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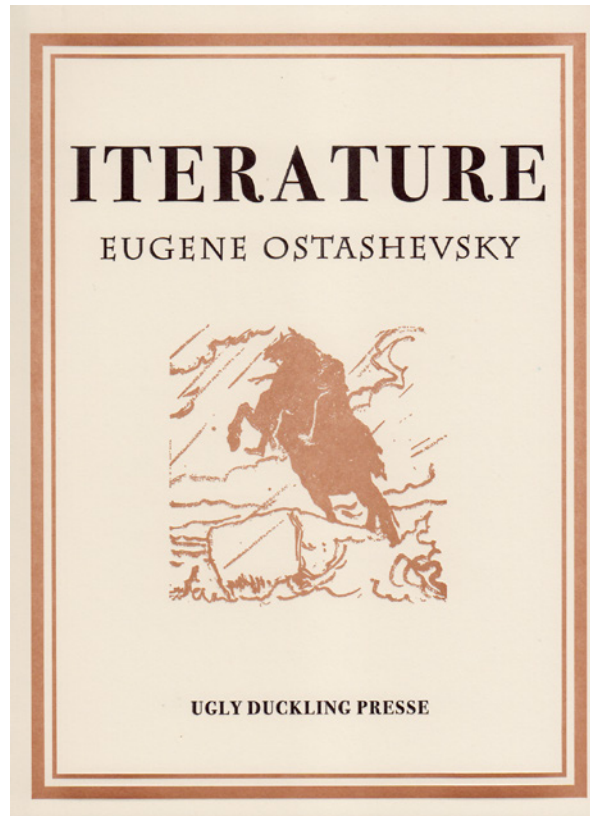
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LITERATURE



EUGENE OSTASHEVSKY



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**T**HIS BOOK CONSISTS of selections from and expansions of four chapbooks of my poems: *Noughtbook 1* and *Noughtbook 2* (1998), *The Unraveller Seasons* (2000) and *The Off-Centaur* (2002). Eugene Timerman provided the art and design for the first three chapbooks, whereas the last was designed by Macgregor Card with art again by Timerman. I wrote the final section of this book, *The Ambassadors*, as a verbal illustration to a series of as yet unpublished computer drawings by Timerman.

—E.O.

ITERATURE



EUGENE OSTASHEVSKY

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THE GANGSTER WHO LOST HIS G

*St. Petersburg and San Francisco, 1995 – 1998*



*You like Coke, I like Pepsi,  
I got Hep A, you got Hep C.*

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

*Structaque sunt nostris barbara verba modis*

—Ovid

I used to think of myself as just another Ovid  
somewhere in Romania sporting a Mogen-David,

racking the local parlance to make it sigh on  
*Jah! How well I remember Zion.*

My image changed when I got a visa  
only to declare there really is no

Zion—that whether rhinos course by or reindeer,  
it's just varying degrees of Romania.

I turned bilingual. Romanians claimed  
I had two characters, two lives, two brains.

Although they say two is more than one cranium,  
it's half as great if both be in Romania.

Then I found myself with no native tongue,  
only two prosthetics to flap among

teeth & gums, or sitting below the palate  
like in a cockpit two pilots.

I wore my jeans loose & used the word *stupid*.  
I used to have love but I don't know where I put it.

All my flats turned into kennels.  
My only pets were my packs of Camels,

whose caravans filed under the sun  
of my soul's desert—it, one by one,

made them go up in smoke. My sole amenity  
was to point at them & say *All is vanity!*

That too, my dear, is another bubble.  
In most of the cases, one's only trouble

is oneself—so stick up two fingers over your  
head before the mirror in the corridor.

## AN ENCYCLICAL ON THE ADDITION OF ZEROS

1. *porcupine*

I would blow away with a big popgun  
the porcupine that plows your arm

whose pricks sprout poppies & bloom in red  
on your skin's wax roller, as if some compass had

tried to tattoo a circle whose center is  
in each hair follicle & circumference

also, but fluttered up, so you point mute  
like a bottleneck at the Absolut(e)

absence, the lip-crowned O  
into which we all spiral, spiral and then fall

in the process of going down the drain  
imitating a candy cane.

2. *wave*

Maybe that's why I loved you. As a disheveled crest  
Beethoven-like in its race towards rest

atop its wave's roll of muscle, massive & tensed  
up for the slap into the turbulence



of a wipe-out, only ac-  
cidentally sweeps along men, boats, sharks

skyscrapers & strollers, desire wants  
its own annihilation, & to signal what

it really wants, what makes it move  
what the final cause is of our love

it handfiles our lenses & ensures we find  
in emblems of death objects pleasing to mind.

3.

*chamber pot*

All we got is refinery rented, put on; our selves  
but gleaming and vain-glorious eggshells

of a scrambled nothingness within which  
you can't tell a trigger from a light-switch.

So stay in bed & hold in that pee  
for that way at least something inside you be

plus a laboratory technician may not  
decipher your character in a chamber pot

thus unraveling <sup>your knot/</sup>you're not. What we think and feel  
boasts its own clockwork, own set of wheels

winds itself & is to us  
a monster out of Oedipus or of Jaws.

4.

*Arcimboldo*

Whereas we are nothing. If you had  
encased yourself in an Arcimboldian self-portrait

with cookers to cover your forehead and cheek,  
fits over nose, brows, mouth, neck,

hair—cotton, for eyes two Bics,  
it would be as you as what now you is,

since, like me, you are nothing. Not even smoke.  
For even smoke to Israel spoke

& we—O if we could break through  
our junk-sculpture casements, we'd just mouth **MOO**

or **BOO**, maybe **OO—OO** probably, for  
an **OO** adds up to a single **O**.

5.

*O*

This is the ring with which I thee wed.  
This is the fold of our marriage bed.

This is the tube of our embrace,  
televising in our ribcages an everyplace;

contracted pupils, by trance beset,  
the monogram on our wedding-gift china set,

your hot small mouth around my tongue-kiss.  
This is your belly ballooned up with our kid

‡ also the emblem, where Cupid sits  
inside a circling serpent that eats

its own tail ‡ beneath  
it says **POST FATA SUPERSTES**—"love past death."

6. *line of bottles*

Like a Russian placing the drained and emptied  
in a line-up to be looked at from where the lamp is,

we built a bridge through each day, inch by inch,  
adding not log and log but syringe and syringe,

yet the sum was the same as what prints every orange cap.  
Now your legs measure Shotwell or Capp

‡ in every locale, landscape **SLASH** site  
read a thing synonymous to the eye-sight,

homogenous, unaffected by feature  
nature, nurture, culture, creature

a reflection of nothing, bare orthography  
of why I don't need you and you don't need me.

POETRY AND YOU

Put on your sundress ‡ sing *oy lulee*:  
everything is imaginary.

Fallen out of bed, crawl to get a beer:  
this way you ensure the world won't disappear.

Never mind your studies. In much wisdom  
is sorrow. Any cataclysm will

give you the same wisdom, i.e. the same sorrow.  
With luck you'll get hit by a bus tomorrow.

Combining letters, you could place  
endless propositions before your own face.

It could react its way through the entire National  
Portrait Gallery—it'll never *act natural*.

Stomp on your papyrus, smash your inkhorn ‡ reed.  
What you write no one will ever read.

Make your lungs cancerous with a cigarette  
Under the pyramids of cement.

THE ANNIVERSARY

I was your *caballero* when we was little.  
You loved me not—I kept the bit in,

did circles around Stuy Park or  
studied *Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre.

You went to Union Square, became a Buddhist,  
meditating with your booty due east.

On West 4<sup>th</sup> I popped Bud, Pabst, Schaeffer  
cans with Dave Z. & Jeff Schaeffer.

This shows we both had a thing for the void,  
though that's what the black in Asteroids

represented for you, while for me it was  
when the spaceship met the asteroid's force.

Did I change the bait? cause my dream came true.  
I took you home & I unwrapped you.

Your body flopped around like a sturgeon,  
though five minutes before that you were a virgin.

You were not gentle & I was not meek.  
I was like Ahab & you—Moby Dick.

You threw a party where you manhandled Brett,  
so I took the opportunity to pop you in the head.

We've done the limbo over dozens of faces,  
jumped like poodles through hoops of embraces,

but for, say, four years I found it tough  
not to think any girl you if she was distant enough,

that's cause I'm myopic. Now I got glasses.  
& we sit down today so as to empty glasses

face to face, knowing that, like sister & brother,  
we loved others besides loving one another.

Happy anniversary! Were I able to live  
my life over, I still would have loved

you—

but there's no other life &, before we bed,  
I count the gray hairs on your head.

SENSELESSNESS FOR VVEDENSKY

You grew up on bread & the Pentecost.  
Into your throat was a serpent cast

& you walked with it out of your mouth coiling,  
as if the air were water & you were to boil it.

Stick your fingers into a socket—you are  
a Christmas tree, dissociated & spectacular,

whose toys are pieces, but they're no Reese's,  
each is its own genus & its own species.

With a pair of compasses, cosmographer, lay  
concentric circles à la Ptolemy.

In a glass elevator bisecting them go  
*eeny meeny miny moe.*

An angel, at *haec*, is hit by a rock.  
A demon sits brooding on a language block.

An eagle plays chicken with a Mack truck.  
Each is a cuckoo you'd like to clock.

Cause what makes an image is a **STOP YOUR MOTOR!**  
But you ascended, shedding your neurons motor

& sensory—

now no one can clock you, even if he tear  
(since all you are is nothing) apart thin air.

Nature blanks on what you've become.  
But nurture, abhorring vacuum,

pictures you soar through the galactic pinball,  
like Richard Crashaw mainlining a speedball.

Poet & saint! That accidentals are insubstantial  
you now sing with houses, numbers, oceans,

also the wood of boxcars, guns' steel—the whole range  
of Russian poetry's attributes in the Heroic Age.

Let us say that is true, cause it is the same  
whether it is or not: we, if substance stay

inaccessible & immeasurable, its existence bar.  
So I talk into nothing, but that's what you are.

You've lost your ear, you can't distinguish  
plosive from surd, Russian from English,

you comprehend nothing. Accept this verse then  
from a Eugene trying to be a horseman.

SEXTUS PROPERTIUS ON THE STEPS OF  
MISSION DOLORES

On this hill, a pin-cushion for acupuncture,  
we tested whether rapture should follow rupture,

in brown habits reproducing St. Francis  
& airplanes flew around our trances.

Our skin exploded in stigmata  
cause the said planes shot tracer bullets at it,

their metal coffins into the flesh lowered  
decomposed, sprouting blood flowers.

Skinny, our shirtsleeves down,  
we walked the town

eyes scouring around,

our teeth gnashing in desire  
for a more-substantial-than-love fire.

Or we sat in the Orbit & sucked martinis,  
sighing “O, if I only had a teeny

bit!”—but the bit in our teeth is all there was for us,  
so we twisted on the sheets, in a spat with Morpheus.

All we learned at that point is now forgotten  
except how on metal to cook up cotton,

the angels & demons have shot up, startled,  
& the allegorical figure of geometry is departed.

O, let me not recoin the past: its laundromats—  
their washers gaping—sigh the O’s of loneliness

mirroring those driers whose drums I now see.  
So to go back would be a redundancy.

## THE STOMACH FLU

I'm lying in bed and I have a fever.  
If you were to kiss me, I'm sure, fewer

would number the degrees of Celsius.  
Might not Fahrenheit then advance on us?

No. They run parallel, whether East or West,  
but the Fahrenheit is nine-fifths as fast.

It is nervous, irregular, it all but falls over  
turning—like a dog in an uncarpeted corridor.

Theirs is the race and I'm the track.  
In the pillows' ellipse I feel like drek

and my mind spins as if some Star Trek  
fan a naked woman startled.

Yes, my mind spins and my stomach too.  
Should you look at me from the ceiling, you

would see the metamorphosis of Eugene O.  
into a pair of taking-off UFO's.

I've puked almost a gallon; I am as light  
as a room gets when you switch on the light.

Around me angels and demons tear,  
bloodying each other's noses and pulling hair.

There one sits on a chandelier.  
At another's leer it gives a Bronx cheer.

Is this a thermometer or an odometer?  
How does one hold down a glass of water?

Why is it your name I'm so pathetically moaning?  
Maybe my subconscious is histrionic,

maybe I love you, or maybe I err  
cause it sounds so close to *mama*, Maia.

You gave me this flu, you dangly bitch.  
To smack you my hand doth itch,

but I've already taken so much shit from you,  
this is nothing in comparison—just a flu.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY (HARDCORE REMIX)

*l'enfer c'est moi*

I don't want to be an American  
marching for various Campbell's cans;

the country I was born to makes me nauseous,  
its spasmodic Igors, strung-out Natashas.

I was gonna build me a house of love,  
among see-through walls I would live,

incorporeal doorframes, but *non sono capace*,  
I turned this house into Fort Apache.

In my head I heard melodies,  
I deformed rhymes, misscanned syllables,

but I have no native language,  
I can't judge, I suspect I write garbage.

Learning is a dialogue  
where you think dead men talk,

but the tragedy in their words  
made me cry on toilets.

I shaved my head, demoted my parka,  
said to myself "Hey, you ugly mother-fucker!

There's not much time left, but don't get anxious—  
have patience."

THE UNRAVELLER SEASONS

*San Francisco, 1998 – 2000*



*Excuse me is this Damascus  
asks the absent-minded man*

*and falls from his horse  
just in case*

*No one comes to pick him up  
so he lies there*



THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

*En la forest d'Ennuyeuse Tristesse*

—Charles d'Orleans

In the Arena in the middle of Verona  
Like the letter **O** in the middle of **VERONA**

Two mouths sang they were each other's corona.  
Open, they appeared to be a score on a

Scoreboard: **LOVE, ALL**. If an imagined pencil  
Wrote a **+**, a **-** or the **x** of

Multiplication between them,  
Their note would have changed not. It wrote division's

Bar and two dots.

All

Bodies are interchangeable,

Their noses and lips rearrangeable,  
Their breasts and thighs detachable and reattachable:

Held together by fishnets of arteries  
They implore you to play Isis to their Osiris.

A mouth chews on a cigarette  
To confuse what it bewails with what it sniggers at.

A really straight spine  
Makes you note, "It's not like mine."

A pair of testicles hanging from a tree  
Looks at you melancholically.

Of legs and arms the crawling unity  
Says, "We're a community."

*In such a forest of noxious heavynesse  
I met a lady of lucent loneliness.*

*With her I forgot my distress,  
then she extirped her loneliness with everyone else.*

*So I spent a lot of time crying "Alas!"  
in the forest of noxious loneliness.*

In the forest of onerous sadness  
I pranced around, mine own onager that is ass.

My ears were as the conquest dreams of Emperor Hirohito,  
My tongue was a burrito from El Farolito,

I-beams stuck out of my pupils,  
My teeth pointed every which way like recessed pupils.

I went sinusoid over hill and dale  
Until I bumped into a knight named Gayle.

Her hand the bolts of her visor did assail  
Cause with a bottle of Absolut she was trying to wassail.

She said:

"O, what can ail you, pale wretch?  
You walk about with a stale kvetch.

Watch the clock that stands on a windowsill,  
Says, *It's not forever you'll need Clearasil.*

Soon your flesh will dissolve, your chest turn a T,  
Your head an O: there's your eternity.

If every brain the universe's focus is,  
Each death is an Apocalypse.

Sun, stars, planets, Acuras and Mazdas,  
Levi's and Diesel, Wells Fargo, paſtas

And peſtos, your bicycle, each girl you know, her period:  
All phenomena whose <sup>1</sup>/<sub>eye</sub> you were shall vanish, period.

The world is like TOMORROW: O-full,  
It's less than more full,

It's mostly absences and Absence is its ruler.  
Under her muff's a pencil sharpener  
she holds a ruler,

Upon its face there is a series of ciphers:  
She keeps the world stretched out, you infer.

It's due to her that objects don't collapse, since  
Each holds its place like letters in a sentence



I flew over the river Volga  
Around it milled a people vulgar

I became longer and longer

## I FOUND MY THRILL

On Esquiline hill  
Death paused on my windowsill

She was not as the other Eugene has  
a stately lass she had no class

in fact she had nothing even resembling tits and ass  
so I must fix my pronoun It was

a common death, a winged skeleton  
Down stuck to its bones as if they were gelatin

On Esquiline  
hill I was not on mescaline

not on Ritalin, I lay broad waking  
whereas it

acquiring the human fashion of forsaking

squatted for a while, then flapped into the dazed glow  
of the day along Via Principe Amedeo

Please God O God pretty pretty please  
you who does not exist

make this Death my Death  
don't make me a witness to another's death

I would rather fall on the floor in my elbow a saber  
than figure out life from the agony of my neighbor

Right as I finished just saying No  
there appeared a very big Crow

In its beak there was a serrated row  
and as it was going to bite me in T-W-O

I again cried, No!  
Take my neighbor, take her for here or to go,

Table on that body I once did know  
very intimately, until it grow

into the main ingredient of Sloppy Joe™  
Pull out her bluish intestines real slow

chop her up into Caesar so  
cheeze fly through the air like crimson snow

It will be very educational for me  
planets danced their courses through heaven

and the devil  
walked around with a spirit level

In his other hand he held a bevel  
On the other side of the wall sounded a gavel

And I knew there was eternal life  
that there will come a day when I rise

out of the grave, my eye steady and sober  
my hips swaying to the trumpet like a cobra

## THE UNRAVELLER

I met an unraveller from an antic land  
his device was a broken ampersand

his beaver was grand, with him was a band  
of bandits in pompadours layered and fanned

Their mouths smoked cigarettes a.k.a. fags  
The horses they rode on had several legs

They jumped over bogs, fell into logs  
Sometimes they even fell on top of their dogs

Where their horses had hopped, there was nothing crescent  
Their scimitars were like so many crescents

I said, "Hey unraveller  
Digger or Leveler

Abelard, caviler  
reveiller, reveler

You got blinds on your eyes like slopes on a parabola  
Your middle name is Levolor  
Why you be behaving so irregular?"

He said, "Alas, Alas, I am the Prince of Aquitaine  
In my chest is a guava, in my nostril a plantain

Those you see in my train, each one is my thane  
There's one that cries *choochoo* but he is insane

As for the rest of them, they're just inane  
They got a group portrait from the brothers Le Nain

So we ride up and down valley and lane  
Everyone we meet we a) kill b) maim

But I wasn't always like that

I used to be pretty  
My hip was like the Centre Georges Pompidou  
like SFMoMA my tittie

My hands were like the Iglesia de la Sagrada Familia  
With my pelvis everyone was familiar

and when I strolled after dinner I was so happy  
All the kids on the block called me *Pappy! Pappy!*

At breakfast a wood nymph in furry slippers  
rustling my forest of newspapers

I read of amputations, assassinations  
castrations, decapitations, defenestrations

depellations, eviscerations, flagellations,  
infibulations, strangulations, violations

and other mutilations most favored by nations  
as they make orations among carnations

Till once, after I had almost stepped on a turd  
I realized there was evil in the world.”

Well:

I’m in debate like the fish in sea  
I said, “Hey Tin Man,  
                                you got a psychological deficiency!

You ride around waving your scimitar  
knocking down every perimeter

so that you’re everyone’s, to put it in Greek, *nemesis*  
and all this is an act of mimesis?

You’re acting like a character from Theodore Dostoyevsky!  
Thus proclaim I, Eugene Ostashevsky!”

But his face was the prisoner of his beaver’s grate  
and I could not extrasubstantiate

whether my tirade had made him irate  
or whether he thought it was **JUST GREAT**

The whole situation on my nerves started to grate  
To stand there and prate did me denigrate

He valued himself at too high a rate!  
Did he think there were no other kumquats in the crate?  
I decided to break his pate!

Pushing off with the wishbone around my prostate  
above his head in the air became I prostrate

I stomped on him like a jack-booted mosher  
until he turned to kasha

whereupon his band drove through my face **50** lances  
so that I looked like a cross-eyed man  
                                casting **1,225** lascivious glances

No, I did not—like *devochka Masha*—  
convert him into a dish of kasha

nor did his band drive through my face **50** lances  
to make me look like an entomologist  
                                in reverse circumstances

He just cut off my head  
and now I am dead  
and writing the poem you just read

**SO SEND ME A DICTIONARY**  
**I WANNA IMPROVE MY DICTION**

THE MARTYR

Some people think that death is really gruesome  
but they are not the ones who died and then grew some

I was killed for my faith by a mob  
At me hefty stones they did lob

They hit me with fists and large sticks  
Blood ran down my face  
I spat white teeth

I was lonesome at that particular present  
I had expected God but he wasn't present

I wished my life were at some other minute  
I hated this one I was beaten in it

I was prone in the ooze of the Nile Delta  
An ibis 8 my heart  
I did not belt 'er

A heron 8 my toe I did not kick 'er  
Flies blackened me nose to pecker

My iris  
became papyrus

My jaw  
fell ajar

Clouds moved in from North South West East  
like a hand closing into a fist

A blowing went through it the fist, a tuba  
A part of me stayed on the ground like a tuber

another part flew aside like a goober  
I became II like tanks for scuba

The I that flew felt really über  
it moved its extremities, dancing the juba

and sang



THE PRAYER

Said a little girl, all frizzy and gay:  
Won't you come out, come out to play?

I won't come out, come out to play  
Play by yourself, you piece of clay

I'll give you a daisy and a violet  
I'll show you where my biscuit be at

Or is it where my brisket be at  
I don't know myself I forget

I don't want your cookies, I don't want your meat  
I spin in the air without hands and feet

I spin in the air without hands and feet  
because nothing about me is concrete

ZOË'S WAR

She looks over her shoulder  
She looks over her older

On the ground mice scurry  
They're in a hurry

In the air birds fly  
They cry, Bye bye

Let's take the train to Vienna  
Let's hear the play of a piano  
Let's avoid a missile hit an antenna  
Let's Let's

She was once very little  
Was it she—here's a riddle

Now she's two  
What are we gonna do

Here's an elephant  
He is really fat

Here's a hippopotamus  
Show your bottom to us

They're behind bars  
She rides around in backs of cars

In came a man with long muſtaches  
Along his pantlines were red sashes

He waved a tin saber  
He declaimed he was going to save her

From what?  
From yourself  
From me  
From you?  
From all of us

From coffee flavor  
From licorice savor  
From someone named Raver  
Do me a favor  
Mention nothing graver

She looks over her boulder  
She looks over her colder

To a tuba whose sound  
Through all regions resounds

At once on and in mounds  
Always now and not then

You got a call from a general named Pete  
He says his feet are enveloped in concrete  
He is currently located under water  
—Can he call back?—No, this is his laſt quarter!

Oh, okay, hello general?  
I make you an admiral  
Your behavior under duress is so admirable  
If I could I would make you a several

Says general Pete  
I'm dying repeat  
I'm dying I'm pete-  
ring out

Poor general Pete  
Now his days are complete  
Now his holes are replete  
With peat

*Share O sole mio*  
Look at depicted trio  
Cry, O poetry O  
O

She looks over her molder  
She looks over her solder

Like Alexander Calder  
She spins in the air

Where she looks there is ire  
Plus a *p* that makes pyre

Her desires expire  
She revolves in the air

Our *donna è mobile*  
She read Hugh Selwyn Mauberley

Now she thinks very soberly  
She rotates in the air

Let us go to the theater  
Let us hear something sweeter  
Than this silly repeat of

I  
'm  
p  
e  
t  
e  
r  
i  
n  
g  
o  
u  
t

BALLAD

she went to town  
on a horse  
once she got down  
in a forest

she fell into a spring  
its name was Death  
its waters' swing  
exact as death

**SHE SAID:**

I was attached to a rock like a limpet  
around me ran waters limpid

I could not move not even limping  
I became Eleatic and Olympic

I could not **C**  
I could not **D**  
I could not **E**  
I could not **F**

I saw a knight  
of special **K**  
he wore a scuba  
he was **OK**

I took his scuba  
his face turned blue

I cried, Where are you  
Scooby Doo?

I cried, Where are you  
Dooby Doo?  
slap on my count  
your doggie-doo

no o no k  
his name was night  
he stuck his clock  
into my tight

my name was fear  
my name was igloo  
my name was fünf  
my name was Jennifer

## LANGUAGE

Language  
You look like a soup you eat like a meal  
Around you various figures steal  
They steal

They wave their arms they wave their legs  
They eat stir-fried dogs  
They pop eyeballs with wooden pegs

In smashed corpses  
They burn corpses  
No scent worse is

You move them  
You approve them  
Illusionist you remove them

What is death  
What is pain  
What is what

You do not  
Explain  
O breath

We say to you,

Teach us love  
Teach us love

Teach us love  
Teach us love

You say,

Know reads No

That's all you know  
That's all you do not know

We say,

Teach us love  
Teach us love  
Teach us love  
Teach us love

We are wholly unfamiliar with it

## SONG OF THE WESTERN SLAVS

We opened fire like Miller cans  
It was that kind of time  
Before us miscellaneous people fell  
All over the ground

Their thighs beat the ground  
Their teeth bit the ground  
It was so very interesting  
I shall never again see anything so interesting

The way they moved was so interesting  
The way I watched them was also interesting  
And especially interesting  
Was the interesting

I went down to the corporal  
Said, Gimme my head  
He was smoking a Marlboro  
Red

He said he had left it  
Outside city gates  
A pike up the esophagus  
Eyeballs moving with ants

Oh my tongue it was lolling  
and my nose it was gone  
If you find it dear reader  
Please sew it back on  
Oh please sew it back on

GROUP PORTRAIT WITH MASSACRE

Four horsemen moved along Mission Street  
I jumped in the saddle and the set was complete

Our number was circular; if you squared it  
It would end in itself, even for the visually impaired

Even for the hearing impaired  
Even for the tactilely impaired

Even for the olfactory impaired  
Even for the gustatorily impaired

Even for the impaired impaired  
It rotated impassive, it didn't yearn to be paired

We rode through the thickets we rode through the glades  
Cattails exploded like hand grenades

Before they were gone, they meowed woebegone  
Beneath each shone a black sun

I couldn't bear it  
I was a rabbit

I was a bunny  
I was a hare

I walked around like Maurice Scève  
My left retina was a sieve

My right retina was a colander  
I hit **SAVE**  
I hit **SAVE**

But my **RAM** got knotted in its own Boolean  
Ringlets  
like a stoned anaconda

Our captain said to us, our captain  
The earth lies like brown tartan

Various peasants upon her go  
Recalling the Book of Hours of Jean, Duc de Berry

Let us depopulate her fully  
And treat ourselves to a game of tic-tac-toe

Tic-tac-toe is a kind of binary arithmetic  
I don't know the number of combinations but there can't be many

It's like flipping 9 pennies  
And 9 is  $3^2$ , my maties

Just then a dragon flew by, its wings were covered with scales  
Do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do

*Sanctus Ioannes*  
I am Poof the tragic dragon

And I'm looking for a date!  
So another one of us, whose name was 17, said:

Yes yes let's commit ethnic cleansing  
Like we did at Danzig, like we did at Lemberg

Now no one remembers how mouths crammed dirt  
And blood coagulated on it like amber

I have seen a strange equivalency  
Between all states of life

The presence of horse at your gate is congruent  
To the absence of horse at your gate

The only difference is the time  
Time is stretchable and tensible

But the point where you're at  
Is inescapable!

Do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do  
We did what we had to do

We rhymed *pillage* with *village*  
The responsibility rests with language

We had nothing to do with it  
We're just a bunch of fictional characters

We don't have any other characters  
Except for our letters, that is our characters

I looked over my left shoulder  
To see what I could see

And then I saw, and then I saw  
I could not see to see

I was surrounded by various dead  
And so I said:

Dear friends, I said, blessed be our union,  
It is like the mind entirely circular

For the essence of a circle is a circle  
And same for the mind

Let us however recite the following clarification:

Our relative, give us the freedom of will  
To recognize that we have freedom of will

And thereby acquire freedom of will  
And also please prevent us from evil

From the malefactions of the malefactors  
The reactions of the reactors

The prosecutions of the prosecutors  
The projections of the projectors

The factions of the factors  
The actions of the actors

Amen

THE ANATOMY OF MONOTONY

There were two of us there  
me and despair

I resembled a salad  
that resembled a mallard

It resembled a parrot  
that resembled a pirate

that resembled an island  
that resembled an eyelid

that in its turn resembled  
something either assembled or disassembled

We watched my life retreat  
ebb and diminish

and I said in my incomplete  
English:

Should I bulge my cheeks with silence?  
Should I devolve to a fish

or maybe a clam  
since I already am

invertebrate?  
Despair said:

Prate, don't prate  
no one will hear

I've crammed 1,085 roller skates  
into the collective ear

I said, Excuse me, despair  
are you really there?

When we banter  
are we like the poles of a centaur

or are you totally other than me?  
If one woman wed us, would it be bigamy?

Despair said, It would be anomie

I said, You just said that because it rhymes!  
You're only an echo!  
You don't really exist!

I can do anything!  
I can be all that I can be!

Despair showed me its tallow fangs  
Despair showed me its fallow clangs

Despair showed me its callow tanks  
It showed me its trunks, it showed me its yanks

It must have thought it pointless  
to argue



## I STRUCK RHETORICAL POSES

I struck rhetorical poses  
around me rose various roses

they were my frame I their spectacle  
Then I walked around very skeptical

Then I sat down, void of thought and emotion  
gas was my only motion

I would like to know I would like to know  
the difference between yes and no

knight and night, Kurd and curd  
what *l* means in the word *world*

if a fiend in need is a fiend indeed  
what is the maximum number of the dead

O you who are a) love  
b) remove  
c) fauve  
d) none of the above

you're not going to tell me anything I don't already know  
so I'm just gonna wait till my braincells grow

## THE AENEID

My goddess went by the name of Hera  
She chased me up and down various seas  
I landed on a beach and seduced some woman or another

by talking. All the miseries that befell me  
the deaths of all my relatives and especially wife  
I recounted more or less as they happened

We swore love in a cave and then it came time to split  
The subsequent part of my biography isn't clear  
As I recall, my enemy was a large strapping turnip

There were fields steeped in blood, excrement, body parts—  
in short, gore

The gorier the tale, the happier the ending  
My seed shall inherit the earth

It shall do so by means time-tested and honorable  
perseverance and industry, discipline and deft management  
With a measure of satisfaction I climb into the cold bed of  
Persephone

THIRD WATER POEM

That which is prior  
is a many-armed fire

eyeless eyeless  
without expire

it wears a tire  
it wears attire:

Water  
its spell

its Latin  
weathervane alphabet

Water  
is before fetter

Nor form nor matter  
Its house is the letter Bet

Lacking one wall  
A gaping sign

Dicey the first embrace  
above the abyss of the letter Ain

Sea si  
c see

We say, O sea  
Permit us to see

us, electors of ramps  
us, erectors of camps

composed of the letter Breath  
composed of the letter Death

beyond us

SMOTHERLAND

*Formerly known as  
Russian Poems  
San Francisco and Ankara, 1999 – 2001*



*Ils sont mangés des vers*  
– Malherbe

**THE DESPONDENT DESPOT**

*Since not even his wife ever called him “Kolya,”  
Nicholas I suffered from melancholia.*

HELIOTROPE

O dead poets

    who rustle  
in the forest of books

Who died by the rope  
dysentery, hunger

suffocation in boxcars, lead  
Who beat on the floor like an eel and recanted

Who lived to old age  
    growing wisdom  
i.e. acceptance

What is this death  
you talked about so often

the port  
of your trope

the black pun  
of your sunflower

We cannot think,  
sing the dead poets

We are unable  
to answer your question

WHITE EWE

In the heavens horses do a dance  
On the ground stands a black square

Between them errs a white ewe  
With no when no where

The white ewe in its errancy  
Eschews all sensibilia

A member of the family  
Where no one is similar

The white ewe has no eye  
Ear tongue chest fist

It is neither yea nor no  
Does it exist

You die in a cell with no heat  
You die in a cell with no bread

You don't know who you is  
What is the point of this

The white ewe in its errancy  
Builds pyramids of fire

You have not seen the sun in so long  
Bombers rock the city

Death stands in the middle  
With a bow and a fiddle

That it has no riddle  
Is its riddle

To the right an expanse of ice  
My great-uncle makes the peregrination

Upon reaching his destination  
He is slain by chicken soup

The white ewe already lacks an *I*  
Its site is short

Within a single pronoun  
It holds court

The white ewe came to be by parthenogenesis  
As fit for object strange and high

It was begotten by desire  
Desire is a virgin

In tongues she is the Anger of Chance  
Death sits by her sickbed to see

Water water water everywhere  
Freeze into ABC

Where are you beautiful islands  
Where walks the white ewe

Where the dead know no loneliness  
Where what is, is not in error

THE SICK MAN (БОЛЬНОЙ КОТОРЫЙ СТАЛ ВОЛНОЙ)

The sick man is a wave  
His body is

Curves circles and lines  
Of analysis

The sick man knoweth  
His 1, 2, 3

Above his bed hangeth  
A terminal degree

The sick man lies  
Stick-man flat

He feels the warmth  
Of his stick-ball bat

The stick man is an analyst  
The stick man is an ear, nose and throat specialist

He is in a lot of pain  
He says to himself, What is pain

Pain is like bread  
Bread is like born

Born is like bear  
Bear is like pain

What is the sick man himself like?

The sick man is like the Neva  
Running over her granite shelf

He accompanies himself  
On a wah-wah

The sick man divides  
to a stick, a moan

The stick moan is alone  
The shtick moan is a loan

He says to the orderly, What is pain

Pain is like 17  
17 is like 352

352 is like 8  
Must be something I ate

The orderly says  
You're being disorderly

The shtick moan behaves according to his denomination  
He says nothing

The orderly says  
Heal yourself, physician

If not, we have the Inquisition  
To aid you

MASTER OF SWALLOWS

The vermilion of flesh  
The alluvion of the eye

Who saw from the tram  
the I

Whose head  
crammed

The hot bullion of bread  
The mullion of the needle

The ship of fools.  
Whose bodikin

Soft and pink  
Enlarged, capillated, stank

Who leapt off the tram  
Crying, Scram

Landing with a **BAM**  
in the same tram

For whom the air  
gathered there

Oblique  
Potable, cracked

Every animal is a tier  
Worms in choir

Who pronounced  
Swallows pull the bier

Who saw  
Who was

O eyelid  
You close

You disclose,  
My lid



THE AIRMAN BEFORE SUNRISE

Pleasant is the death of the airman  
in the invisible forest of air

final and light  
out of Ovid

He feels himself becoming  
a leaf a star

He sees his own spiral  
and makes a wish

O airman O Hesperus  
of an occupied century

You've distilled the wormwood of death  
into eau de vie

You are excused from seeing  
the bloody bones on the wheel

the soggy bones in the ground  
the grey bones in the air

You will never taste  
cat, human meat

wallpaper glue  
boiled leather, sawdust

Pleasant is the death of the airman  
in the incandescent heights

The birds go on  
And then everything

THE DEATH OF OLEG

Stung the prince falls  
turning into a field of prints

His hoſt passes by  
brandishing spears like umbrellas

Their funeral feaſt  
is enlivened by yeaſt

Ergo they don't cry  
when the cook serves chicken Kiev

They speak obliquely  
licking their fingers

for  
the inventor of forks awaits to be born!

Says one, the hiss in the grass  
That's our ſiſter, life

Says another, alas  
ſhe's our couſin, and diſtant

We are made up, of language  
We are paper ſoldiers

And even our death  
is a jeſt

CANTOR IN THE AVIARY

Cantor in the aviary  
reads

a crib  
his Ossian of black suns

He runs  
from the aviary

to the aviary  
He lies

in the crib  
that he sings

accompanied by violins  
in the fat arms of washerwomen

The water breaks  
through the window

into the ear  
that is the aviary

Is the band banned?  
No

they play on  
and they're not even weary!

*There's a bird  
called swallow  
It comes from the land of the dead*

*There's a bird  
called la rondine  
It says nothing*

Cantor questions the swallow  
They discuss

The equivalence of parts and wholes  
The precise meaning of transcendental

Whether the crib is a crib  
I'm not a child

cries Cantor  
and stomps on his bib

Outside there's a horseman  
green, streaky and bronze

In flesh he was *Mors* man  
Had a thing for cranberry

Cantor heads outside  
lip-synching his crib

Uncountable swallows  
yoked in the sky

pull a bodybag  
with the cooling black sun

Cantor cries  
although now *he* is the best poet!

ERRORISM

*San Francisco and New York, 2000 – 2003*



*A philosopher from Attica  
complains of sciatica.*

AT A TEMP AGENCY

At the time I was assailed by insects  
as well as outsects  
My defenses were implausible  
My scratching  
would have entertained a turntablist

When I recovered  
I put my new insights to work!

As I worked  
I sang

I was  
    so lonely  
I was  
    so moanly  
I was so  
    whatever

I was several  
    like the number tree  
I was myself  
    only approximately  
Thank God for the pronoun that held me  
    together!

My job conspired  
at a den of gossip and malaise  
I photocopied my hand

THE MAN-MOOSE

Alas I am a poor moose  
I want to be a pure νοϋς

I want to be a peer muse  
I want to be a spear cruise

I said to God, God give me strength  
I said to God, God give me hope

I said to God, God give me charity  
I want to stand stiff like a rarity

I want to be encased in glass  
Admired by all those who pass

I went to the forest and what did I see  
But 17 owls looking down at me

I went to the desert and there a camel  
Laughed laughed unlippping his yellow enamel

On the path of life I met an alien  
His tongues cartwheeled sesquipedalian

I said, Take me up in your UFO  
They said, No

By the rivers of Babylon  
I sat down and wept

By the rivers of Babylon  
I sat down and wept

I couldn't tell the sweeping from the swept  
I was like Death

I was like Maréchal La Far  
I pranced around, crying LAFAAAA!!!  
Everyone said I had gone too far

I said to God, God give me love  
I said to God, God give me patience

I said to God, God give me strength  
God said nothing

Alas Alas cooked is my goose  
Am I a poor moose? Am I pear mousse?

Should I rub mousse into my pair  
Of antlers?

If only my hooves ended in fingers!

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, WAYNE CHAMBLISS

In a jungle, constricted by a boa  
I went from feeling low to feeling lower

My teeth exploded like semen  
and my eyes saw everything according to Riemann

My liver got reconfigured into a sphinx  
and my heartbeat resounded from Minsk to Pinsk

I summoned up my last remaining strength  
and cried:

Why do these things always happen to me  
Why couldn't I have settled for regular and gainful  
employment

Why did I insist on becoming  
a poet?

Being a poet is like going on a safari  
when all you have to defend yourself is an "I am sorry"

It's like flying to the moon  
and when you've almost arrived

you suddenly don't see any moon  
cause it's noon

My momma  
wanted me to be a suicide bomber  
but wouldn't you know it  
I had to go off  
and become a poet!



## THE CHOW FAMILY

Mr Chow lies on a cot  
underneath which slither the sibilant

wolves of history  
He feels he is a cat

about to be devoured by Mrs Chow  
who feels she is a dog

Their children  
take air on the balcony

One child says to another,  
History is a mirror

The other child answers,  
I do not understand

They have erected a wall  
around themselves and over themselves

and it accompanies them invisibly  
as they locomote to the mall

## THE BIRTH OF A SUPERHERO

“I saw the black sun  
in the seeing of the black sun

Equals

I did not see the black sun  
in the not seeing of the black sun,”

confessed



the logician to  
the Queen of Forms, the joy of man's desiring.

“I have your glove but it is void of hand,  
and if I turn it inside out  
it is void of the other hand”  
(he was now a topologist).

His third utterance  
went like this:

“rrym chekym chekym  
chawa lapa  
tr tr tr tr.”

He had become  
a random-sound generating machine.

Nature looked upon him  
in her own, natural way.

Birds arrived.  
They did not  
arrive, they did.

## ONE OF THREE PHILOSOPHERS

The youngest philosopher  
avows, I'm incorporeal

There's precious little of me  
Only a pronoun

Where are my hands with dimples on knuckles  
Where are my plump footsies

I do not know  
How will I ever get to the playground

Who will tell me  
how pail differs from shovel

I furrow my brow  
I take aim at the word "parallel"

What comes after one  
What comes after one

What comes after one  
I can't count it

They say,

Two comes after one  
Two comes after one  
Nothing less but two comes after one

Such is the truth, and it, perfect

No no I am not perfect  
Where are my hands with dimples on knuckles

Where is my head, round as a brass pot  
Where are my dreams like swollen rooms

in which I am loved  
and return the favor

## THE TWO-DIMENSIONAL PHILOSOPHER

We play at “Is it true I am real  
and death will come”

We look at the photograph of the philosopher  
The philosopher has the wet eyes of a rodent

Alas, but *I* am not real, says the philosopher  
I am a photograph

In my photograph I am depicted  
with my favorite phonograph

The phonograph plays through the day  
What does it play, say?

I made love long ago  
to somebody else

At least I think it was love  
Love is, never having to say

boy  
am I sorry

She took this photograph  
of me and my favorite monograph

And then we played at “Is it true I am real

and death will come”  
So what was your conclusion?  
we ask the philosopher

Tell us  
Tell us  
Tell us

Deaf man, dead man  
ancestor god

*Deine Zunge ist rot*  
Your tongue is rot

The philosopher in the photograph  
only clutches

his favorite monograph  
cause language, what can it say

THE AMBASSADORS

*A Libretto for Eugene Timerman*

*New York City, 2004*



*I'm not losing a pseudopod,  
cried the amoeba,  
I'm gaining a friend!*

1.

**CHOIR OF BIRDS:**

Matrix

mootrix

meetrix

nutrix

nutrix of Dmitrix

nutrix demeratrix

nutrix antisemitrix!

**CHOIR OF INSECTS:**

*Zzzzzz*

*Za za za za za za za*

*Zzzzzz*

*They fall asleep.*

2.

**CHOIR OF ELEPHANTS AND ONE RABBIT:**

Who will provide us with food?

Food is the ultimate good.

Never mind the scenery,

Just serve us some greenery—

It so much improves our mood.

3.

**NURSE**, *out shopping*:

Quels sont les sons des patissons?  
Quels sont les mots des haricots?  
Quels sont les mythes de merguez-frites?  
Ses mythes,  
    ses mythes—  
        but that word,  
        it is so strangely **FAMILIAR**!

4.

**DMITRIX**:

*Wab wab*  
я ползаю едва

три четыре  
пять шесть семь восемь

и так далее.

**NURSE**, *entering*:

Are you playing the Peano?

**DMITRIX**:

*Wab wab.*

5.

**DMITRIX**, *alone*:

I shall now compose a poem entitled *Esprit de géométrie v. esprit de finesse*.

Can an octopus  
concoct a puss?

Does a dachshund  
deduct some?

I shall now compose another poem. It is called *Lucky in Love, or Everybody Deserves a Second Chance*.

Each boatswain wants to have a dachshund,  
each dachshund wants to have a boatswain,  
and they go driving in a Datsun.  
The boatswain picks his nose. The dachshund  
decides to turn the blind spots on.

**NURSE**, *entering*:

A prodigy, a true prodigy!

6.

**NURSE**:

Dmitrixipoo! Let us play at Giraffe and Hyena, oo? I'll be the Hyena. And what are the Giraffe and Hyena playing, oo?

The Giraffe is playing the unfortunate Podarrestes, and the Hyena is playing his sister, the iffy Evgenia, with a hard *g*. Their drama is called

7.  
ОФИГЕНИЕ В ТАВРИДЕ  
(by Everypede)

**PODARRESTES**, *in bounds*:

I am the unfortunate Podarrestes,  
son of Ogo-memnon, king of Alas.  
What family is more dysfunctional than mine?  
I fled here because I killed my mother,  
who killed my father,  
whose father killed his brother,  
or rather killed the children of his brother,  
except for one, who, sleeping with my mother,  
got her to kill my father,  
who was his cousin, son of his father's brother.  
Oh, keeping track of this is really a bother!  
Why am I not an orphan? (*Brightening.*)  
I forgot—I *am* an orphan! (*Darkening.*)  
Alone and in bounds, in bounds and alone!

**EVGENIA**, *entering as Scythian priestess with very large Meat Clever*:

Who are you?

8.  
**PODARRESTES**:

I am the unfortunate Podarrestes,  
son of Ogo-memnon, king of Alas.  
What family is more dysfunctional than mine?  
I fled here because I killed my mother,  
who killed my father,  
whose father killed his brother,  
or rather killed the children of his brother,  
except for one, who, sleeping with my mother,  
got her to kill my father,  
who was his cousin, son of his father's brother.  
A family is a burden and a bother!  
Why am I not an orphan? (*Brightening.*)  
I forgot—I am an orphan! (*Darkening.*)  
So slay me now, go ahead, kill an orphan!

**EVGENIA**, *eagerly*:

O Podarrestes, I am Evgenia, your long-lost sister.  
You have family after all.  
I am the cause our mother killed our father,  
whereupon you killed our mother, for our father  
killed me in order to allow his brother  
to reunite with his wife who had left him for another,  
and when this other died, married *his* brother—

*Podarrestes falls down dead.*



9.

**CHOIR OF PENGUINS:**

Floop floop

floop floop

Flickoooooooo

Flabadibadilloo

Floop floop

10.

**DMITRIX, *alone*:**

*Wah wah*

перехожу на слова

A curse, a curse, a curse for the nurse,  
the cause is terse—no nurse is worse:

through spelling error may your slaughter be!

Turn to a purse, turn to a horse,  
a hearse, a corpse, a copse, a tree—

Is this any way to bring up a child, namely me?

Where are

your promised ambassadors?

## NOTES TO SMOTHERLAND

"**WHITE EWE**" IS about the death of Daniil Kharms of starvation in a prison asylum during the blockade of Leningrad. "The Sick Man" develops a line by Aleksandr Vvedensky. "Master of Swallows" is about Osip Mandelstam. "The Death of Oleg" revisits a ballad by Pushkin in which a prince, told by a seer that his horse will kill him, gets rid of the horse, only to be stung years later by the serpent nesting inside its skull. "Cantor in the Aviary" is about Georg Cantor, born in Petersburg eight years after the death of Pushkin.

## DEDICATIONS

"**THE ANNIVERSARY**" IS dedicated to Jessica Bornemann; "Sextus Propertius" to Ben Robinson; "The Stomach Flu" to Maia Fraser; "Excuse me" to the La Mura family; "Zoë's War" to Zoya Prouslin; "Group Portrait" to Matt Hollis and Kurt Bigenho; "I Struck Rhetorical Poses" to Anna Omodei Zorini; "Cantor in the Aviary" to Zaheer Ze'ev Ostashevsky Coovadia; "Two-dimensional Philosopher" to Oya Ataman.

A **SPECIAL THANKS** goes out to Milena Banjevic, Wayne Chambliss, Brandon Downing, Anna Moschovakis, Genya Turovskaya, and Matvei Yankelevich.

## COLOPHON

**THE TEXT IS** set in Adobe Caslon and Adobe Caslon Pro with Charlemagne titles. Russian text is in Bukinist and Russian titles are in Demosfen. Cover titles are Bodoni.

**THE COVER ILLUSTRATION** is taken from Alexandre Benois' drawing for a special edition of Alexander Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*, published in 1923. The ornaments are based on motifs drawn by B.S. Nikiforov for a book of folk legends, *Былины*, published in Moscow in 1937 and inspired by Russian book ornaments of the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries. The covers were letterpressed at the Ugly Duckling Presse workshop in Red Hook, Brooklyn, NY, using polymer plates made by Boxcar Press. Typesetting and design by Macabea's Revenge.

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