

A Selection of Poems

MARK LEY¹

Laszlo Almasy

The desert . . . there one feels clean,
Perplexities resolved, loyalties simplified
The sun does not question; it burns.
Either, neither, both or nothing at all . . .
Which am I? A riddle to myself,
As I spy on the heart with stealth
And guile. I find myself possessed
By the secrets I feign to possess.
How can we live at all,
If not with courage and skill?
This I have made my experiment.

Fourteen and sad, I built myself
A glider, launched from a hilltop
And flew, flew—a few seconds only—
Oh glory!—crashing meant nothing,—
What were a few broken ribs to me?
Anything to escape the castle,
The cold corridors, my parents' voices
Rising, battling . . . Alone in the hall,
Where Magyar knights once gathered
Beneath the ceiling of Greek myths,
I swore my own vows of honour.

Africa, what did you want with me,
A pale northern wanderer,
In love with lost oases?
All my life you have held me
To some secret account!
In the desert, I would drive full tilt
At the dunes' windward side,
Sail to the top, and, with a hard turn,

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Slide broadside down the leeward
 Steep . . . a fine manoeuvre!
 Life itself I feel through my hands.

The scorpion, the dung beetle
 And the sand viper—my comrades!
 We shared the Libyan desert,
 Terra incognita, rich in death.
 Blistering days and freezing nights
 Were the poles of my existence;
 Sandstorms charged me electric,
 And evening shadows showed
 More beauty than a life could hold.
 For that, I have suffered every horror,
 For a few mad instants of truth.

The wise desert mocked our wars
 And adventures . . . the nonsense
 Men fight and die for! As for me,
 I would have made a pact
 With the Devil himself, had he shown me
 The way to Zerzura, or the lost army
 Of Cambyses. Those of us
 Who did not leave our bones there
 Still left something of themselves.
 What remains of me is a memory
 Of light. A moment of fire.

Fabergé Eggs

Meteorites from a planet of fairy-tales
 And toys, they fell into history's atmosphere,
 Trailing fires from Mars and Venus.
 Carved, turned, enamelled, chased,
 Gilded, painted, cast, blown, spun
 And wrought, tumultuous Easters
 Conjured into the hands of the fallible
 Royal orbs, apples of the Hesperides.
 Detail and sheen of flawless surface
 Bespoke the ethereal solid, Platonic
 And industrial,—fabrications from Faustus'
 Crucible, infused with the peacock's tail;
 Pomegranates seeded with stories
 And prayers, plucked from the tree
 By the Virgin's hand! Ghostly doomed ice
 Of the *Winter Egg*: within, suspended
 Amid freezing fog, a basket of anemones
 Glows on a bed of golden moss.

Elegy for Nikolai Gumilyov, 1886–1921

Death was always your secret friend;
 It had to end in a firing squad.
 You who worshiped beauty were not handsome,
 Tormented by the ugliness you saw
 In the mirror, the pale thin awkward hero
 Of a myth, not quite the Nietzschean superman
 Deserved by a godless dying world.
 Leader, adventurer, lover of women,
 Believing you could actually change the world,
 You stalked across the African plains,
 Like the first man, hunting invisible prey.
 Could life itself be conjured into art,
 And manhood be proven in danger?
 A new idea, a new test, and, then,
 Whatever came of the fight, the bloody birth!
 Marching round Petersburg in top hat,
 You stole poems from the air
 With warrior's fists, striding on,
 Sure of your purpose, and nothing else.
 Many mistook your reserve for disdain,
 Ignorant that kindness could be shy,
 And, noticing only the weary pompous air,
 Missed the tender smile of a child.
 You exulted at the coming of war,
 A cavalryman for the love of Russia,
 Eager to prove yourself a warrior.
 Your soul had been long prepared,
 Accepting the trial without hesitation,
 Yearning for more and fiercer battles,
 Believing, always, against all evidence,
 In victory,—a man must suffer and create,
 With fasting and vigil to strengthen him,
 And foster new energies within.
 You quarrelled with the times,
 And with your own impossible self,
 Ever the aristocrat, no matter Revolution.
 In frozen starving Petersburg, abandoned
 To cockroaches, you remained grand
 And oblivious to the farce of politics,
 Never deigning to conceal old-fashioned views,
 From this vulgar destructive new regime.
 Skinny as a ghost, in threadbare coat,
 You strode the streets still, surrounded
 By students, hanging on the lecture
 That steamed from your mouth, as your hands

Turned blue, and poetry rose supreme
 Over the graveyard of decent souls,
 Offering its science to the unredeemed.
 The world was dying and rotting around you,
 All dust and typhus,—at last, you rose
 As Russia fell, and, like a sad Houdini
 Slipping the chains in his sinking trunk,
 Broke free of cool proportioned verse
 Into the wolfish wilderness . . .
 You recognized no walls, and, for that,
 They put you up against one.

Kazakhstan

Snow leopard eyes of the man within
 Foretelling a mountain death

Sarmatian gold of the sun
 My life smelted in the snowstorm

Kumiss of words
 Milked from the galloping earth

Wormwood scent
 Of the steppe
 Where lifetimes migrate
 With the spring and autumn
 Like the saiga

The sun-headed men
 Stride across rocks
 Haloed with concentric circles
 Planetary orbits

The Golden Man
 Flies in his suit of stars
 With a silver cup
 To catch the moon's elixir

In the mountains of Ulytau
 Heartbeat in rock
 Dragon's pulse
 Earth to heaven
 Heaven to earth
 Star-milk nourishing the baby
 Cosmonaut swimming through space

Wolf's tracks
 Mark the path of the first man
 The first to see the mountains
 The first to climb up on a horse

Rains of the Altai
 Cleanse me in light-storms
 From kurgan thunderheads
 Suckled at the breasts
 Of Mount Belukha
 As the deer sheds its antlers in season
 So I shed myself

The Last Khan

*Baron Ungern-Sternberg, 1885–1921, White Russian
 General and Last Khan of Mongolia*

The blood of the Teutonic Knights
 Yells through me-Mongolia's warrior-king,
 Cutting down enemies with the sabre
 As I gallop over fiery horizons
 In yellow silks, astride a white mare.
 No mere man, but the God of War himself,
 I live to slaughter the unclean,
 Purge the world of the Bolshevik virus
 And the evil stench of the Jew!
 With a wave of my hand, I can raise
 Armies, legions of devils to ride
 West against the proletarian scum,
 A Golden Horde is mine to command!
 I am Genghis Khan reborn,
 And all Asia will become my empire,
 Under the yellow flags of Lord Buddha,
 In this crusading age of Shambhala.
 Heaven shall see the monarch restored.

Barechested, hung with bones and charms,
 Smeared in filth and blood,
 I ride my nightmare like a shaman,
 A monk whose worship is the kill.
 The angry gods, skull-garlanded,
 Trampling corpses in their dance,
 Demand tribute in the temple's gloom,—
 Lords, accept the generous sacrifice,
 Flayed skins of our foes,
 From my bloody hands!
 I keep my men about me like wolves,
 Packs that feed at my hand alone,
 And chase down any quarry for fun,
 Tearing flesh down to the bone.
 Wretches, traitors, hear the name

Of Great Star Mountain, and tremble!
 I bow to no man, true scion of my clan,
 (Did not my ancestor, ambassador
 To Ivan the Terrible, have his hat
 Nailed to his head because he would
 Not doff it to the tsar, or any man?)
 Since the first fire of consciousness
 Ignited in me, I have fought a war
 Against the world, my puny inferiors,
 The craven, the ignoble, the weak.
 Truly, these are the Last Days,
 The battle for order and the world,
 When the ungrateful peasantry,
 Corrupted by their Jewish leaders,
 Rise up against their God-given masters.
 (What, Jews, rule the world, will you?
 Ruin nations and races from within?
 The blood of Zion is rising
 Amid earthquakes, famines, plagues,
 And the sword is whetted for battle,
 Angels and demons on horseback clashing!
 The toxic seed I shall exterminate;
 The snake I shall crush with my boot).

The turn of the swastika
 Decides the evolution of men;
 My blue eyes are starting to see,
 To penetrate and manipulate minds.
 The Hidden Masters of the World
 Guide my hand, clenching the Cossack blade!
 (Sitting alone with my playing cards,
 I always draw the ace of hearts.
 What, by God, does it mean?
 Is the omen good or bad?)
 Now the triumphant East will rise
 In wrath against the doomed West,
 And set the pyre of history ablaze!
 It is the time of the wild horses,
 The cavalry charge into the cannon
 Of time-dust devils of the frontier,
 Ride with me through the very gates
 Of Hell!—my horse's ears prick
 At the hints and inklings of nature,
 My wolfhound teeth rend each moment
 Like the tenderest meat.
 Break out the vodka-drink

To the white fever, and show us
The visions in the opium cloud.

Rage is my joy, my insurrection:
To cross the endless grasslands-
A sword at my hip, a gun in my belt-
And see no human sign, no excrescence,
Is the highest pleasure, driving oneself
To exhaustion, and beyond, becoming
The land and sky, invincible,
Ragged and scarcely human any more.
Every torture the gods inflict on mortals
In Hell, we shall enact them here on earth,
Scourge the base and wicked without mercy,
With ice and fire and savage beasts,
In these wastes, where every tree is a gallows,
For flayed hides to dangle from.
Joyous war:—epic fruition of man!
In these days the essence of life is uncovered,
The false and mundane annihilated,
The unity beneath screaming out.
Wolves follow hard on our battles,
Feasting on the feet of the dead,
Strung up from branches along the roads.
Sweet beasts, my friends and brethren,
How I admire your simple purpose
And skill,—stay at my sides, I will feed you
On carrion kind unworthy to live.

Out here I need no home, no possessions
Save my opium-pipe, in whose clouds
I scry the shapes of destiny, unfurling
With infinite ease, so clear to me.
What news do the soothsayers bring me?
What prophecies for my troops?
Let the scapulimancer do his work
And the bones set the date of battle.
I know—it is foretold—I shall perish out here
When my time is come, but my victory
Will survive me,—so bury me with my horse,
And be done!

A Better Future for Ukraine

The violence of the edge
 Calls you to your senses,
 You feel the blow and learn,
 Against your will. . .
 There will always be a master,
 A tormentor;
 Freedom is not in the contract.
 Drink to the bottom of the bottle,
 And find what lies there,
 But paradise it will not be.

Snowdrops in spring,
 Smell of cabbage on the landing. . .
 Like an old man playing chess
 Against the ghosts,
 I sit with my pen and paper,
 Feeling with my mind
 The naked body of a dancer. . .
 The city is covered with dust,
 As if already in ruins,
 Another civilization expired.

Heathen devotions—
 Indo-European roots,
 Hieroglyphic as horses' hooves—
 I lay at the blue Virgin's
 Crimson-slippered feet,
 (Byzantine empress of martyrdoms,
 All those living dead buried
 Under the steppe grass)
 In Santa Sofia, offering sacrifice
 To Jehovah, Yahweh, Perun.

Between Poland and Russia,
 Baptized in the river,
 Restless Cossack words
 Saddle their nightmares and ride.
 After all the rhetoric
 The truth is as clear and deadly
 As vodka, dark and weird
 As the legends you raise
 In a clanking old bucket
 From a village well.

A Bit Like Helsinki

Reckless in pleasure,
We held the nights close to our skins,
And fell with the seasons
To the deep core of the moon.
Fathomless tides overtook us,
Carried us far, far from shore,
Into the Ocean of Storms,
Masochists of love, anarchists of fear.

The wild and the human
Hold the dark in common;
Your face is a moon to steer by
In the midnight fury
And your heartbeat
Will lighthouse me home.

Oblivion's minx,
I spidered the corners of your world
And wove little stars
For the void's entertainment.
Death sang lullabies
Into the cot,
And nursery rhymes
Appeared in our fists.