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VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY 1893-1930

A CLOUD IN TROUSERS

Your thought
musing in those brains of oatmeal
like a bloated functionary on an oily sofa —
I'll mock it to death with a dripping shred of my heart
and nourish my biting contempt.

No gray hair in my soul,
no doddering tenderness.
I rock the world with the thunder of my voice,
strolling, looking good —
twenty-two.

Sensitive ones,
your love is a violin solo,
cruder ones use a drum.
But you can't be like me,
inside out, all lips.

Come out and learn,
cambric-prim officialdom
of the angelic leagues!

You too, ladies, thumbing your lips like a cook
his cookbook.

If you prefer,
I'll be pure raging meat,
or if you prefer,
as the sky changes tone,
I'll be absolutely tender,
not a man, but a cloud in trousers!

Flowery Nice doesn't exist!
Again I sing to praise
men used as hospital beds,
women wornout as clichés.

I

You think I'm crazy? It's malaria?

It happened.
It happened in Odessa.

"See you at four," Maria said.

Eight.
Nine.
Ten.

Then the twilight
spun around from the window
and stomped off into nightmarish darkness,
frowning,
decemberish.

Behind its dilapidated back,
snickering candelabras.

You wouldn't recognize me,
a sack of gristly meat,
moaning,
writhing.

What can such a jerk want?
A lump's desires are infinite!

Who cares
if I'm made of bronze,
if my heart is lined with iron?
At night I only want
to muffle my clang
in soft woman.

And so,
huge,
I hunched by the window,
my forehead melting the glass.
Love, no or yes?
And what kind,
big or teeny?
From my body how could it be big?
It would have to be a quiet little lovelet
that's shy of noisy traffic,
that loves horse-tram bells.

On and on,
my face muzzling
the rain's pocked face,
I wait,
drenched by the city's splashing surf.

Midnight races,
grabs,
stabs,
get rid of him!

The twelfth stroke fell,
a chopped-off head.

Gray raindrops on the windowpanes
howling,
a heap of grimaces,
like all the gargoyles of Notre Dame
in concert.

That's it!
The hell with her.
I'll yell till my mouth busts.

Quietly,
I heard
a nerve
twitch like a sick man hopping out of bed;
at first
it barely stirred,
then pattered around,
uneasy,
strict;
then a few more,
tap dancing
frantically.

The first floor ceiling crashed.

Nerves!
Big,
little,
millions!
Galloping like mad
till their knees give!

Through the room, night oozed on and on,
ooze the heavy eye can't heave out of.
The hotel doors
suddenly banged,
chomping unevenly.

In you rushed,
sharp as "Here!"
torturing your suede gloves
you said,
"Guess what?
I'm getting married."

Go get married.
Big deal.
Who cares?
I'm perfectly calm,
pulse:
zero.

Remember
you used to say,
"Jack London,
money,
love,
sex."
I only saw
a Giaconda
that had to be stolen!

You were stolen.

I'll gamble for love again,
my brows a fiery arch.
So what!
Hobos can live
in burnt-out houses.

You mock me?
"A beggar has no money,
and you have no 'emeralds of madness.'"
Now listen!
They mocked Vesuvius,
and Pompeii was destroyed!

Attention
gentlemen,
dilettantes
in sacrilege,
crime,
slaughter —
have you seen
the epitome of horror,

my face
when
I
am quite calm?

And I feel
"I"
is too small for me.
Some other body is bursting out.

Hello?
Who is it?
Momma?
Momma!
Your son is wonderfully ill!
Momma!
His heart is on fire.
Tell Lyuda and Olga
their brother is trapped.
Each word,
even the jokes,
that his scorching mouth pukes up,
hurls itself out like a naked whore
from a burning brothel.

A whiff
of burning flesh!
Here they come!
Glittering
helmets!
But please, no heavy boots.
Tell the firemen to climb
tenderly on a burning heart.
Here, let me.
I'll pump barrels of tears.
I'll push against the ribs.
I'm jumping! I'm jumping! I'm jumping! I'm jumping!
They fell in.
You can't jump out of your heart.

Through cracked lips,
from my smoldering face,
cindery kisses leap up.

Momma!
I can't sing.
In the church of my heart the choir's in flames.

Charred images of numbers and words
rush from my skull
like children from a flaming building.
Fear,
grabbing at the sky,
lifted high,
the Lusitania's burning arms.

Into quiet apartments
where people are trembling,
a hundred-eyed fire roars from the docks.
My last cry —
groan through the ages,
I'm on fire!

2

Praise me!
I am greater than the greatest.
On everything before me
I stamp *nihil*.

I won't read anything
at all.
A book?
What's that?

Here's how I used to think
you made a book:
a poet comes along,
mouth half open, inspired,
then suddenly the idiot bursts into song —
fancy that!

But, it seems, before he starts his song,
he tramps around, calloused from fermentation,
with the dull fish of imagination
flopping about in the heart's swamp.
And while his soup of love and nightingales
is boiling, thrumming with rhyme,
the tongueless street's in torture,
unable to make a sound.

We're proud,
We lift up towers of Babel,
but god
scatters all speech,
grinds
cities into fields.

Quietly the street shoves pain along.
Out of its gullet a yell sticks up.
Fat taxis and bony cabs
swell, stuck in its throat.
Its tubercular chest
is pedestrianed flat.

The city barricades the street with night.

But still,
when the street coughed up its phlegm
onto the square,
shoving that porch off its throat,
it seemed a choir
of archangels cried
god was plundered, now he comes to punish!

But the street sat down and yelled,
"Let's stuff our bellies!"

Krupps and baby Krupps
paint war brows on the city,
but in its mouth
dead words rot,

only two grow fat:
"bastard"
and I think the other
is "borsch."

Poets,
sopped with lamentation,
rush from the street, their long hair matted,
"how can those two words sing
of maidens
and love
and tiny flowers in the dew?"

After the poets
come thousands
of students,
whores,
contractors.

Hey gentlemen!
Stop!
You're not beggars,
don't beg!

We're strong
and take huge strides.
We mustn't listen, must rip them apart,
those who are glued
as a special bonus
to every double bed.

Should we kneel and beg them
"help me!"
beg for hymns
and oratorios?
We who are the creators in a blazing hymn —
in the noise of factories and laboratories.

Who gives a damn for Faust
in his occult rocket

slithering along the parquet of heaven with Mephistopheles!
I know
a nail in my boot
is worse than Goethe's fantasies!

I,
the extreme golden mouth,
whose every word
gives birth to the soul,
and christens the body,
I say to you,
the least living speck
is worth more than anything I'll ever do.

Listen!
Today
brasslipped Zarathustras preach,
rushing around,
moaning and wailing.
We,
our faces crumpled like sheets,
our lips dangling like chandeliers,
inmates of leper city,
where dirty gold breeds leper's sores,
we are far purer than Venetian azure,
washed by sea and sun!

Damn Homer and Ovid
for not having made
characters like us,
pocked and sooty.
I know
the sun would dim
seeing the golden sparkle of our souls!

Muscle and sinew work better than prayer.
Do we have to beg time for charity?
We —
each of us —

hold the world's reigns
in our five fingers.

Saying this brought me to my Golgothas in the auditoriums
of Petrograd, Moscow, Odessa, and Kiev,
where there wasn't one
who didn't
yell:

"Crucify him!
Crucify him!"

But,
people, even you who have wounded me,
you're closer and dearer than anything.

Haven't you seen a dog licking
the hand that whips it?

I,
mockery of my tribe,
like some long
dirty joke,
I see the one no one sees
crossing the mountains of time.

Where men's vision fails,
I see 1916 come,
leading hungry masses,
wearing the thorny crown of revolution.

I am with you, I, his precursor,
I am wherever there is pain,
I nail myself
to every tear.
There is no more that can be forgiven,
I've cauterized once-tender souls,
a thing far more difficult
than taking a million Bastilles!

And when
he arrives,

announced by rebellion,
and you greet your saviour,
then I'll
rip out my soul,
stamp on it
to make it big,
and hand it to you,
bloody, for a flag.

3

Ah, what's this?
Why
do dirty fists
shake at clear joy?

It came
the thought
of insane asylums came
and hung its curtains in my head.

And —
like a battleship, sinking,
men choking,
diving out open hatches —
so Burlyuk,¹ terrified,
crawled
out of his own gashed eye.
Nearly dirtying his teary eyelid,
he drawled out,
stood,
walked,
and unusually tender for one so fat,
proclaimed,
"Good!"

Good, when a yellow shirt
keeps the soul from having to answer questions.

¹ David Burlyuk (b. 1882) Russian artist and Futurist poet.

Good
to yell
when thrown to the gallows,
"Drink Van Houten's Cocoa!"

That
thunderous
flash
is worth more
than anything . . .

Lurching through cigar smoke,
like a liqueur glass,
here comes Severyanin's² drunken face.

You call yourself a poet,
squeaking like a little gray quail!
Today
brass knuckles
will smash the world inside your skull!

You,
troubled by only one thought,
"Is my dancing smooth enough?"
Look at me enjoying myself,
me —
an ordinary pimp and gambler.

On you,
pickled in love,
wetting the centuries
with weeping,
I turn
my back, using the sun
as a monocle
for my bulging eye.

Dressing up incredibly,

² Igor Severyanin (1887–1941), Russian Futurist poet.

I'll strut over the world,
spreading ruin or joy,
and in front of me,
like a pug on a leash, my pet, the Emperor Napoleon.

The world will lie on her back,
meat quivering, eager,
things will come to life,
lips
prattling forever,
Umm umm *ummm!*

Suddenly,
clouds
and various cloud-like things in the sky
will kick up a fuss,
as if white-suited workers were dispersing
after calling an embittered strike against the sky.
Enraged thunder crawled out of the clouds,
its huge nostrils snorting friskily,
and for a second, the sky's face twitched
like the iron Bismarck, grimacing.

And someone,
tangled in cloudy chains,
held out a hand to the cafe
and somehow it seemed feminine,
and gentle somehow,
and somehow like a gun carriage.

You think
the sun's kindly
patting the cafe's cheek?
No it's General Galliffet³
coming to cut the rebels down!

Take your hands out of your pockets!

³ Marquis Gaston Alexandre Auguste de Galliffet (1830–1909), a French general known for his harsh treatment of Commune prisoners.

Grab a rock, a knife, a bomb,
and if you don't have any arms,
use your forehead!

Come on, you little starving,
sweating,
timid,
moldy, lice-infested clods!

Come on!
We'll paint Monday and Tuesday with blood
and make them holidays.
At knifepoint let the earth remember
those she tried to vulgarize!
The earth,
fleshy
as Rothschild's overpetted mistress.

As on an official holiday,
let the flags fly, in a delirium of gunfire,
you street lamps, raise up higher
the bloody carcasses of merchants.

Swearing —
begging —
knifing —
biting
each other's flesh —

The sky was red as the Marseillaise,
a final shudder and the sun set.

This is crazy.

There won't be a thing left.

Night will come,
chew you up,
gobble you down.

Look —
is the sky turning Judas again,

with its handful of treachery-stained stars?
Night came.

Mamai⁴

squatting down on the city to feast.
You can't break through this night,
black as Azef.⁵

I slouch in the corner of a bar,
getting wine on the tablecloth and on my soul,
and I see
in another corner the round eyes
of the madonna piercing my heart.
Why give this crowd in a bar
such radiance of painted cliché?
See?

Again they spit on the man from Golgotha
and choose Barabbas.

On purpose, perhaps,
my face is no newer
among this human garbage heap,
perhaps I'm your handsomest
son.

Give them
in their mildewed joy
a time of fast death,
so the children will grow,
boys becoming fathers,
girls — pregnant.

And let the new born
have the keen grizzle of the magi.
And in their turn

4 Mamai — Khan of the Golden Horde. He was defeated by Russians under Prince Dmitry Donskoy at the Battle of Kulikovo, Sept. 8, 1380.

5 Yevno-Meyer Azef (1869-1918) dual agent and terrorist in employment of the Socialist Revolutionary Party and the Tsarist police.

they'll baptize
their infants with the names of my poems.

I, praiser of England and machines,
perhaps am merely
the thirteenth apostle
in a common gospel.

And wherever
my dirty voice sounds,
then, minute by minute,
day and night,
maybe Jesus Christ
is sniffing the forget-me-nots of my soul.

4

Maria! Maria! Maria!
Let me in!
These streets drive me nuts!
No?
You'll wait
for my cheeks to collapse
and me to arrive,
squeezed,
stale,
toothless, muttering
that today
I'm "amazingly honest?"

Maria —
look,
my shoulders are sinking.

On the streets
men poke at the blubber of four-story craws,
little tiny eyes stick out,
worn out in forty years,
to sneer

at me gnawing —
again —
the stale crusts of old caresses.

Rain pours its tears down
on the sidewalk. A wino in the puddles
soaked, licks the dead street's cobbles,
but on his faded eyelashes,
yes! —
on the eyelashes on the grizzled icicles
tears pour down,
yes! —
from the lowered eyes of the waterspouts.

The rain poked and licked
everyone on foot,
but athlete after fat athlete gleamed by in carriages.
Stuffed down to the bone,
people cracked open,
and the grease dripping out,
plus the old chewed hamburger,
plus the gummy used bread,
flowed down in a cruddy river from the carriages.

Maria!
How can I jam a delicate word into those fat ears?
A bird
sings
for charity,
hungry — but he sings sweetly.
But I'm a man, Maria,
ordinary,
one that the tubercular night
coughed up onto Presnya's dirty hand.

Maria, do you want a man like me?
Let me in!
Or I'll have a fit and squash the doorbell.

Maria!

The pastures of the street are a jungle.
They've got their hands around my throat.

Open up!

It hurts!

Look, they're sticking
hatpins in my eyes!

I'm in.

Sweetheart,
never mind
the damp mountain of sweaty-bellied women
I carry on my oxy neck —

I lug
a million pure endless loves through my life
and a billion foul little likes.

Never mind
if again
in storms of betrayal
I kiss thousands of pretty faces

"Mayakovsky's girls!"
They're just the dynasty
that rules from a madman's heart.

Maria, come closer.

Naked and shameless
or trembling in fear,
give me your beautiful mouth.
My heart and I never live in May,
we're stuck
in a hundred Aprils.

Maria!

The poets trill sonnets to Diana,
but I
am pure flesh,

100% man.

I ask for your body,
simply, as Christians pray,
"Give us this day
our daily bread!"

Give, Maria!

Maria!

I'm scared I'll forget your name
like a poet's scared he'll forget
a word
born at night in pain,
equal to god.

I'll cherish and love your
body
as a soldier,
mutilated by war,
useless,
alone,
cherishes his one leg.

Maria —
You don't want to?
You're not going to?

Ha!

So again,
dim and dull,
I'll take my sobbed-on heart
and carry it
as a dog
carries
to the kennel
his paw a train crushed.

I give joy to the road with my heart's blood.
Blood sticks in flowers on my dusty shirt.

The sun, Salome, will dance a Herodiade
a thousand times
around the earth, the Baptist's head.

And when my time
has danced itself out,
a million spots of blood
will be spread along the path to my father's house.

I'll climb up, filthy,
(from sleeping in ditches)
and I'll stand
beside him and bend down
and shout in his ear,

"Listen, sir god,
aren't you bored
daubing your puffy eyes
in cloudy jelly every day?
Why don't we
rig up a merry-go-round
around the tree of good and evil?
You'll be omnipresent in every cupboard
and we'll set the tables with such wine
that even the Apostle Peter, the puritan,
will dance the kickapoo.
We'll put little Eves back in Eden.

Say the word —
and by tonight
I'll get you the best girls
from the boulevards —

how about that?

Why not?

You shake your head, Curly?
You frown, Santa?
You think
this thing

with wings
behind you knows what love is?

I'm an angel too, I was one —
I used to stare gently as a sugarlamb,
but I'm not going to give old mares
ornamental vases of tormented Sevres anymore.
Almighty, you made hands,
gave
everyone a head,
so why couldn't you manage
to let people, painlessly,
make love and make love and make love?

I thought you were Mr. Big once,
but you're a jerk, a dwarf.
Watch now,
I'm getting my knife
out from my boot.

You winged fools,
huddle in your heaven,
better start shaking your feathers!
I'll slit you, full of incense,
from here to Alaska!

Let me in!

I can't be stopped!
Wrong
or right,
I'm quite calm.
Look —
they've chopped up the stars,
the sky's dripping blood!

Hey you!
Heaven!
Get that hat off!
Here I come!

Not a whisper.

The universe sleeps,
a paw on its huge ear
lousy with stars.

Bob Perelman & Kathy Lewis

A GOOD ATTITUDE TO HORSES

Hoofbeats pounded.

As if to sing:

“Clip.

Clap.

Clomp.

Clump.”

Stripped by the wind,

shod in ice,

the street skidded.

The horse

fell on its ass,

clattering clumsily,

and suddenly

after every

idle, gaping fancy-pants

out to bell-bottom on Kuznetsky

crowded around,

laughter began

ringing, snickering:

“A horse has fallen!”

“Fallen — a horse!”

Chortled Kuznetsky Bridge.

I alone

would not fuse my voice with its howling.

I walk over

and see

the eyes of the horse . . .

the street convulsed,

turned over, and

flowed on in its fashion . . .

I walk over and see —

swelling drop after drop

roll down its cheek,

hide itself in the hair . . .

And some universal

vague animal

anguish

wells from me and

spills spreading a pool,

gurgling.

“Horse, you mustn't.

Horse, listen —

you think you're more worthless than they?

Ahh, my little one,

we're all part horse,

each is horse in his own way.

It may be,

old-timer,

that you don't need a nurse —

or perhaps my sentiment

thought he

ludicrous —

anyway

the horse

gave a shrug,

got back on his feet,

whinnied, and

went on,

switching his tail.

A chestnut-haired child.
Cheering up, went
and stood in his stall.
And took the whole incident
like a young colt —
and to live seemed worthwhile,
and to labor,
worthy.

P. Lemke