

## The Idiot

*No psychologist should pretend to understand what he  
does not understand.*

When you will not play  
the fool, you are an idiot, and left out in the street  
to drink vodka. And when you will not accept  
the boredom, the torture, of living, of the feeling of being alive, you are mad,  
and dragged off to the asylum. And if you resist,  
you are hysterical.

Next, should you, for nausea, refuse to eat  
what you are served, they will bring you ripe gooseberries dipped in fresh honey,  
then, when you die of starvation, they will throw out your spring wildflowers  
and sing you *arias*.

## Ah, Katya

*I am in mourning for my life. I am unhappy.*

why must you suffer?

Because that's what people do. And when they are done,  
they die. But meanwhile, we dance, for today we are not dust,

we are human,

and in forty years, at the utmost, we will both of us  
be dead, so whatever will not matter then—this injustice,

that indignity—

shall not matter now. After all, the world lives yet, and it is not life's fault  
that you are boring.

## The Violinist

*Thinking of his wasted, pointless life, he began to  
play, he did not know what . . .*

Performer, at your play, take this body  
in your arms, and, tightening your fingers  
    round her neck, lowering your cheek  
        to her waist, lay the stroke of your bow  
    across the strain of her frame, arcing  
wholly, as, upon the gut plucked unstrung, falls the stick  
    weighted straight, along the belly  
    fretted deaf, thrumming dumbstruck,  
        until, with the twist of her pegs  
against the curl of her tail, swells the spread of her ribs  
    over the arch of her back, cracks the voice,  
        rolls the eye, in her box, at the split  
    of which timber, sweet violinist, lift,  
heel to bridge, your creaking instrument (one not  
    to be fiddled with) up off the rosin's  
sticky rub, and, beneath the making of your music,  
    bend the breaking of her silence  
        unto its smashing into pieces  
            of quiet.

## *DEKADENTI*

*. . . we shall be forgotten . . . but our sufferings  
will pass into joy for those who will live after us.*

### I. In the Park

In winter, when the sky  
grows dark, and the wind  
turns cold, under the blankness

of the snow lies the blackness  
of the ice, sets the deepness  
of the freeze. Beneath the chill

in the air burns the fever  
in the blood. Until, out in the park,  
round the gardens, by the lake;

over the meadows of crushed  
wildflowers; across the frost-stiffened  
grass; through bare cherry

orchards; down  
to the bee-hive nestled  
in the patch of hardened

gooseberries, it is spring,  
and gray clouds  
rain white stones

on black sea.

## Parables

Between the man who knew too little and the man who knew too much lived the man who knew just enough, but didn't know it. Across the street lived the man who knew nothing at all, but knew it well, next to the man who knew everything, but forgot. Down the road, meanwhile, lived the man who didn't much care either way, and would have told you so, but couldn't be bothered. Besides, he knew very little, and what little he knew was uninteresting. So much for all that.

Nearby, behind an outhouse, lived the man who said he knew only one thing, that he knew nothing else, but in time, one grew tired of hearing about it. Meanwhile, the man who lived in the shed next to the hatchery claimed that he, too, knew just the one thing, but it was the only thing, and that anything more was unknowable, but who will listen to such gibberish. There is only so much you can ask of people.

Next door, sharing a cellar in a barracks, lived the man who knew it all, but wouldn't tell, with the man who didn't, but would, so about whom, in the end, one knew next to nothing, or, to tell truly, just couldn't tell. Enough about them.

Down by the foundry lived the man who knew something you didn't, but wouldn't say, alongside the man who didn't, but would, and did, and did again, until you took him behind a tanning vat and banged him in the face with a brick, once for each time. This is what you get for talking when no one wants to hear you.

Then there was the man who lodged in the boarding house, who knew more, which meant nothing, and the man who slept out in the stable, with the pack mule, and knew better, which got him nowhere. And that was that.

Meanwhile, at the warehouse, stacked on bunks like pickled herring packed in a tin, lived the man who knew what he knew, then the man who knew what was what, then the man who knew only too

well, but all three got dysentery and died, whereupon they were buried in a pile, but out of order, which made no difference. That was all.

As for the man who knew certain things certainly, him they called scientist, while the man who knew doubtful things doubtfully was called philosopher. But the man who knew doubtful things certainly, he was known as theologian, until one day people turned up at his door and drove him out with sticks. Which served him right for going on like that. Then, of course, there was the man who knew certain things doubtfully, and he was called Yakov, and also my wife's cousin, before he ran off somewhere, which left things pretty much as they had been. And there's an end to it.

Over time it was shown that the man who had it right was unhappy and the man who got it wrong was content. This seemed backwards, but was nonetheless the case, which is just how it goes sometimes in the world. Later, one of them got a sore behind his ear that he knew he shouldn't pick at, but couldn't help himself. Things got worse from there.

One day a man who kept a mute swan was chiding a man who kept a plucked cockerel. 'At least my swan can fly,' he taunted, with a jocular tone. So the owner of the cockerel shot the swan dead with a rifle. Then, when the cock crowed, he tried to shoot it dead, too, but missed, so had to wring its neck with his hands. Some problems can be solved more than one way.

Once in a village lived two men who thought too much of themselves, one in the sense of too highly, and the other in the sense of too often. By and by it was found that their miseries, while different, were roughly equal, because misery is misery, after all. As for the other two fellows, who thought too little of themselves—one in the sense of too seldom, and the other in the sense of too low—they found their own ways to be unhappy.

Out in the country somewhere lived a man who was always right, which worked out well enough for him. During the same period, in some city or other lived a man who was always wrong, which

worked out even better, because he was wrong loudly, and with a stick. For where there is no certainty, certitude will do, and in the absence of true authority, authoritativeness serves well enough. That much is sure.

As for the man from the *taiga* who told the truth, no one believed him. Or if they did, they didn't care, and moved along soon enough. But when it came to the man from the *steppe* who lied, to him they accorded credence and credibility alike. Because being right is nice, but feeling right is nicer, which feels more than right, and is called righteous. Nicest of all is when everyone else is wrong, or can be made to seem so, which is the same thing. Besides, who would ever know, or be the wiser. People's credulousness is past believing.

It happened that two men met at an intersection. 'Move,' said the first man. 'I am walking.' 'No,' said the second. 'I am also walking, and I am stronger.' In this he proved correct, because by then the first man had been pounded to mush with a mallet. Being strong has its advantages.

Once there was a man who felt only ire. This proved disagreeable to those in close quarters with him, so they conspired to throw him in a pit with another man who was no less irate, and the two pummeled one another fiercely until it was done with. Then there was the man who felt only ardor, which presented its own difficulties. His compatriots were of the same mind as the enraged fellow's, so they locked the impassioned one up in a *boudoir* with a woman who was known to be his equal in this regard, and the two engaged in all manner of concourse until nothing was left. This sums up everything.

One day a man was doing something stupid. Another told him to stop. 'You cannot stop me! I am a man! This is a free society!' the first man insisted. 'No, it is not,' replied the second. 'If it were, I would beat you with a stick and steal your things.' Then he slapped the daft man across the mouth with an open stroke and helped himself to his pocket-watch. 'You see? If you keep it up, I will come for your wife.' But the halfwit kept it up, even though he knew he was in for it, because he was simple, so that was his nature. 'People

make mistakes,' he pressed on, after a pause. 'Yes,' the irritable chap answered. 'But better ones make fewer, and smaller.' Then he kicked the mistaken fellow in the shin with terrific force and, cleaning himself off, made his way to his wife to be finished with the business. He had warned him. But when he got there, she had lovely hair, and the man sang her an old song instead. He was human!

First the one man said something. Then the other said something back. And so on and on, if not forth, as in a futile match of naughts and crosses, until we'd all had just about enough of that, hadn't we. For as you can just as well tell for yourself, people are enamored of nothing so much as their own vapid patter, nor so little as everyone else's. Which is why, last anyone checked, the blatherers were still at it, batting their little shuttlecock of twaddle this way and that just to keep it up the longer, and so the longer to defer its coming down. Every idler needs a pastime.

Or another way. So it happened that, in a given instance, for no reason in particular, if at all, one man poked the other in one place, whereupon he poked him back in another, at which juncture, on activation of the reflex, the first had a second jab at his partner, only harder, and why not, what was he going to do about it. But by then even the leashed monkey screeching each time the mute urchin jerked its tail could tell which direction this was heading in. For it would only be a matter of time before the issue, like many another before it (and not a few to come after), would have to be settled with sticks. Or, to be more particular about it, *stick*, since only the one of them had one, which is why now the other's face looks like something that could no longer even be described as face-like. After all, people don't like winning; they like beating. There is no victory so sweet as a comrade's defeat.

I still haven't told you about the man who asked too many questions. Him or his neighbor, the man who didn't have any answers. Even so, by and by it was shown that in fact he did have them, but disliked the other man, and was only being stubborn, which is just how people can get from time to time. Anyhow, when at last the taciturn chap was of a mind to provide a reply, the meddlesome