "walking." Totya and Moisei watch intensely.

"The Flame": *(a little hoarsely-shrilly)*: Agh! Who's there?

Moisei and Totya: Who's there?

Anna Pavlovna: Antonina Nikolaevna! Dearie, what are you doing here? Why aren't you in the bomb shelter? I just don't understand you! *(She examines them and their quarters.)* You're going to freeze here! You know, it's more comfortable there... more sociable...

T: More sociable?! You've got some 32 people sociably dying there...

M: Totya, love, don't, not now... Don't talk about that – it'll upset you...

T: *(in a stubborn, frightening, lifeless voice, on the verge of hysteria)*: And Sonya, and Olga Petrovna, and Kolya with the red hair, and Kolya with the gray hair, and Irakly... Irakly...

M: Totya, don't torture yourself! Don't talk about them!

T: *(coughing/laughing, now with rising hysteria)* Irakly told me: "Totya, do you remember when you hung Cezanne's 'Blue Apples' next to the window? I was furious!..." He said he was furious and then stopped ... so I said, "You, Irakly, are a conceited ass! There's light there: the color coming from the window, from the Neva, is blue! Do you really not see it? Do you not see anything with regard to color?..." And he says, "And what do you understand, you idiot, about the movement of blue light. Look, see how it falls here... not there..." That's what he said, *(dragging it out)* iiii—diiii-ot...

Anna Pavlovna: Well, I have to say, dearie, you weren't right! You'll magnify the colors...

T: I don't magnify them! The light falls and it doesn't.... But I probably was being an idiot. My nanny used to say, "Where others have gone, Totenka's gone wrong."

Anna Pavlovna: What are you saying, Antonina Nikolaevna,... Take our Adrian Leonidovich, what an amazing, amazing man! He's kept his courage up, he's invented the best imaginable stove! Just think, he was inspired by the sixteenth-century Dutch stove – the subject of his dissertation, by the way...

T: Sometimes I think we're burying ourselves in the past, we're using sixteenth-century stoves, and Moisei here is always writing in his little diary, even though he can't see a thing,

he's like a blind mole, his hands are almost gone, but he keeps scratching away by torchlight. He calls it "Diary of a Caveman"... And you, Anna Pavlovna, which cave are you headed for now?

Anna Pavlovna: (*a little embarrassed, but stubbornly proud*) I'm, you know, going to see him... to spend time with him...

T. and M. (*in loud amusement*) Rembrandt again?

T: But those halls are empty, completely empty ... Aren't you afraid, Anna Pavlovna? Why go by yourself?

Anna Pavlovna: How can you even ask, dearie? Are you saying these paintings have lived here for centuries and suddenly they don't exist because of a mere evacuation? Because of this cursed blockade? I've spent fifty years with them, I know every crease they have... every crease! As if the war could make anything go away! You should know better: it's all here... everything is here – you only need to be able to see and remember how to see! You know, my dears, whenever someone visits, I tell them stories about the paintings.

Moisei (*reviving a bit*): Oh! People come here?

Anna Pavlovna: Of course they do! Just yesterday a lovely young man from the Baltic Fleet came to check out the electrical system... can you believe, he took some macaroni out of his pocket... nice boiled macaroni... and put it in my mouth... just like this (*She demonstrates on Tonya, getting a little embarrassed about just how he did it.*) And, you know, by then I really wasn't feeling well. Not well at all. In return I took him to the Danae and showed him everything!

T: (*lighting up a cigarette*) You showed the Danae's everything to the eager young sailor?... ooo la-la!

M: Tonya, come on! So what do you mean – you showed her? She was evacuated over the Urals! Orbeli sent her off first thing!

Anna Pavlovna: You know, I just... told him about her! From memory. I mean, I'll always remember her the way she is... I remember them all... They're still here, you know. (*She points to her eyes and into the darkness.*)

M: So, why the Danae? Why the Danae, exactly?

Anna Pavlovna: Well, I just thought a young man would like her – she's so wonderfully golden, so warm... Now everyone's cold, but she's warm! Though, as you yourselves know, there are paintings more in tune with my emotional state ... elderly men, elderly women...

T: Anna Pavlovna! Putain! What emotional state?! The Danae, she's... life.... yes, she's life itself... She's the only one you should be telling about...

M: Well, in your place I would have talked about the Prodigal Son...

T: Why? Why would he want to hear that?

M: I'm always glad he came back, you know.. I'm glad for all of them... that they met again at last – and I think about the father.... You know I always think about how they... may be worrying. (*He blows his nose, protractedly.*)

Out of the darkness descend / appear picture frames. They glimmer with a dull, warm golden light. Each of the characters appears captured in a sparkling frame. Each begins his monologue in the “professional” tone of a tour guide, at once ecstatic and robotic, and then gradually grows more animated, turns into a hybrid of himself and Rembrandt’s subject.

Anna Petrovna: The Hermitage’s collection of Rembrandt von Rejn, the great Dutch master, is one of the museum’s treasures. It boasts more than twenty canvasses. Every period of his career is represented. The name of the man depicted in “Portrait of an Elderly Man in Red,” like the names of many of his models during the years 1650-1660, is unknown. While the individual features of those depicted... *(she stumbles trying to say the difficult word)* depicted are preserved, they are unified by a single theme – a meditation on the meaning of life and death... *(Here she begins to change from a guide-robot into herself, as if waking up, and she hits her stride.)* Rembrandt is attracted to the faces of older people... Rembrandt’s old men and women! What have they learned? What do they see ahead of them? What are their thoughts? The face of an old man, a face covered in wrinkles – wrinkles from weariness, calm, understanding, acceptance... He is very tired. His face gleams out of the darkness, against fabric the color of Bordeaux, the color of blood ... His hands are clasped. Clasped like this. Aged hands that know everything! He’s no longer afraid of anything. He grows more and more afraid! *(Lamenting)* He still hasn’t achieved anything, he’s just beginning to understand, just beginning to see... And all this – the terror and the hope – is expressed in his hands, his remarkable hands!..

M: That’s so true, such amazing hands... The hands of the old man placed on his son’s shoulder! Totya! Anna Pavlovna! Look at this... *(Anna Pavlovna makes gestures showing that he needs to be more serious, and he draws himself up and continues.)* “The Return of the Prodigal Son” – the apex of Rembrandt’s achievement! Before us we see the famous Biblical tale: the prodigal son is shown covered in scars; he has traveled the earth in search of happiness, glory, heroic deeds, wealth, pleasure, and he has lost everything... I would even say he lost himself... His back trembling with anguish and humiliation, he kneels before his father. His whole back expresses shame and grief, but the father’s face is peaceful and soft with compassion! His aging hands, his fingers, tremble with happiness – at embracing his son again, touching him, catching his scent, pulling him close. For him the work of forgiveness is easy. They lean toward each other with hope for the future... hope... that they will have a future....

T: The royal Danae: she’s pure expectation! The picture’s very composition, the arrangement of the heavy folds of the drapery, details like the little table at the head of her bed or the elegant shoes dropped from her feet – these are techniques of the Dutch genre masters. With Rembrandt such details acquire special significance... significance (What am I saying... what significance... where did I get these words?) The royal Danae is nervous... the tips of her fingers are... shaking. *(Looks at her own hands, then at Moisei.)* Why are they shaking? From fear? From desire? From joy at meeting her lover? At meeting her future? The princess’s glowing face is hidden in shadow, turned to the light: the Danae is resisting the dark of imprisonment. She wants to flee the darkness. Her huge golden body is turned toward the window, anticipating her fate. She is warm, and she feels warm! But I’m cold, Moisei! What are we doing, what does any of this have to do with us? *(She tears herself out of the frame as though she’d suddenly woken from a dream, or a vision.)*

Anna Pavlovna: They all have to do with us, dearie! For always... they will always exist... even afterward: it's so important to know that someone will exist in the "afterward." (*She finds a rag-as-handkerchief and blows into it for a long time.*) You know, me and Sonya, Sofiya Evgenievna, god forgive us, have been going to look at the still lives... we get up to go look... we just stand there and look... it's, and it's shameful but, you know, it's good... so you enjoy yourself now and then... god forgive us... that Rubens, you know, is looking good to me now – all those bodies, and meats, and fruits.. oh, and the cheeses... and sugar... chunks of sugar... and bread...

T: Uh-huh, and our Irakly even started writing verses about the edible Hermitage... He'd eat his oil-cake, sip some boiled water, and start groaning... describing still lives, I mean...

M: Oh, oh, this is my favorite one... (*He checks his memory. He pulls his hand out of its wrappings and gesticulates as he recites.*)

Snyders

A crimson rind shines blood-red,
A lamb roast's soft fat gleams,
The primal ocean's marvels spread
On the table, give off a sheen.

Homer of *les delices*, of Shakespeare's revels,
Who more adores the "lifeless thing"?
Joyful Snyders calls us to the table,
And every person feels his hunger sing,

On seeing the amber bunch of fruit,
The succulent pear, the pistachio nut,
The *sfumato* of plums and lemon's sunset.

But once my eyes have had their feast,
Dear Snyders, I only wish (god's least)
I had your still life to digest.

(*Laughs sadly.*) Isn't a sad irony, sweetheart! The great Snyders and this damned, pathetic, humiliating hunger...

T: Musya, you shouldn't be thinking about this, you aren't allowed! And enough of this remembering poor Irakly and his fits of ecstasy – he and his “lemon's sunset” have been cooling off downstairs for how many days?... We had an agreement – no talking about food! Akh, Anna Pavolovna, why did you get us started? Why are we making all this up? What kind of game is this? Why elaborate all these visions? It a lie, for fuck's sake! What *sfumato*?! We're dystrophics, let's talk about that – without apology... Here... this is more like it... let me read it for you... (*She reads in a terrifying voice at Anna Pavlovna, at Moisei, and at the audience, in turn.*)

Ree-ree

I'm a fool, I am shit, I'm a cripple,

I'd kill a man for a tippie.

But let us in, we're at the door,

We scrabble like wild dogs.

My tormentors, I'm in pain

From awful bladder strain!

Anna Pavlovna: Don't you do that! Don't you dare do that around me! Don't you dare!

T: (*yells, snarls at her*) Ree! Ree! That's exactly how it is! That, my dearREE, is how it is... (*Crying.*)

Anna Pavlovna drops her oil-lamp – the flame goes out, and they're left in the dark.

SCENE THREE

HAPPY NEW YEAR'S!

M: Totya! (*He clears his throat. He is rehearsing his congratulations out loud ...weighing his choice of words – is the tone right?*) My sweet... my dear... my dearest... Antonina Nikolaevna! Totka! My kitten! I congratulate you... No.... I congratulate *us* on the New Year! I wish that the year 1942 may be completely different: cheerful and normal. I wish that we may live to see another time... a new time... When we can live well and (*he emphasizes the next word*), normally... I wish that you may preserve...

T: (*She enters. Her every movement is full of effort, she is covered in snow.*) My god. I barely had the strength to go out, and barely got myself back up here. I don't want to do aaaa-nnyy-thing.

M: My dearest beloved...

T: Don't do that – it's all words, Motya, just words!

M: It's not just words! It's New Year's... We said we would celebrate!

T: Believe me, I know... it's thanks to that miserable New Year's of yours I just took four hours walking home to get gifts... See, I got them. (*She rummages around her many layers of clothing and eventually finds a small package.*)

M: Which one did you bring?

T: Hold on... not everything at once... Remember, the main thing is the anticipation.

M: Anticipation! Yes, you're really tired and sleepy... but you can't help feeling excited... (*The memory perks him up.*)

T: Musenka, how about we go downstairs to the bomb shelter like we were thinking? I mean, after all... there are people there... and it's warmer. And there's more light. And maybe they'll give us something to swallow. To mark the holiday?

M: But we wanted to celebrate together. Just the two of us. Together. With nobody else around. Downstairs they'll be making big speeches in praise of artillery – you know I can't take that anymore.

T: True, we're better off without the war speeches. Alright, sweetheart, let me show you what I brought (*She pulls a little package out of a pocket buried deep inside her clothing; she does this laboriously, takes a long time unwrapping it – and a silvery sand, a dust, falls out.*)
Akh!

M: What happened?

T: It's smashed! It's destroyed!

M: Which one was it?

T: (*in a weepy voice*) It was our bullfinch....The one we...

M: There-there, love, it's just a glass bullfinch...

T: (*in despair*): But that was father's bullfinch! I remember we would put it on the Christmas tree together. It was a piece of my childhood, my happiness! There's nothing left of that happiness, you know... I don't have papa, I don't have the bullfinch... Such a stupid idiot, slipping on the embankment like that...

M: Darling, you fell down? But these things happen! Don't cry... (*He awkwardly embraces Totya; he rocks and comforts her, like he were trying to lull her with his words.*) You know, someone I know told me a very strange story. It's almost impossible to believe. He said he went to the store a few days ago to buy Christmas toys! Imagine... (*Totya keeps crying and shaking.*) He said the "ridiculous urge" remains... Those were his exact words, the "ridiculous urge" – to buy Christmas toys. His family – just like yours, Totya – would always put up a bright, shiny Christmas tree, and now toys are part of his memories and hopes, they're a bridge to elsewhere. So, anyway, in December he and his wife, arm in arm, made it to the store and bought some toys – a samovar with a teapot and a few other things. The store was half dark, lit by a gaslamp. When they left the shelves of toys behind and went out in to the dark, the cold nearly killed them, brutal winter loudly announcing itself. Say, Totya, maybe we can buy a bullfinch there...

T: (*deflected from her grief over the bullfinch*): Good lord, who's selling them nowadays, toys like that? Why on earth? Who in this dead city would buy them?

M: Well, whoever still remembers some happiness...

T: Now we don't have any presents.

M: I have one for you... *(He goes over to the table, and for a long time he mumbles, fusses, digs around, pulls things out.)* Here it is, sweetheart!

T: *(in disbelief)* What is this? A record?

M: *(with exaggerated cheer)*: Yes!

T: But there's no gramophone...

M: Well yes, that did occur to me.. But you know what...

T: What?

M: We'll just remember how it goes! Our music. Let's do it... we'll sit ourselves down and start remembering. *(He helps Totya up onto the table and triumphantly sits next to her.)*

At first there's an agonizing silence, since there is, of course, no music. But then their somber waltz gradually becomes audible.

T: Yes... that's so nice. I remember everything. Now I remember everything...

M: *(shouting over the waltz)* Dear Comrades! *(Parodying the voice of a radio announcer.)* My dearest Totya! I wish that the New Year may be warmer and brighter, that it may be normal. I wish that we may survive, that we may get *ourselves* back, and that we may have life.

T: Yes, that we may have life... a little more life.

M: Totya, you... are my life. You are... my life.

The sound of the music finally overwhelms his voice.

SCENE FOUR

DIARY OF A CAVEMAN.

WRITING BY FEEL. JANUARY.

Projected on the screen at the back of the stage, excerpts from Moisei's dairy appear and disappear (melt away); someone is writing as though he were blind; letters and words crawl over each other.

M: Antonina, wake up!

T: Oh, don't touch me, really, please don't touch me...

M: *(He triumphantly pulls a notebook from the bottom of his rags.)* Ok, now it's time, time to read you my diary.

T: *(unenthusiastically)* But you can't see anything, Musenka. What is the point? What's the point of the whole thing?

M: Well, I want to do it... It matters to me what you think! *(He clears his throat. Then he starts declaiming.)* "Diary of a Caveman":

Grease burns reliably and has an aromatic scent but casts a terribly dim light – you have to write almost by feel. Today, after crawling out from under the bedclothes toward 11, I spent more than an hour messing around with a new can and a wick (a piece of cotton). I got my hands, the matches, and the table all smeared with pomade, but what really bothers me – my hands can't hold onto anything.

We ate breakfast at about 11 – I had a dose of cod-liver oil and 2 tablets of vitamin B, and Tonya had 2 spoonfuls of pine bark extract. A luxury.

T: Who could possibly be interested in this, Musya – how many spoonfuls of cod-liver oil we had? How much oil-cake we stole from each other...

M: How can you say that?

T: Ok, or wanted to steal from each other... but we didn't... we were too ashamed... or didn't have the energy... It's so squalid... Maybe it would be better if you left that out?

M: What do mean, leave it out? It... happened!

T: But don't let people know that... it would be better to replace us with a blank spot instead of this shame, this entire shame-fest. Don't let anyone see this horror, don't let them know! Let it be forgotten, sink to the bottom of the sea.

M: What? Oh no, I think we have to write about it, about everything the way it is, Totenka. The truth and nothing but the truth!

T: Somehow I'm not convinced anyone's going to be too interested in that truth of ours...

M: How can that be? Nobody will want to know? Why not?

T: Well, you know, we aren't the most pleasing spectacle... average mummies, unsatisfactory condition.

M: Oh ye of little faith! I am sure someone will want to know about us. So I need to write it down. So that afterward their words – I mean, the words of people living afterward – won't be pasted over our words! Won't be pasted over these black days of ours! So no one can just imagine it any way they want – afterward – after we're gone...

T: What are you saying?

M: You know, afterward... saying we were all heroes or villains, or that we suffered beautifully and with honor, or that we didn't suffer at all... You need to write it like it is – the stench, the dark, the improvised toilet, the abjection, the terror... and you like you are – sweet, shining, slender, emaciated...

T: Hah, covered in fleas, starving, vicious...

M: Exactly – the way it is, all the stench, all the boredom, and then your face – so intelligent, so lovely... every single day, every single fact! That's the important thing, just the facts... in full detail – and no whining!

T: Bah!... boredom, you say!.. You won't get bored around here! And who's whining? I'm not a whiner – and you, you're no whiner either. You're my Musya. My Achilles – my worn-out Wellies. With a hole in your rainboot... I just get upset when you fall down all the time... You definitely have an Achilles heel...

M: Not all the time, Totenka! Don't exaggerate! Actually, I notice you've been finding excuses to lose hope!

T: And you, my dear, have been looking for excuses to fall down – you completely smashed your hip! You didn't leave a single functioning part...

M: Totya, you are my functioning part! Last week I wrote this down specifically:

Today I'm walking quite well. (*Did you hear that? – I'm walking quii-ite well.*) Automobiles don't smell to me like pine trees anymore, they smell like something artificial – some cloying confectionary smell.

T: Honestly, how could anything smell like that? Musya, why don't you just go ahead and tell the whole story – say that a truckload of corpses went by... there are almost no other vehicles on the road...

Moisei keeps on reading:

I got home quickly and only fell once, but walking down the back hall of the Hermitage, the Hall of Vases, I went down four times.

I barely made it to the Academy. Using the tire tracks of passing cars.

The frost is beautiful covered with patterns and smoky mist. St. Isaac's Cathedral and the sun behind the mist.

I fell again, in the same place I fell yesterday, and broke my hand and my hip.

Projected on the screen are clips of documentary footage from the blockade, of pedestrians walking along Nevsky Prospect.

Moisei walks along the front of the screen, falls down, gets up, falls down, gets up, falls down, gets up – and repeats this many times... He stops and, trying to keep his balance, draws in the air with one hand an outline of the city. He reads on:

Today I was drawing with one hand, then my hand started to hurt, and I was practically drawing with my nose, since I could barely see. I was tired from the strain of doing the crosshatching, but my mood kept rising, until I felt like I was in the saddle again:

Giddy-up, giddy-up! We're hitting the trail!

Can you imagine, that's exactly how I wrote it: Giddy-up, giddy-up! We're hitting the trail!

Moisei tries to hug Totya, to "dance" with her and "play horse." They move sadly and clumsily. Spasmodically, like a broken record, the melody of "The Snow Queen" plays.

M: And a little further on I wrote:

Art is a good joke! Worth living for!

T: You wrote that? Let me see... Hmm... You really think it's worth it?.. A good joke...

M: A really good joke!

T: Well, Irakly said: "When I look at Cezanne and then close my eyes, I don't feel afraid, I'm light at heart." Light at heart... and he himself got soooo light!

M: Really, Antonina, I don't need to know that. Don't you dare keep mentioning him.

T: What an idiot. I'm not talking about that. I've forgotten almost everything... everything... I remember nothing, and I know nothing, Musya. Where did the cigarettes go?

They take a long time lighting up, blissfully, like they were kissing, stopping and shaking their heads from pleasure, and from pain: they hurt all the time, they're always uncomfortable. Moisei cheers up and keeps "drawing" in the air with his wrapped-up hands: in one of his "paws" is a lit cigarette, and he draws with that. Their movements again resemble a dance, but a dance of dystrophics: Moisei wants to, then he doesn't, then he can, then he can't expend strength on his "drawings" – it's clear that he hurts all over.

T: Moisei, tell me, will it be alright?

M: It will be alright.

T: And what, what could possibly be alright – what the hell are you talking about?

M: Adrian Leonidovich says a new clinic is opening– they're feeding people! They're giving out kasha! And I hear they've got their own banya...

T: They do, but it's not for the likes of us, Musenka. We're not the ones building tanks. We're useless people. So what are you drawing now?

M: You really can't see?

T: Not, I can't really see.

M: How silly you are! Look, here's the embankment, Petropavlovsk, the needle hidden in mist as the sun rises and trucks carry the corpses away...

Here the most vivid, color images of the city made by blockade artists – Bobyshov, Glebova – can be projected onto the screen.

T: I wonder whether they collected ours from the basement. Did a truck take them away, too, I wonder?

M: No, Totenka, I don't think that's worth wondering about... Some people wonder, why even collect them? Why touch them? They look so peaceful, frozen, beautiful...

T: It really is unbelievable! That asshole Kontsevich lying there next to Irakly... my god, if anyone had told him, with his endless ballerinas and blondes... who he would have to die next to... She even reported on us, the hag, she wrote denunciations about all of us – the old bitch!

M: *(laughing weakly)* Totik, I have to fine you again! You won't get your cigarette tomorrow, and you'll have to listen for hours as I recite Kontsevich's views about the achievements of socialist realism...

T: Is that so! Then I fine you back.

M: There, that's more like it! You sound like the little thief again – that's good!

T: There is no more little thief ... You know old Ganzen, who translated Anderson from Danish, yes, the translator – they say she also... Anna Pavlovna says – it was back in

December... They say she burned all her books to stay warm... which means, she even burned "The Snow Queen"... Lit it right up! Hold my hand, little Kay. Hold me.

M: I can't even hold a thought in my head, sweetheart... my hands are so frozen... it feels like they're splitting.

Totya takes a long time freeing from their coverings a long, elegant, thin, strong hand and places it on Moisei's face.

M: Totya... my Totya.

They are silent. Moisei continues reading:

I couldn't move at all. Totya mixed heated cod-liver oil with something else and put the vial in the briefcase. Kerosene spilled everywhere and soaked five cigarettes. We snapped at each other, poor thing! Tonya took refuge in the cot.

The sight of my sick little girl breaks my heart, and she doesn't understand, she tries to persuade me she just has a cold.

So we've reached either the bottom or the top of despair! For the first time, I wasn't so sure we were going to make it...

Tell me... Tell me! Tell me it's going to be alright!

Totya lies curled into a ball, with her head under the covers. Moisei sits next to her and softly, pleadingly calls/asks/whimpers: "Totya!"

SCENE FIVE

Broken Mirror

M: My beautiful Totya, do you happen to have a mirror?

T: (*peevishly*) There aren't enough mirrors in the Hermitage for you, my vain Moisei?

M: There were all kinds of mirrors, but most of them were shattered by the bombings. Do you have a compact?

T: I do not have a compact. I haven't looked at myself in two months. I'm afraid to. I looked once – *Mon Dieu!* Bald, blackened, aged... And not even aged but beyond aging... Some kind of, you know, allegorical image of war. Goya.

M: (*preoccupied with something*) But I really, really need a mirror!

T: Well, there are pieces all over the floor. Pick one up and look. Admire yourself.

Moisei laboriously seeks out and picks up a shard; he turns it this way and that, but because his hands are all wrapped up, it doesn't go well.

M: Totya, hold the mirror for me! Well, that's what I thought! The third tooth is gone. It's loose, the bastard, and will fall out any minute. Then I'll have another hooooole! Like the holes in Gostiny Dvor...

T: Exactly. Like on Pestel street, where the bakery was.

M: And Nadezhdinsky. Lidochka lived on that street, your friend. What happened to her?

T: Moisei, how do I know? The phones stopped working back when... No one knows anything about anyone, they can't possibly know and no longer want to know. I don't know what happened with my Lidochka. But you know what? Hold that little mirror up for me, Musya.

M: No.

T: No? Yes!

Moisei turns the piece of glass one way, then another, away from Tonya. Light flashes off the mirror in all directions.

M: You have such beautiful eyes, such a beautiful forehead, such beautiful hair... You're funny, capricious, golden, shining...

T: Do you mean that?

M: *(like he's suddenly exhausted)* No, my love. *That is not true.* You have red gums from scurvy, brown skin covered in spots, your eyes are sunken – but you're alive! You're uglier than death itself, my Totya, but you're alive, and that's all that matters now: to survive.

T: Your mirror is crooked and evil! Why should we survive, when we're so horrifying? We can't even look at each other anymore.

M: I know! But, Totya, you couldn't stop looking at me before! You were licking your lips: my boy, my gorgeous boy. All of Leningrad was talking about me. You remember last summer, in Komarovo?

T: Oh, I remember last summer. You were running after all the Hermitage queens, including, of course, Lidochka. You were drooling over them, like they were Greek statues. I just bided my time, until you noticed me...

M: Well, they all behaved like Greek statues, I should say. I had absolutely no interest... But you, now, Antonina Nikolaevna, why would I look your way? It was clear you'd mock me for it.

T: *(astonished)* How so?

M: Because you made fun of everyone, Totya. You had such a terrifying, scathing laugh *(he tries to replicate it, but it comes out faint, like a bark)* – ha-ha-ha!

T: *(repeating it just as faintly)* Ha-ha-ha! You once said that no one in the city laughs anymore. There's no laughing during the blockade. During the blockade, according to Adrian, humor is out... *(Making an effort to liven up, on the strength of her slightly warmed-up vanity)* So, anyway, how did you finally dare look my way?

M: I dared? Totya, I dared when you, *pardonnez-moi*, undid my shirt...

T: No, then you definitely weren't looking my way – you turned away in horror, innocent Moisei. But my curiosity was peaked!

M: *(indignant)* Your curiosity?

T: I got curious about you – that day when you were the only one, the *only one*, who dared ask that sleazebag Kontsevich at the meeting whether Rembrandt also was a Trotskyite and a formalist, since all the formalists studied him...

M: You were so curious that you invited me to Komarovo – to pick blueberries.

T: Mmmm, it was so warm and sunny! Remember? I take some berries in my palm... then I put them in your mouth... And my whole palm is in your mouth, and you squash the berries with your tongue and lick my palm... you squash them one by one... and they burst... and juice runs out. Moisei, why are you... fidgeting like that? From the sweet memory? Hard to believe. You haven't laid a finger on me since December...

M: (*sharply*) No, not hard to believe. (*He "unnoticeably" rubs at his cap with a bound hand.*)

T: What's wrong?... Oh... You have lice, my love?

M: Antonina Nikolaevna, how can speak like that to me! Leave me alone!

T: Dear god, what's the problem – all of us have lice. The living have lice, and the dead have lice. If there's one thing that unites us during the blockade, it's that. Sweetheart, let me take your cap off and have a look.

M: Don't you dare! I have... I have hives.

T: Moisei, you blockhead. It's not hives... Allow me to unmask you. (*Playfully*) Komm zu mir... (*Moisei whimpers unhappily but doesn't really object.*) There it is, my dear – now let me grab it: easy now, easy...

M: Disgusting...

T: Why disgusting? Just a raised white spot with a dot in the middle!

M: So disgusting!

T: You know, it occurs to me that blockade lice may be the essence of blockade love.

M: How can you say that? Disgusting!

T: I think it's true. Lice are very weak and very firm. Nothing gets rid of them. Nits, now – they're the top. They're like berries, like blueberries – I used to pull them off so slowly, so carefully, and you would watch so closely. And I would watch you watching. (*Totya stands over Moisei and searches in his hair. They are illuminated in a small, weak cone of light.*) Moisei, you are so handsome! You have such beautiful hair, a beautiful forehead, beautiful everything. Just everything.

SCENE SIX

THE SNOW QUEEN. FEBRUARY

Darkness. The radio plays: triumphant news reports.

T: Moisei, get up! (*coughs*) Get up! Bring my coffee! Cut the games, please! (*Raising her voice in an annoyed monotone*) Moisei, time to get up! How many times do I have to tell you! Get up, already!

M: I'm not feeling so good... today. I don't think... don't think I can...

T: It's all in your head... Why do you always invent things? You do it all the time! You're indulging yourself... This alleged weakness of yours – it self-indulgence! I'm sick and tired of your helplessness! Why can't you do anything?

M: Don't... don't do that... you have to stop!

T: Why can't you do anything?

M: Me, yes... I'm getting up... See: I am getting up! (*With agonizing, long, slow effort, he gets up, goes over to get the pot, tries to hold it with his wrapped-up hands – and, of course, he drops it; it makes a loud noise, and water goes everywhere.*)

T: (*gives a piercing shriek*) Aaaaaaa! You idiot! Why are you always have to make a mess!

M: Don't do that! (*He holds his hands to his head, shielding himself from her voice.*)

T: (*shrieking hysterically*) I can't take it anymore... I can't stand you... I just can't! You keep making a mess!

M: Are you alright, Totenka?

Here Totya should turn into the Snow Queen, while the coldest, loudest, most terrifying version of her song plays. For example: Totya climbs up on the table, “gets bigger,” in her white bedclothes, lit by white and blue light. Moisei's voice – not his blockade voice but a very beautiful, strong, steady, velvety voice – reads from above/behind the stage:

There stood a tall, statuesque, blindingly-white woman – the Snow Queen; she was wearing a coat and hat made of snow.

“Are you still freezing?” she asked, and kissed him on the forehead.

Oh! Her kiss was colder than ice; its cold pierced him all over and went to his very heart, which was already half frozen. For a second Kay thought he was going to die, but then he started feeling better and even stopped feeling cold.

“I won't kiss you anymore!” she said. “Or I'll kiss you to death!”

Kay looked at her: she was so beautiful! He couldn't imagine a more intelligent, charming face. Now she didn't seem like ice anymore, like she did when she sat outside his window and nodded her head to him; now she seemed like perfection.

M: (*Lying on the floor next to the empty coffeepot.*) Don't, you're going to kill me!.. Don't torture me! I'm cold! Please forgive me! (*He cries.*) I'm an idiot, I know it's hard staying with me, it's so hard for you... My love, my poor love... My... little girl... you're tired!

Here they can speak at the same time, shouting and whispering, not listening to one other, like lovers singing their aria-duets in an opera, except that there's no harmony, just a nightmarish mutual non-hearing.

T: *(in an icy voice)* Oh, this is unbearable! Unbearable! When will this end? I can't listen to you anymore... Your complaints! Your demands! *(Suddenly her hysterics inexplicably "freeze," and Totya shifts to a totally calm voice.)* I don't care anymore... Do you understand.. Moisei. Nothing matters anymore. May it end as soon as possible... as soon as possible!

Carrying the same small lamp as she did earlier, Anna Pavlovna enters very slowly. She has changed drastically: in place of the lively, high-strung woman, we see an aged shadow, and she can only whisper due to her scurvy.

Anna Pavlovna: Moisei Borisovich! Moisei Borisovich! Moisei Borisovich! There's wonderful news, just wonderful – you got admission to the clinic. They're going to help you, they have kaa-shaa, they've got heat, they save everyone... everyone there will be saved! *(She slowly walks downstage, then stops still and quietly "falls sleep" – behind her, a sheet of white paper falls, swirling.)*

T: *(As though coming back to her senses, she climbs down from her pedestal, abandoning the role of Snow Queen/Blockade Death, and crawls over to the piece of paper – the notice of admission to the clinic. She cries out.)* Musya, it's... Can it be?! The clinic?!

M: Don't...

T: They finally came through with admission to the clinic... Now you don't have to die!

M: Don't...

T: You're going to the clinic right this minute... They finally got it... they understand you're a brilliant boy... and you can't be allowed to freeze!

M: For the love of god... Leave me alone... Don't touch me, don't torture me! I'm not going anywhere now...

T: *(Lowers herself onto the floor next to him.)* You're going! You are going! You can't just die here! You know it can't end like this – you know it's just beginning, right? Forgive me. But get up! Now! *(Moisei hugs himself to her knees, we see her face; Totya and Moisei repeat the composition of Rembrandt's "Prodigal Son.")* You're going to go, you're going to eat, they are going to feed you, they are going to help you, they will heal your hands, you will start drawing with them again... screw this nightmare of ours... You'll explain everything to them. Remember, Tyrsa said: a brilliant boy, very promising future. You'll honor that promise, won't you, Musya?! Come on, get up, like this, my strong boy! You heard what she said: everyone there will be saved.

Moisei leans on Totya, gets up, and slowly moves toward the exit; he keeps looking back at Totya with fear, hope and the semblance of an encouraging smile – but it's a gruesome smile.

T: Go on! Go... It's warm there, it's bright! Musya... Go!

A triumphant blockade newscast plays; there is some interference, and then we hear Totya enunciating precisely, like an announcer:

Moisei Vakser died at the aid station on February 4, 1942. Totya, Antonina Izergina, was not at his side that night. Most of his unpublished writings, letters and photographs are not accounted for.

Projected onto the screen are paintings by Moisei Vakser. Cue the music.