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Orchard Lamps

BY IVAN DRACH



EDITED BY STANLEY KUNITZ
WITH WOODCUTS BY JACQUES HNIZDOVSKY

ORCHARD LAMPS





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BY IVAN DRACH

Edited and introduced by

STANLEY KUNITZ

with woodcuts by

JACQUES HNIZDOVSKY

translated by

DANIEL HALPERN . STANLEY KUNITZ

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EXILE EDITIONS

TORONTO

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This Edition is published by Exile Editions Ltd.,
69 Sullivan Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
M5T 1C2

Sales Distribution
General Publishing Co. Ltd.
30 Lesmill Road, Don Mills, Ontario M3B 2T6

ISBN 0-920428-460

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JACQUES HNIZDOVSKY**

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INTRODUCTION

Over twenty years have passed since my first meeting with Ivan Drach in legendary Kiev, some of whose architecture still reminds us that it stands on the old trade route between Byzantium and the north. He was only thirty then, but already he was a prominent figure in modern Ukrainian literature. In advance of my visit I had heard his praises sung by the poets of Moscow and Leningrad. He showed up at my hotel, slight of build, blue-eyed, bespectacled, snub-nosed, with a wide and mobile mouth and thinning wheat-colored hair, combed straight back, that fell in long strands down to the nape of his neck. It was a scholar's face or an evangelist's—I couldn't decide which. Somehow we managed to overleap the language barrier and achieve a swift rapport, mostly non-verbal. Soon we were walking along the banks of the blue Dnieper, climbing the steep bluffs to Prince Vladimir's park, and making the obligatory tour of golden-domed St. Sophia Cathedral, converted by the state into a museum, where Yaroslav the Wise, who laid the cornerstone in the eleventh century, rests in his marble sarcophagus. On my last evening in Kiev, Ivan and I gave a joint reading in the crowded auditorium of the Foreign Literature Institute. I was moved by the sonority of his poems and the blazing intensity of his spirit. It was a different music from any that I had heard in Russia, and I wondered whether it would be possible to render it in English. I suspected, as events have confirmed, that it would not be easy.

Ivan Drach was born October 17, 1936, on a collective farm in the village of Telizhenci, about a hundred miles from Kiev. His father worked in a beet sugar refinery (see "Father"); his mother labored on the farm. Ivan, who was a precocious child, attended the local school. His most vivid early recollections, he says, are of "green, sun, soil, screams, and the madness of war." The German invasion left an indelible imprint on him, as it did on all his generation. The conquerors came with their planes and tanks and torches. He saw the storm troopers bathing and frolicking in the spring from which the village drew its drinking water and learned the

meaning of the word "pollution." His native roots run deep. He has a peasant's feeling about the sacredness of water and bread. Reading him, one is never in any doubt as to where his human sympathies lie. His poems are steeped in local color and folk memory, but they have a universal resonance that permits them to travel far beyond the Dnieper. "Nothing is closer to us," he says, "than our tears."

Drach's beginnings as a poet help us define his range. In the desolate aftermath of war his imagination was stirred, as if out of Homeric mists, by wandering minstrels, blind or crippled old Cossacks, who sang of better times and heroic deeds in the village square, to the accompaniment of the lute-like bandura, or improvised rhyming chronicles of the latest news. Among his other influences he names the Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko, Pushkin, Whitman, and Neruda. Two older Kiev poets, Mykola Bazhan and Pavlo Tychyna, anticipated some of his themes and paved the way for his experiments in sound and form. Drach also acknowledges his debt to Goya, Picasso, and Chagall, as artists who excited his visual imagination. He has translated Lorca, with whom he claims some affinity, and numerous other modern poets from several different languages.

Drach became famous with the publication in 1960 of his first collection, *Sunflower*. The title-poem, which has remained inseparable from his name, crystallizes his essential verve and originality. From its opening lines it is daringly anthropomorphic, and yet it seems to me totally right and believable. Could I ever perceive a sunflower again without recalling how Drach's "hopped on one foot/ to shake the water out of his ear" and looked up at the sun "with its golden spindrift of curls,/ the beautiful tanned sun/ in a red shirt that reached to its knees"? For Drach, that solar fire is both real and symbolic, one of the keys to the central world of his creation:

*Poetry, my orange sun!
Every minute some boy
finds you for himself
and changes to a sunflower forever.*

In another luminous poem, "Bread," when the hot loaf is withdrawn from the oven, "the whitewashed house glows/ with the fragrant sun on the table." Drach's mind generates so much light that he is capable of making even the homeliest objects radiant. The pears in a common galvanized pail are transformed into "sun's rivals, orchard lamps,/ souls exiled from the republic of juices/ and gathered up into aprons in the night of pear-falling." And the pail itself announces a miracle: "When I lie empty the whole length of the day,/ then I am filled to my brim with sky."

When Drach was a student at the University of Kiev, he majored in literature and philosophy. Since then his philosophic and scientific predilections have nourished his intellect and enriched his art. To complicate the picture, a vein of Slavic mysticism is also present in his work, not always distinguishable from a romantic drift towards afflatus and murkiness. The best of his poems begin with brilliant perceptions, or concrete instances, and climb, with an explosion of images, towards the realm of the transcendent. "My strongest horse," Drach has remarked, "is fantasy of soul. My horse of reality is weaker, but it keeps me from flying out of sight."

Drach is predominantly a lyric poet with an ear for phonetic harmonies and symphonic effects that defy translation. In some of his longer poems, such as "Dialogue of the Genes," "Wings," and "Knife in the Sun," he demonstrates his command of the narrative mode. This last poem, indisputably a major achievement, in which he searches for his own soul and the Ukrainian national identity, is an overwhelming amalgam of history, folklore, nostalgia, political passion, and grotesquerie. In its evocation of an uncanny reality through the juxtaposition of "tangible absurdities and their sublime context" (Ivan Fizer), it is a prime example of Drach's gift for tragic irony.

So then, what do you have to say, devil?

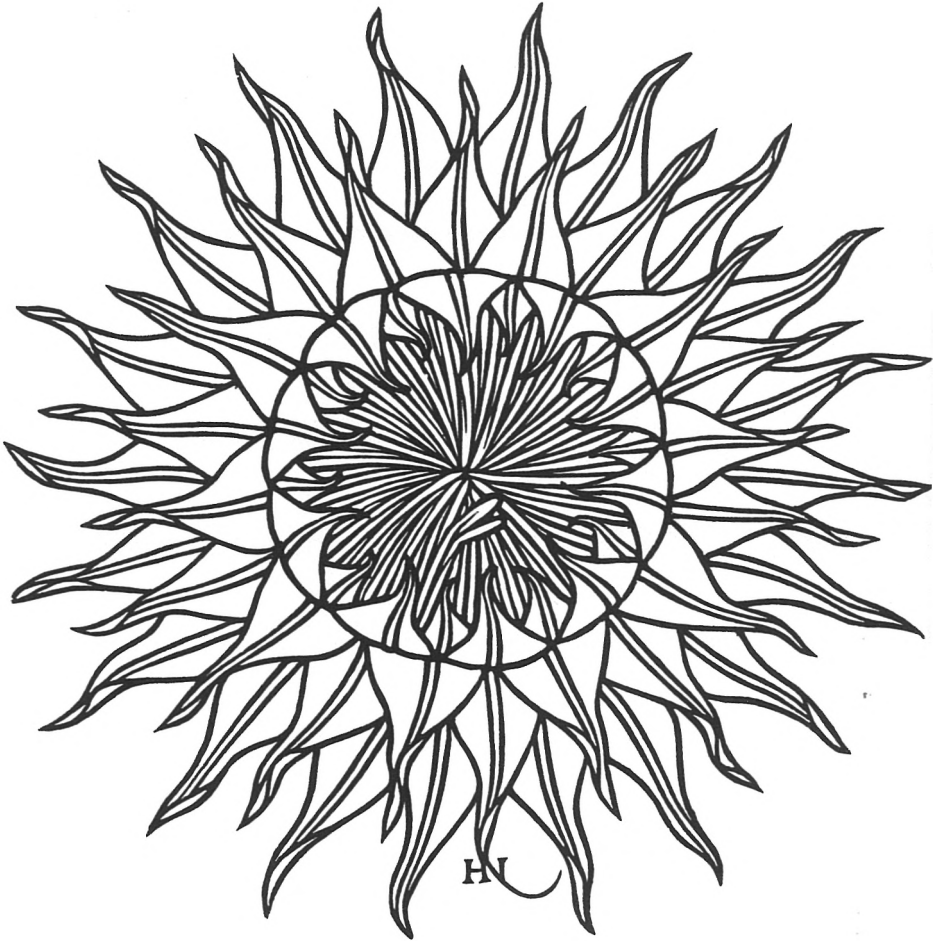
What do you have to say about my country?

In all Drach has published seven collections of his verse: *Sunflower* (1960), *The Solar Prominences of the Heart* (1965), *Workday Ballads* (1967), *Poems* (1967), *Toward the Springs* (selected poems, 1972), *Root and Tree-top* (1974) and *Kiev Sky* (1976). The translations in *Orchard Lamps* are representative of the body of his work. The literal drafts, from the original Ukrainian, were made at my request by the poet Bohdan Boychuk for what began as a workshop project in the graduate writing program of the School of the Arts at Columbia University and continued, as a voluntary commitment, for an extended period thereafter. The final versions, as published, are attributed to individuals or pairs of translators— whoever made the initial verse rendering—but they are virtually collaborations, the end-product of intensive group discussion and criticism. For his endlessly patient and selfless participation in these proceedings I want to thank Mr. Boychuk.

In midstream we were fortunate to receive a grant from the Translation Center at Columbia, which spurred us on to finish the task. Prof. Jaroslav Rozumnyj, of the Department of Slavic Studies, the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, who first proposed the undertaking, gave us his word-by-word transliteration of the Drach texts and never failed to provide long-distance support and encouragement. I also wish to express my gratitude

to Jacques Hnizdovsky, the distinguished artist, who made a generous contribution of his woodcuts for the design of this book. I am indebted to Prof. Ivan Fizer, of the Slavic Department, Rutgers University, and the poet Yurij Tarnawsky for supplementary biographical and critical data. Lastly, it would be remiss of me not to indicate to Daniel Halpern, Paul Nemser, Mark Rudman, Paula Schwartz, and the others who shared the life of these poems for a long season how much I appreciate the unstinting gift of their time, their craft, and their companionship.

STANLEY KUNITZ
New York City



H

Sunflower

The sunflower had arms and legs,
had a rough, green body.
He raced the wind,
he climbed a pear tree
and stuffed ripe pears into his shirt
and swam near the mill
and lay in the sand
and shot sparrows with his sling-shot.
He hopped on one foot
to shake the water out of his ear –
and suddenly saw the sun
with its golden spindrift of curls,
the beautiful tanned sun
in a red shirt that reached to its knees.
It rode on a bicycle
weaving through banks of clouds.

For years, for centuries the sunflower froze,
silent in a golden trance:
— Let me have a ride, Uncle!
At least let me sit on the cross-bar!
Uncle, be a sport!

Poetry, my orange sun!
Every minute some boy
finds you for himself
and changes to a sunflower forever.

[D.H.]

Babi Yar

July 22 1966 at five in the afternoon
we were passing through Babi Yar
the afternoon sun lingered
in a heavy cloud
the villagers lay in bushes drinking beer
sucking herring from their fingers
nearby a Negro rested his head
in the lap of a blond girl
a grayhaired woman
went from person to person
looking for a cross to buy
the maples were wilting in the heat
and my son slept on my lap
dreaming of a wild horse racing in high grass
somewhere piledrivers pounded the dry earth
someone shoveled the sky on me
roots of clouds, stones of the sun
and the steel cobras of lampposts
hid their long necks in leaves
I covered my son with my hands
July 22 1966 at five in the afternoon
when we were passing through Babi Yar

[D.H.]

Old Man Hordij

The dark stops me at the doorway
and a ray of light leads me into the house,
lighting my heart
with ragged kerosene flames.

I go in to him, sit at the black table
with my conscience, with a shot of *pervak*,
with the shade of Horpyna, who went
to the graveyard yesterday, to the moonstruck crossroads,
under the patter of the stones.

A ritual black he-goat hangs from a beam
its legs trussed on a maple stake.

His dead breath reeks, sweet and garlicky
and the skin hangs from the fluted horns.

The man beats the goat-ribs with his fists
and shakes his shock of hair at me.

His pregnant daughter sleeps,
her weary arms flung out to Kazakhstan,
her black braids and black hopes flung out
to her lover, who for months
has drunk another's lips.

Her father flays the skin
of the splendidly reeking goat
and begs me to plant a cigarette between his cracked lips.

Under his nails, black grease;
the tractor sleeps outside, silent in the rain.

Under the heart of an oaken man
numbness roots.

For yesterday his Horpyna went
to the graveyard, to the moonstruck crossroads,
under the patter of the stones...

So you go to the truth, to the source of things,
caught in leagues of philosophy,
universal harmonies and lunar integrals.
Sometimes you come within a heartbeat
of that rare ozone truth.

[P.S.]

Bread

Crack the egg. Glaze the loaf.
A wooden shovel slides it in the oven,
and sparks fly up the crackling soot,
a night sky in miniature.

Drunk with hops, the loaf puffs its chest,
round and flushed,
and hot embers of the hardening crust
wake the appetite.

Caked with dough, the shovel
withdraws the hot loaf,
and the whitewashed house glows
with the fragrant sun on the table.

[P.N. & M.R.]

The Pail

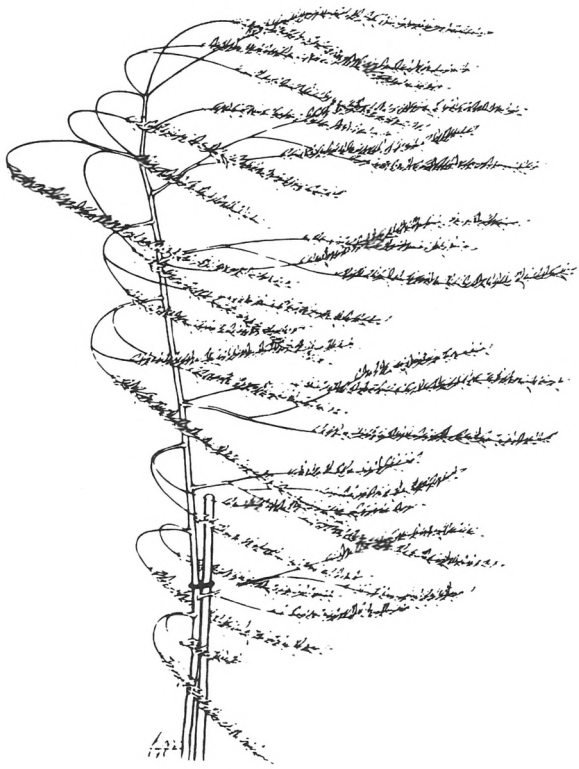
I am — zinc is my form. And I contain — cherries,
dusty firethorn globes
that drank the light of purple stars
and, plucked, lie in their muddled sleep.

I am — zinc is my form. And I contain — pears,
sun's rivals, orchard lamps,
souls exiled from the republic of juices
and gathered up into aprons in the night of pear-falling.

I am — a cut-off cone is my shape. Containing, until I die,
all that is free, all that flows into me:
honeydew melons, horseradish roots,
crisp green vegetable leaves.

I am — zinc is my form. What I contain was not born of me,
servant of time, servant of necessity.
When I lie empty the whole length of the day,
then I am filled to my brim with sky.

[S.K. & Gregory Orr]



The Hula-hoop

I fly through crowds of hot-eyed women
through parasols and mushrooms
through driftwood bodies,
a whirlpool of swimmers.

Then, sunstruck, panting,
I stand rooted in the hot sand:
her slim form, her eyes hold me,
my eyes zing towards her.

Blue blue corolla more blue
from under her lashes blue lightning flies,
but how delicately shy she is,
how gloriously foolish.

Sheaf of wild black hair
bursts from a purple band.
the hula-hoop swings round and round her waist,
a halo of aluminum.

Her captive thighs
lure me into her blazing cage,
the golden clusters of her breasts
pound out a clear music

and the jealous sky leans
on the warm hoopings.
Suddenly she stops,
tossing streamers of laughter over her shoulders.

I'll wipe her salty lips,
and the hula-hoop will ring us both.
A bee, tired of riding the wind,
will light on her shoulder.

[P.S.]

Pen

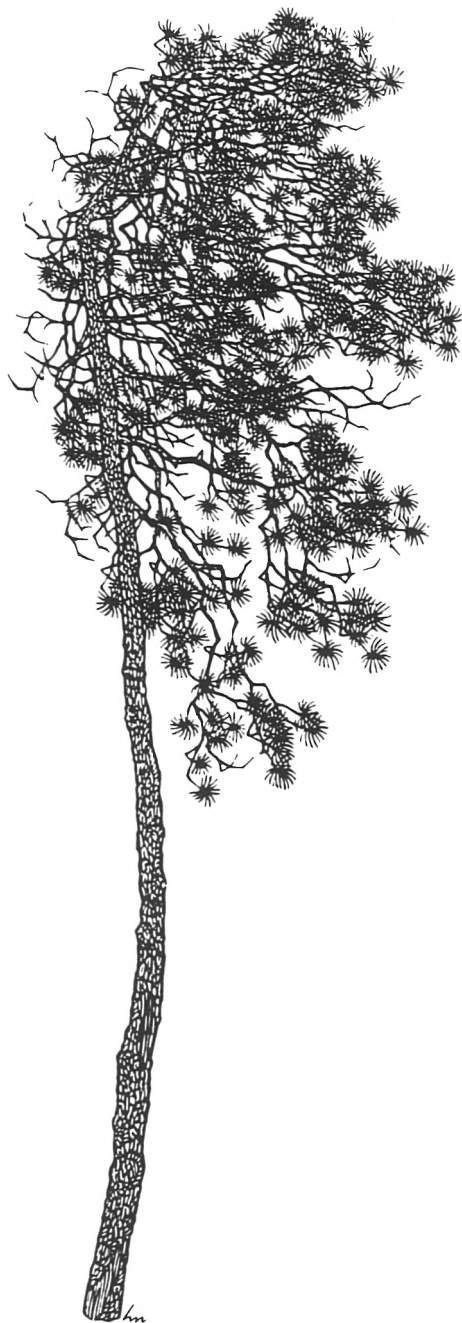
My firetipped scalpel,
my black angel,
my primal call,
my wildflower, my first love,
 we must cut these hazel days
 to the core, to the morning star,
 where informers
 will not mislead us
 with their word-games.

These days of our distress,
uneasy silent days,
and days like fine pottery
gemmed with fire,
 and joyless days
 warm days full of wine
 where old dregs settle
 at the bottom of the bottle,

days gloriously indolent,
hunchbacked days, work-calloused days,
steadfast days, and days of betrayal,
heavy with briny blood.

It is our black destiny
to perceive everything, to seize everything,
till the poplar on our common grave
rustles in place of two crosses.

[P.N. & M.R.]



Pine Tree

The old tree vibrates like a stretched bass-string
and her bittersweet crown
jets like green lava
in the sunstruck cauldrons of the clouds.
Resin hums in the veins beneath the bark,
her branches murmur with stoic majesty.
She's an altar of branching candelabra,
she's the sister of eternity,
princess of another world.

 Suddenly
 a zigzag blade of light
 scores her trunk,
and the old bark cracks
in the whistle of rain.

Around and around that magnetic core
whirl two electrons, two red squirrels
lording it over their kingdom.

 Sharp eyes glinting
 the squirrels spin.
 Pungent with resin
 they chatter and whirl.

They're dancing the twist,
and they tease the tree into their dance.
Below, on the needles, sits a kerchiefed woman
heavy with child, pungent with resin.
She sits burdened with silence, her lap full of pine cones,
and watches the squirrels' careless dance.

Just then,
in that rainy autumn moment,

in the murmur of the pine tree
she feels under her heart
the first tickling stir of the child.

[P.S.]

La Strada

For Mykola Bazhan

La strada, a saber of curved steel,
cuts a path through the night;
the wind hacks at the olive trees
as if to drag them off the slopes.

Bends in the road drink gasoline honey—
gulp thunder.
The headlights of Fiats jab
into the blond braid of the night.

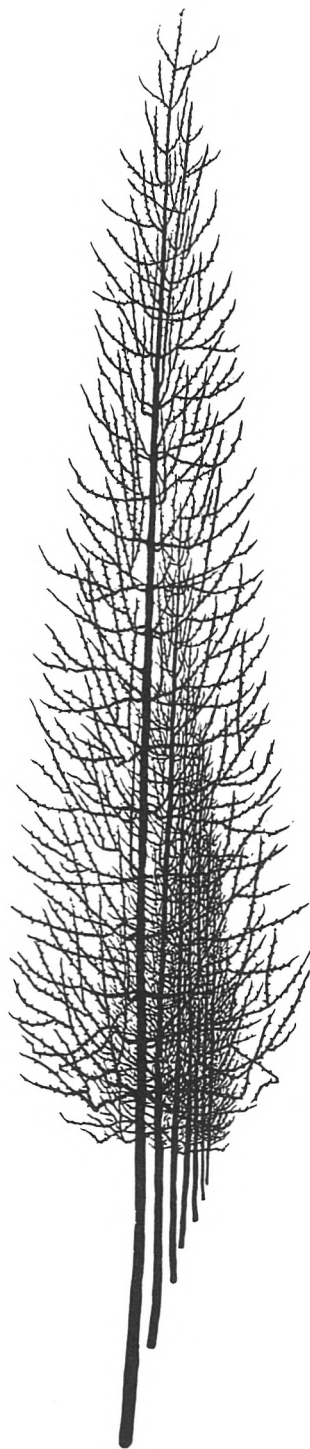
The weave of lights flickers.
My car wears no bridle, but foams at the mouth.
My thoughts spin through the tunnel,
bullets through the barrel of a gun.

The stars on the Coke sign
pulse and flare.
I love these roads! On a razorblade—
my narcotic alcohol pain.

A deep song wells up in me,
boils over.
A gull keeps silent watch,
on the far side of the Danube.

Lawless road, my brother.
Asphalt lord of distances,
I'm flying towards you.
Where are the brakes? I'll crash on a star!

[P.N. & M.R.]



The Word

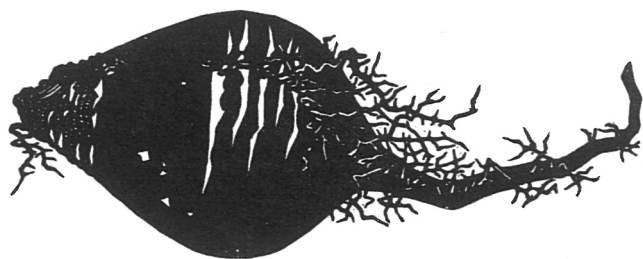
The cello gutters out. The contrabass,
hastening to die, collapses.
And the violin drinks hot thunder,
a white-eyed thunderstorm.

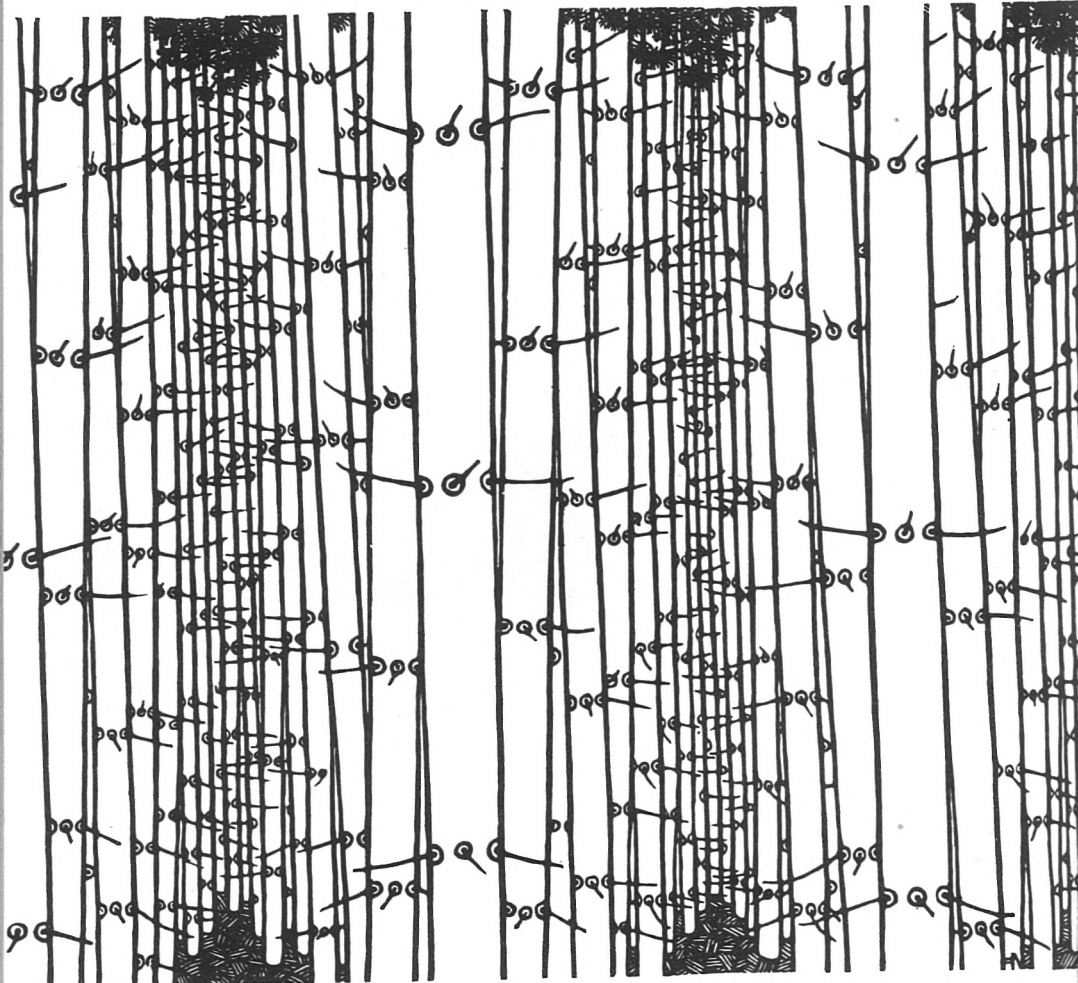
Let imagination, slung on a wild bow,
sweep the strings
into the violin's womb,
where the word buds, ripens.

The violin is a woman giving birth.
The orchestra freezes into silence
when the unbaptized word
rises from its cradle of sound.

Take this word. Don't let glory
corrupt it. Let your life prove
the word is born of music.
The mother of the word is the violin.

[P.N. & M.R.]





Prokofiev's Sonata

"The cardinal achievement (or defect, if you like) of my life has always been a search for my own original musical language. I loathe aping..."

I

Blue chorales carry the heart
along a path of dove-gray mist
through an open field.
Struck dumb, yellow-crawed storms
clamber out of orange shells,
and oaks like black trucks
thud, come to rest on a horse's rump.
At the eastern edge of the pasture,
the pug-nosed moon grazes.
Thunder barrels out from behind a grove
unable to sit on a cloud.

II

Tired soccer players
in black shirts
with low foreheads
and dulled cleats
tear downfield, swiveling,
kicking the head of Socrates
into the goalmouth.

The fly-quick goalie,
flicks out his arms, nabs the philosopher
by the ears, and kicks him

smack into the gullet
of the stadium.

Fury resounds.
Oratorio. Chorale.

III

May the road to eternity be paved
with saffron yellow cloth.
Bales of sun pour through the window.
I've as much light today as a god.
Every chord smells of sleep.
Notes pour into burlap like millet.

I plunge headlong into the sun,
hit dead bottom in the sonata.

IV

Let me tap this branch, the violin's bowstick, and decant
this sparkling wine. Bassoons, horns, here's to your
Prokofian health!

V

I love his black firestorms.
Pure steel, he rises
into my riddled clouds
like the three-pronged bayonet
of a TV tower.
He stabs me with chords.
Over an ultramarine bridge
he stomps
with an atomic hoof.

VI

Touched by your music, my seventeen-year-old girls,
leaning from open windows, catch the dew on their puffed lips.
Every night, when you take me by the arm, I pluck, out of my heart,
cherry-black roses.

[P.N. & M.R.]

Synthesis

Banquet of storm. Thunder rolls
out of black flower beds,
young winds stack
the rough straw of lightning.

A lurid streak of light,
sinfully blue,
and a hellbent sonata of rain
batters me.

And I drink your mania
to keep that solar glow alive.
On the steep-browed shore
two hazel oceans pound.

Guttural rumbling of thunder.
Broken spines of the rain.
The salty bugles of solitude
falter and lament.

[P.N. & M.R.]

A Girl's Fingers

God, what cries inhabit fingers,
what screams in the blue-bunched tips,
burnt fingers, travelers,
frail pilgrims: hands.

God, how fingers glow,
tender as healers,
flames of a sleepless conscience
intimate only with my shadow.

They shine — fireflies, dawns,
worlds washed with a kiss,
little concubines
loving in dumb captivity.

What else can they do, many-tongued
but mute? If they speak, they die.
I curse, and slash with a cold tongue
at their pride, their shamelessness.

Five small suns:
I drowse...
Above me, fingerstars:
your bittersweet nectar
seeps into my heart.

[P.S.]

The Cranberry-Rose

I don't know. I don't know where waves
turn gold or electric purple.
I don't know the limits of my strength
or the power of my wild cries.

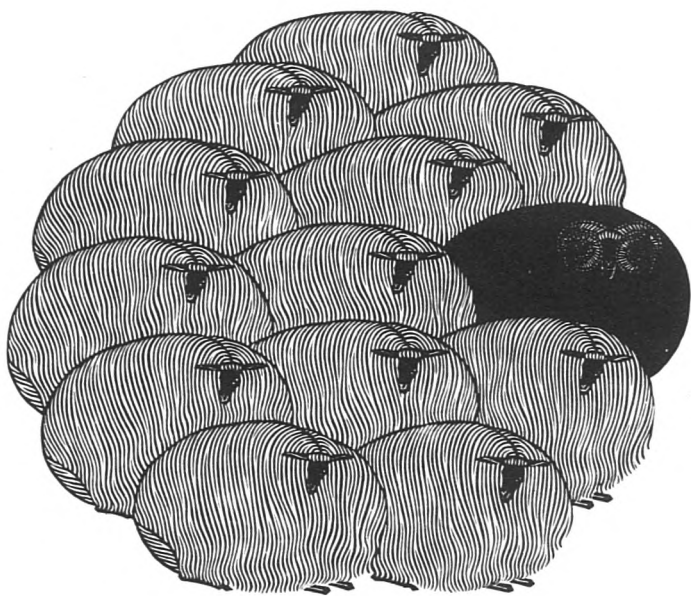
I don't know. I don't know. I kneel
before the known (known to whom?)....
I forge armor for my horse
and, parting, kiss the lips of a star.

Spotted misfortunes, doomed years,
the know-nothing forehead of my life.
I don't know where my steps will burn like flares
and what memory will dredge from the Danube.

But I know this: a cranberry tree rocked me
in a land of roses
and cranberry blood, my own dark song,
burns in my heart with bitter stars.

[D.H.]





Dialogue of the Genes

I

*The gene for hazel eyes dominates
the gene for blue eyes.*

I lift fire in my hands,
my redheaded whirlwind.
Her luxurious braid prickles me,
blows over the brown of her eyes.
Sucked again into the nets,
I stand in a blizzard of passion,
“Lovely doom, who are you? Where do you come from?”
I ask the woman of brown eyes and red hair,
the perfectly modern beauty.
I inquire like an antiquarian into disaster:
“Lovely traitor, who are you? Where do you come from?”
I torture her lips with questions,
I torture her burning lips.
I am happy among the ruins.
By contact, by touch, I ask:
“O goddess Biologyne, tell me your code,
your chromosomian troubles...”
Your tiny skeptical mouth boils,
but your salty mouth is silent:
“Lovely death, who are you?”
 Only smoke over the eyebrow
 of the redheaded whirlwind...

II

Who am I, you ask, who am I?

The Germans were retreating from Tetiev to Buhaivka; mama

went for chaff to the granary in the field and had filled half a sack when three men came in, then four men came in, and mother, her boots filled with chaff, was running on the grain; she threw off her boots and was barefoot when they caught her in the corner; they jerked up her skirts and conceived me on the chaff in the granary behind the winch under the tin roof that once covered the church. The seven men were redheads, mother had black hair and brown eyes, my seven fathers with Bavarian freckles hungered after the odor of woman's love sweat—and mama had black hair and brown eyes; embrace me, my love, kiss this memory right out of me. My mama drank wild thyme, carried heavy sacks to abort me, but her belly got rounder and rounder—I was mean and stubborn, and waited for my father-stepfather. And he arrived, one-armed, from the war, from Breslau, to kick in the belly of his whore. Inside mama's womb, I fended off the attack with my elbows. Who am I, you ask, who am I?

My stepfather Hordij cooled down,
mopped his brow;
yanked my mother onto the wagon—
I was ready to be born.
He lashed his gray hacks with the reins.
His chest constricted.
“Giddy up,” he rasped.
And the horses dashed off—“Whoa there!”
to the hospital through the crowd's accusing eyes.

Who am I, you demand, who am I? Such potholes in these roads, such pits—no pillow could cushion mama—she was just about to give birth, father raced the horses to town. If only a midwife... if only a midwife were here...but circles of stubblefields whirled before her eyes. Here are the railroad tracks, father went mad—parked the wagon on the cross-ties—pushed his whiphandle against the train—so mama says. She still isn't sure if father knew what he

was doing or of what happened later. Maybe he wanted to quash with a single manly stroke the misery that hounded him. Embrace me, my love, drink out of me this memory that is and is not mine.

The train halted. The engineer swore.
Boot heels crunched gravel.
Father stood up tall in the wagon:
“There’s a woman giving birth!” he croaked.
Soldiers stormed out of boxcars,
bandaged, unbandaged, some hairy, some bold,
everyone’s fists trembled with rage,
and a one-armed soldier stood on the wagon,
“There’s a woman giving birth!” he shouted,
and with his whiphandle wiped away a gray tear.

The demobilized mob was hushed—
on the wagon, a woman in pain.
At last, her water broke.
The doctor appeared.
Orderlies—white smocks—were running.
The crisis of ordinary life!

The war-weary soldiers laughed and wept at once,
“There’s a woman giving birth!”
The whole train gasped at so sudden an event.
And gently, disdainfully,
horses munched oats.

Who am I, you ask? When I appeared on earth the front line soldiers tossed my father Hordij up and down in their hands, tossed him up and caught him, and he cried, and bit himself and laughed in his despair, and mother lay, beatific and alert, on the wagon, and the hoot of the steam engine jolted the horses, and when the train disappeared over the horizon and waved a white handkerchief

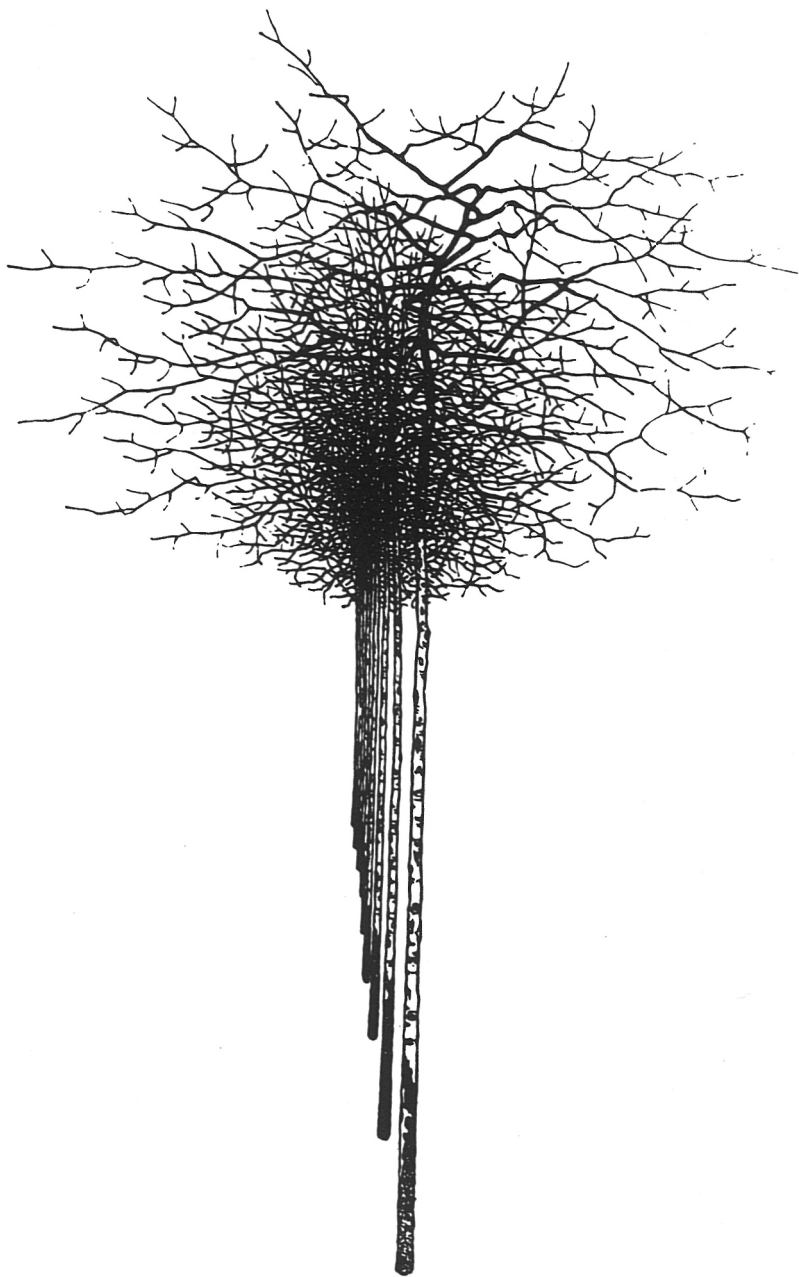
at me—I knew, even in my swaddling clothes, that the train was my godfather, and that my stepfather Hordij would buy me sky-blue hair ribbons, or beat me with drunken fists, until I ran away, stark naked, to a technical school...

Who am I, you are asking, who am I?

Do not ask—embrace me...

Even now, asleep in my arms
your history moves through your lips.
Tears fall from your cheeks,
to their dark source.
Words mumbled, a language I don't know,
your red head reddening...
Perhaps it's your right to say this:
"Ich liebe dich! Ich liebe dich!"
Little swan....

[P.N. & M.R.]



Forest

A gale subdues the trees,
subdues them, bends them down,
snatches rusty stars from the tall oaks
and whips the hawthorns till they bleed;

lifts the skirts of the virgin birches,
uproots the smooth aspens
and on their bark
inscribes its fatal sign.

Firs scatter their needles,
the yellow pines, stricken with fear,
whistle lewdly, like yokels at the cinema,
when the wild rose takes off her last kimono
and plunges an icicle into her heart.

[P.S.]

Wings

Through forests and jungles,
 crisscrossing the sea,
the New Year came bearing gifts:
for some — lambskin caps,
 for some — dimestore pipes,
 or new improved brass knuckles,
 or photon rockets,
 or salt for potatoes,
 or three sheaves of wind in the field.
For some — powder for their snouts,
 but for the old peasant Kyrylo — wings.

It was a day like any other day, and then—
shoulder blades cut through the jacket.
Slashing through cotton, blue wings lit up,
began to boil in the sun.
Starved for the sky, they hovered boldly,
and swallowed sky-blue tint.
And in the old peasant's heart — grief.
And in the old peasant's heart — shadows.

For some — rotten luck,
 for some — sun out of the fog,
for some — a girl's breasts,
 for some — sudden death at midnight,
and for the old peasant — dammit — wings.
His wife complained: "Ordinary people —
their lips are smeared with butter:
for some — felt boots
 for some — cold pills,
for some — a crib of corn,

but for this schlemiel,
God forgive me — wings?!”

In a fit of common sense
the old peasant grunted
and to set himself free
he put his ax to the whetstone,
stretched his wings on a log, and hacked them off.

Screech owls gagged, the stars blinked,
and at night, slashing through cotton,
his new wings began to beat.
The old peasant lived by his ax.
He got rich off the wings.
He shingled his roof with wings.
He fenced himself in with wings.
And poets stole the wings
to keep their muse in wings.
Aesthetes worshipped the wings,
and the lopped wings dreamed of heaven.

For some — new gates,
for some — a ton of venom,
for some — sun in their pockets,
for some — a bushel of nothing, cheap,
but for the old peasant, dammit! —
some people have all the luck — wings.

[P.N. & M.R.]

The Only One

Of all your fantasies
I remember only one:

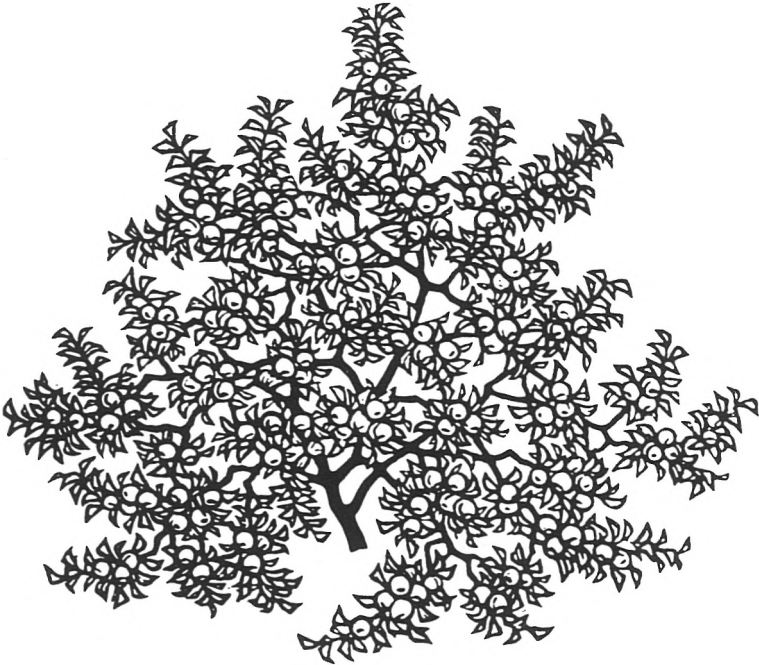
a man with a broken wing
bends over a girl.

She is no match for this man,
even broken wings
remember the scent of air.
He cannot fly
nor can he marry her,
he is from the skies,
she is from the earth.

A woman always lies on her back
on her braided wings.
Broken by the wisdom of motherhood,
she flies with the small wings of her breasts
to the man with a broken wing...

Of all your fantasies
I remember only one.

[D.H.]



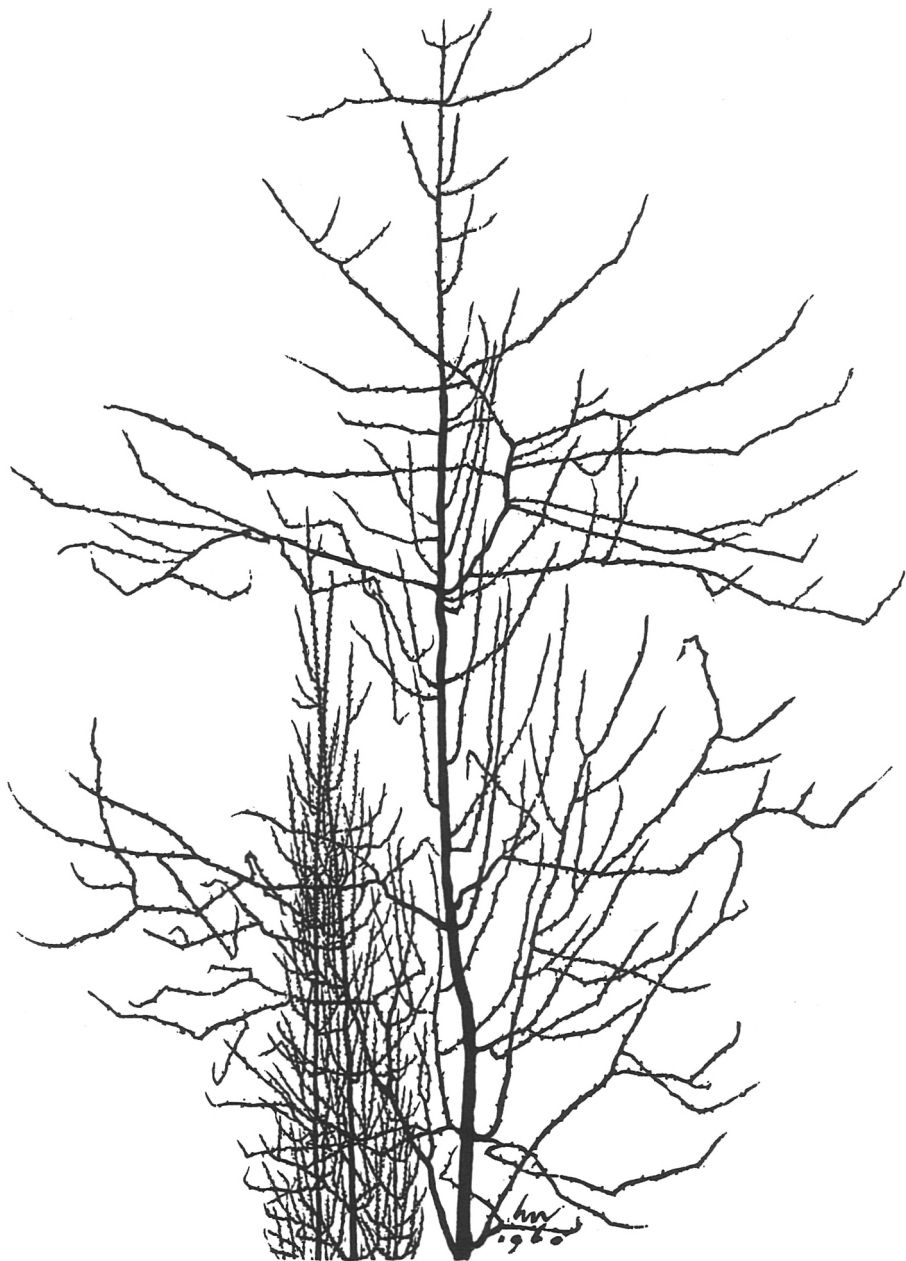
Father

Where tons of sugar beets
 rock in the wind,
where the tops are edged with milk,
where a refinery cranes its neck
making a hooting sound,
that's where my father walks
with his bald head glistening.
The sun stole his crown of hair;
aureoles of clouds
shine on his forehead.

In my father's veins steamboats
ply their trade,
rubbing against his ribs like harbor walls.
Whistling, they sail through his aorta,
carrying refined sugar from his heart
 all the way to India
 to sweeten the tea of a Yogi.

Old, upright, like a masthead,
he walks in the field.
For seventy-five years he's held a star in his palm,
hoping that the sea wind
would not eat the sugar away...
Now he's ready to stretch out,
whose tired legs never reached the firebird.
Clods of earth will breathe
on his pinioned feet.

[P.N. & M.R.]



Why, Do You Think...

(after Whitman)

Why, do you think, I pick up my pen?
To speak of good and evil?
To separate those inseparable brothers?
Or embroider life with a white silk thread?

No!

Only to say that I saw two strangers
on a deserted field, on white snow:
one just stepped out of a spaceship,
the other just stepped off a train
on a deserted field, on white snow.
One, just back from a camp, embraced the other
just back from the sky.

A black jacket with numbers embraced
a white tennis shirt without numbers.

On a deserted field, on white snow
one firmly embraced the other,
and the other passionately kissed him.

[D.H.]

Spinoza

Taught and overtaught
drilled and overdrilled
June-bugs buzz in the cherry trees
boys gather around a transistor radio.

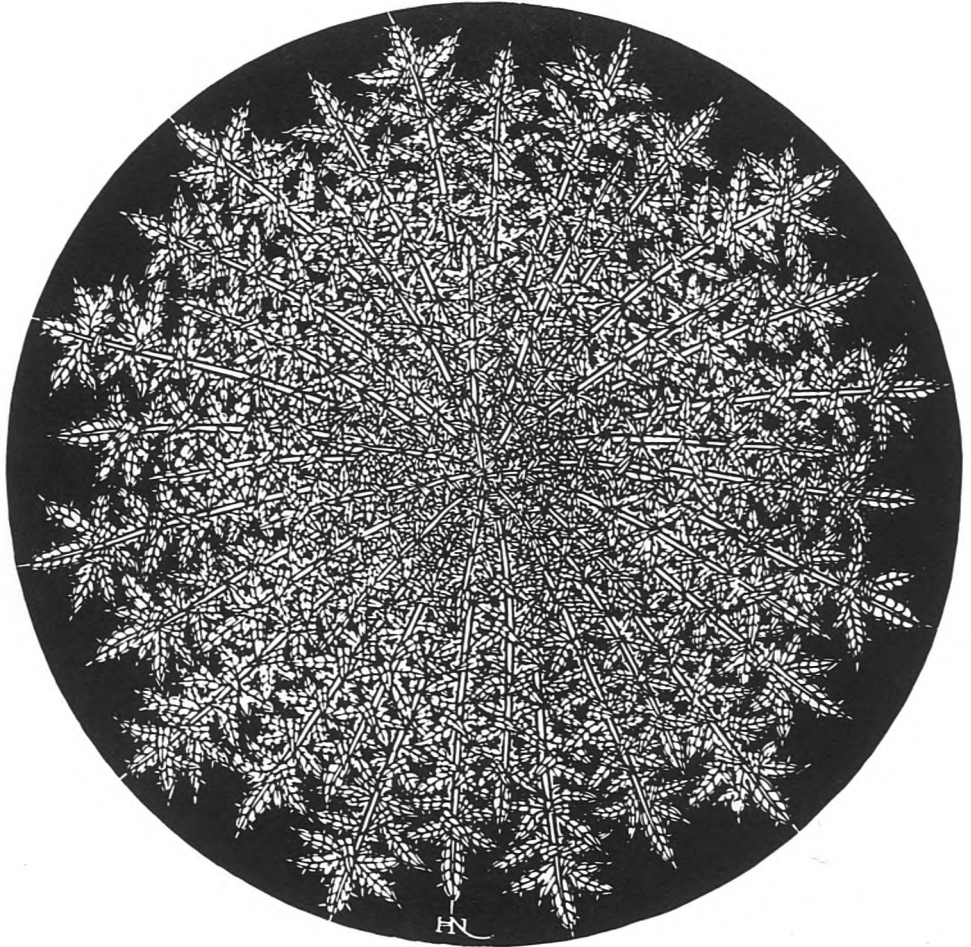
Learned and overlearned
boys knock down the June-bugs
pierce them with straws
and shoot them toward the stars.

Smell of smoke and tears
a roar of laughter splits a coat-seam
in a Grand Boulevard shop window
a calf bellows.

And the rockets fly upward
and the wounded June-bugs fly
to complain to the stars
about the boys with their plastic radio.

“Nature is an infinity of attributes,
each one complete in itself,”
said Spinoza, rising skyward
pierced by a straw.

[P.S.]



Woman and Sea

Sea, I came out of you. Sea, I return to you.
Came out of the seafoam
to ride the human waves.
What was my name? Aphrodite,
perhaps?
Who knows?

Coming out of you on tiptoe
with the sun on my left shoulder,
I was chaste,
I was young,
— and afraid...

Who's there behind me?
The sea is before me.
The sun is above my head.
The wind caresses my breasts...
I know no one. I know nothing.
I overstep temptations, step into the sea.
Again I am small,
— and afraid...

The sea is before me.
Who's there behind me— who knows?
His name was man, it seems...
The sun is above my head.
The wind caresses my breasts.
Sea, I came out of you. Sea, I return to you.

[P.N. & M.R.]

White Candle

Somewhere on the floor of my nights
a white candle burns
a wind blew and couldn't put it out
a bull charged and couldn't put it out
a horse galloped with a silver mane
a tank crept by on its toes
a plane opened its blue umbrella
they couldn't kill the flame

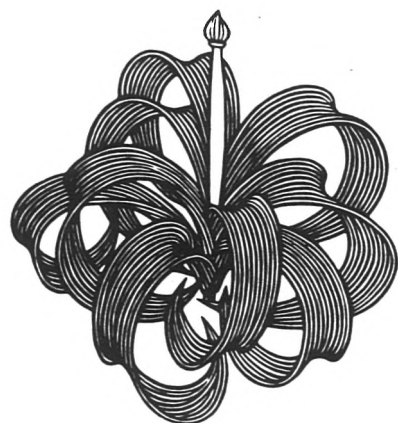
Each one leaned
made a light

The wind comes bearing a candle
the horse a candle
the bull the tank the plane
all of them candles

A crystal palace
floats past with a candle stub
a mosquito
hovers with a long taper

Somewhere on the floor of my nights
a white candle burns

[Carol Muske]



Work and Leisure

One room on the left,
one room on the right,
my room in the middle.
Work, in one room,
taps day and night on the typewriter.
In the other room Leisure
swigs from a bottle, laughs, carries on
and swears loud enough
to shrivel an elephant's ears.
"Neighbors," I say, "Come in and visit."
So Work sits on one stool
and Leisure takes the other.
"And where shall I sit, Sir?" I ask.
Then Work gives me one stool to sit on,
while Leisure slyly keeps the other.
"But Sir, don't you have a place for Work to sit?"
So Work takes one stool
and I glumly sit on the other.
"My dear host, haven't you a seat for Leisure?"
"I know," I say at last, "I'll bring in a third chair!"
They both stare out the window.

[P.S.]

from **Triptych About Words**

How do I know my own words
when they belong to others?
Although my violence spurs them on,
their caw is the voice of the world.
I want my words to be cut true...
now they are hacked with an ax.

[P.N. & M.R.]



August

August, a golden wing, turns to ash.
The trapped heart turns to ash.
We depart transformed— an oar, a plowblade.
We arrive transformed— as proton, as macadam.

The throaty wind jeers above us.
You bake on a fresh mown field.
Latched for autumn,
buckles on a suede skirt gleam.

I am already absent. Yet you stand by me.
We are not here. Wrapped by winds.
The words of old plays nest
in the clumps of blue-gray wormwood.

O my widow, my little swallow,
your word is fast losing its breath.
Except for now all life is chaff—
but this moment is holy.

[P.N. & M.R.]



Knife in the Sun

Prologue

My years tread on my heels:
from windmills to rocket-flash,
photons to Easter bread—
down to the simplicity of shoes.

Cherry-blossoms dream
in orchards singed by the sun.
Words! Stand up for yourselves—
let stardust chap your lips.

Why am I here? Where will I go?
did my restlessness begin when the universe
struck its roots
into the dark mud of my village?

What can I bring to the hazy distances?
An offering of bread
or the black atomic cancer
eating the heart of five continents?

The air cracks like a wafer,
I drink voices that ride the wind...
I am young,
what is in store for me?

I gather blue shadows in my palm,
take leave of the bluebird and the Dnieper—
Newton's gravity can't hold me,
I break through the galaxy into the unknown.

I met Skovoroda in a streetcar
(he has wandered the world for two hundred years).
Removing his sheepskin cap, he asks me
to give his regards to the sun.

His face, yellow with age,
is lined with a million wrinkles,
his melancholy hands
tap the world with a blindman's stick.

He whispers: "Go, my son,
Cain has marked your brow.
Before your ship of life becomes your coffin,
take my blessings and go.

Walk through the land. Enter human hearts.
Let them show you the way.
That's where the scaffold of the rocket
stands and will stand forever.

Open the Heart

(madwoman and honey)

I threw my white cape and bright scarf
over my shoulders.
The evening opened out to me.
As a train rushed me away
cloud-banks leaned over me.
The odor of mushrooms drifted from the forest.
Oak trees swayed
and the moonlight grieved backward.

The door blew open in the trembling air
and in a fan of rain
with a bottle of cool Madeira
and a black cloak,
he entered. Put the bottle down. Stood there.
Two clear glasses,
held out to me,
rippled in the light.

Stranger:

I come from the underworld. Like it or not
I'll take you on a journey
that will make you curse your native land,
your motives and your dreams.
You will dig the bones of your ancestors
out of their graves,
you will tear the red flag into shreds
and use it to wrap your feet.
You will throw yourself off a cliff
into the black mouth
of your humble servant.
Then you will writhe
for a hundred centuries.
But today we can negotiate as friends....
Come to us; to our coffin makers,
to our eternal gathering.
We crumble souls and blast flowers with frost.
There is no end to the dark night of us,
but there are only a few billion of you.
This isn't a threat.
What's your bleeding heart worth,
you who are one of us?

I:

Quiet! I'll drink —
to your death!

We went together. In the woods
a slow fire consumed itself.
The arrow-gold poplars
held the sun over the blue day.
White huts glowed under straw roofs.
Girls raised their song into the sky,
boys cartwheeled and let out their kites
through the autumn plum trees.
My devil wore a fashionable suit,
his cloak upon his arm.
Mocking, monocled,
he squinted, as the houses glowed.

Suddenly an old woman flung open the door:
“Children, children, come to your mother.
Come quickly to the feast.
The overseer snubs me,
people reject me —
my God, what have they got against me?
Only my puppy and my rooster befriend me.
I also have a kitten and a swarm of bees...
All my sons are home today.
They've come home. Bless them all...”

Straw turned to ash,
the color of her braids.
There was wilderness in her eyes,
the numb oaks stared,
stones pulverized themselves,

and the sabres of my eyebrows snapped.

In the house—

whiskey on the table,
three spoons, three forks, three plates—
and not a soul.

The dog sat at the table, the cat sipped gelatin,
and the rooster clucked on the stool.

“Drink up, my handsome boys!”

She filled tumblers

for her cat, her dog, her rooster:

“This one’s for Andrei... This for Peter...

And this for Vanyusha...

There’s plenty to go around.

Ask our guests to sit down, boys...”

And she began to dance.

The devil wind

spun her round the black table.

Her three sons wept

from their bloodstained frames.

One died near Berlin, one in a snowdrift

somewhere near Warsaw, and the third

officially by his own hand,

during the black terror of thirty-seven.

And their mother danced

on the holy straw,

danced round the planet, round the table:

O sons, little sons,
precious little cucumbers,
little mop-headed boys,
my own little songbirds.

Hitler wanders over the Ukraine,
props a handmill on his knee:
how can I crush you all
and still escape from Stalin?

I sit on horsehair
and count the working days.
This way turn, that way turn,
and you, old man, shush!

Mother poured us honey in a pail,
thick autumn honey.
The honey leaves whirled in the wind,
spinning the color of death into the air.

“Now dear guests, for your journey
take this gift, but return the pail.”
I kneeled to mother’s feet
and broke the web woven by madness.

Funeral of the Head of a Collective Farm

They carried him with their knotty hands,
on the backs of their anger,
in a maple coffin,
a handsome man of forty.
They carried him with knotty hands.

The devil and I
followed the procession
of stooped shoulders.
I heard a winding music.
The devil and I tugged at our wind caps.

Blown leaves paved the road.
Houses tipped their straw hats,
blue pity in their eyes.
Women, fences, and horses mourned—
slowly the road unrolled.

He sat up for the last time in his coffin,
leaned on its polished rib
and reached for the rib of life.
His eyes and his lips cursed death
when he sat up for the last time in his coffin.

Goodbye, farms! And you, wise oxen!
And you, fretful horses in your sad harnesses!
Goodbye, sun and people and maple leaf!
And you tractors, and you cisterns.
Goodbye, road! And you, wise oxen.

And you Beethoven, forgive me.
I never had time for you—
I know the symphonies of the fields
but not one of yours.
Forgive me for that, Beethoven.

Forgive me, Rodins, Mozarts, and Einsteins,
and you Stephen, drunk even today,
forgive me, Marina—I didn't look
at your lips and blue eyes—
forgive me for not caring enough.

He grew silent. The cemetery rose up with crosses
as he sank back, breathed for the last time.
A satellite orbited his head,
a halo for this ordinary man.
The cemetery rose up with crosses.

All the crosses were crossing me.
Mephisto jeered.
The head of the collective farm
blessed my journey with a red star.
All the crosses were crossing me.

Invisible Tears of a Wedding

Hey, make a circle, travelers! Give them a drink!
The couples whirl, spin and stamp.
One laughs so hard he cries, another is blown into sleep.
A young drummer bangs his drumstick.

And gropes for it under the table. The house smells of dill.
Shaggy roosters crow on the walls.
The wind shoves its head forward, arms akimbo,
and dances the matchmaker over the floor.

The gardener picks up the spicy dill apples,
yellow and full-cheeked with turned-up tails.
The godfather dips into the fruit liqueur and whispers
to the godmother. His bushy mustache tickles her cheek.

The flushed groom winks,
begins to dance, kicks one leg out after the other.
Children, all eyes, bang on the window;
they bring a slender violin to the slender bride.

The night is on its way. Eyelashes turn blue.
Dream-violin, play for us.
Spread your wings for us.
The music stutters, then sweeps the strings.

Studio Portrait: Ukrainian Horses over Paris

This breathing world was not molded by God,
but by man, from Adam's clay.
It was painted and dried,
then coaxed its way into the human heart.

I ignored the horse.
A child's toy, I thought.
I took the saddle from the closet
and admired its strange horn.

I was blind to the horse and he took revenge:
when I looked at him again
he tossed my soul into the kiln
and snapped his invisible harness.

He changed me into the wild steppe,
casting me back three hundred years.
Through the dense mist hordes
of barechested Tartars stormed over me.

This horse led the army.
He pounded me with his naked hooves,
after three hundred years
pounding the red stars into me.

I looked again. He changed me
into Dnieper and drank my clouds,
and from behind some wormwood sheaves
called his colt, his Tenderlipped Prince.

Palaces, houses and bridges
spouted from me.

The Seine coursed through me
mirroring trees and clouds.

Above me, on a Scythian horse,
Picasso bolted
through the silver clouds
with a dove in his hand...

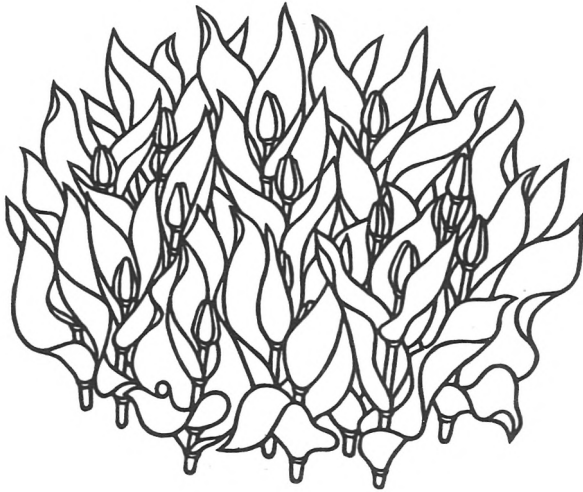
How shall we find the master workshop?
Go straight with your heart under your arm
to a grey-haired man who calls horses out of clay
whose ceramic oxen chew their cud,

from whose crowded palette
cosmic fear erupts:
a cow in a top-hat sits,
holding a bomb with its black hooves.

Horses leap over bureaucrats
from Moscow to Paris—
unshod, unbridled,
the Ukraine hanging onto their manes.

That Scythian horse, who began in a clay-walled hut,
today stamps the stars of the Milky Way.
So then, what do you have to say, devil?
What do you have to say about my country?

[D.H.]



NOTES TO THE POEMS

Sunflower (page 7). The sunflower frequently appears in Ukrainian art and literature. It is generally associated with aspirations toward space, light, freedom.

Babi Yar (page 8). Babi Yar is a ravine on the northwest outskirts of Kiev where in 1941 the Nazis killed more than 70,000 Jews. The first poem with that title, by the important Ukrainian poet Mykola Bazhan (b. 1904) appeared in 1945; in 1961 the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko made Babi Yar a world symbol of infamy with his dramatic manifesto attacking Russian as well as German anti-Semitism. Drach's poem (1966) is low-keyed, oblique, ironic. Annual observances at the ravine were at first discouraged, but recently an official monument was erected on the spot, designating the massacre as a "tragedy of the Soviet people."

Old Man Hordij (page 9). Ivan Fizer cites this poem as an example of Drach's concern with ordinary life, the micro-reality of human existence: "The sweet and garlicky dead breath of the ritual blood ram, the old man with black grease under his fingernails flaying its skin, his pregnant daughter asleep and his old woman Horpyna at the graveyard since yesterday"—all these elements combine, in the context of Drach's philosophic vision, to convey his characteristic note of tragic irony.

Pervak is the first run of a raw home-made whiskey.

Kazakhstan is a constituent republic of the USSR, east and north of the Caspian Sea, in Soviet Asia.

La Strada (page 20). Original title, "Ballad of the Road." The highway between Bologna and Florence inspired this poem, which was preceded in 1927 by Mykola Bazhan's poem on the same theme.

The gull is a popular symbol of the Ukraine. This tradition is said to go back to hetman Ivan Mazepa (1639-1709), reputed author of a famous song about the Gull-Ukraine (Chayka).

Prokofiev's Sonata (page 25). This musical dithyramb, a tribute to the modern Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953), is presented here in abridged form.

The Cranberry-Rose (page 30). *Viburnum Opulus* (Kalyna), a variety of the European high-bush cranberry, is commonly known as snowball or guelder-rose. It is a favorite symbol of the homeland in Ukrainian literature.

Dialogue of the Genes (page 33). Original title, "Ballad of the Genes." Drach's idiosyncratic use of the term "ballad" to stress the folk-roots of his subject-matter would be misleading in English. The brutality and destructiveness of the German invaders of the Ukraine during World War II is a recurrent theme of modern Ukrainian poetry. In Drach's poem, his beloved ("woman of brown eyes and red hair") reconstructs the scene of rape that led to her birth.

Wings (page 40). Drach's most popular poem can be interpreted as a probing analysis, despite its comic tone, of a gifted but self-destructive people, his own compatriots.

Why, Do You Think... (page 46). Drach's poem is based, with significant variation, on these lines by Walt Whitman:

*What think you I take my pen in hand to record?
The battle-ship, perfect-model'd, majestic, that I saw pass the
offing to-day under full sail?
The splendors of the past day? Or the splendor of the night
that envelopes me?
Or the vaunted glory and growth of the great city spread around
me?—No;
But I record of two simple men I saw to-day, on the pier, in
the midst of the crowd, parting the parting of dear friends;
The one to remain hung on the other's neck, and passionately
kiss'd him,
While the one to depart, tightly prest the one to remain in his arms.*

Spinoza (page 47). The line "June-bugs buzz in the cherry trees" is from the famous poem "A Cherry Grove Beside the House" by Taras Shevchenko (1814-1864), the poet-father of Ukrainian nationhood.

"Grand Boulevard" stands, in translation, for Kreshchatyk, the main avenue of Kiev.

Knife in the Sun (page 57). When this poem appeared in the *Literary Gazette* on June 18, 1961, it created a sensation. Following severe official criticism, Drach has reprinted the poem in revised versions, softening some of its impact. Our translation is based on the original text.

“Black terror of thirty-seven” refers to the bloody reign of Nikolai Yezhov, commissar of N.K.V.D. (the secret police) in 1937-1938. After his liquidation by Stalin, he was succeeded by L.P. Beria.

Skovoroda (1722-1794) was a philosopher and poet who wrote in old Ukrainian and Latin. He gave up academic security in order to wander from village to village, teaching in the streets.

Ivan Drach was born in 1936 near Kiev. He writes in Ukrainian and is generally considered the Ukraine's most distinguished poet of his generation.

"I was moved by the blazing intensity of Drach's spirit. It was a different music from any that I had heard in Russia," Stanley Kunitz says in his introduction. And indeed, the reader will find in Drach's intense poetry of wonder the hard, original knowledge on which the human spirit survives.

One would expect translations by several hands to be rendered into different and separate voices. Remarkably, the poets in this book, under Stanley Kunitz's guidance, have achieved for Drach a single musical English voice.

ISBN 0-920428-46-0



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\$12.95