

The Backbone Flute

Vladimir Mayakovsky

Prologue:

For all of you,
who once pleased or still may please,
guarded by icons in the catacomb of the soul,
I shall raise, like a goblet of wine
at a festive board, a skull brimful of verse.

More and more often I think:
it might be far better for me
to punctuate my end with a bullet.
This very day,
just in case,
I'm staging my final performance.

Memory!
Gather into the hall from my brain
the inexhaustible ranks of my loves.
Pour laughter from eye to eye.
Festoon the night with wedding past.
Pour out joy from body to body.
Let no one forget this night.
On this occasion I shall play the flute.
Play on my own backbone.

1.
With far-flung steps I crumple miles of streets.
Where shall I go, hiding within me hell?
Accursed women, what heavenly Hoffmann
has created you in his fancy?!

The streets are too narrow from the storm of joy.
The holiday prided and poured out people in Sunday best.
I thought,
thoughts, sick and coagulated
clots of blood, crawled from my skull.

I,
miracle-worker of all that is festive,
have no companion to share this festivity.
Now I'll go and dive,
dashing my brains on the stones of the Nevsky!



I have blasphemed,
Shouted that there is no God,
but out of the infernal depths
God plucked a woman before whom the mountain
will tremble and shudder;
he brought her forth and commanded:
love her!

God is content.
On a crag under the sky,
a suffering man has turned beast and perished.
God rubs his palms.
God thinks:
just you wait, Vladimir!
So you might not guess who she was,
it was he, he indeed,
who thought of giving her a real husband
and of placing human notes on the piano.
If one suddenly tiptoed to the bedroom door
and blessed the quilted cover above you,
I know
there would be a smell of scorching wool,
and the devil's flesh would rise in sulphurous fumes.

Instead, until early morning,
in horror that you were taken away to be loved,
I rushed about
faceting my crises into verse,
a diamondcutter on the verge of madness.
Oh, for a pack of cards!
Oh, for wine
to gargle a sighed-out heart.

I don't need you!
I don't want you!
In any case,
I know
I shall soon croak!

If it is true you exist,
God,
my God,
if the stars' carpet is your weave,



if, of this daily
multiplied pain,
you have imposed the ordeal, o Lord;
then wear the chain of a judge.
Wait for my visit.
I am punctual
and shall not delay a day.
Listen,
All-highest inquisitor!

I'll clamp my mouth.
No cry
shall escape my hard-bitten lips.
Bind me to the comets as to horses' tails,
and gallop me away,
tearing at the stars' bit.
Or this perhaps:
when my soul leaves its lodging
and presents itself to your judgment,
then frowning dully,
you,
throwing a gibbet astride the Milky Way,
seize me and string me up, a criminal.
Do what you will.
Quarter me if you will.
I myself will wash your hands clean.
But do this--
do you hear!--
remove that cursed woman
whom you have made my beloved!

With far-flung steps I crumple miles of streets.
Where shall I go, hiding within me hell?
Accursed woman, what heavenly Hoffmann
has created you in his fancy?!

2.
To both the sky,
in smoke oblivious it was blue,
and the clouds resembling ragged refugees,
I shall bring the dawn of my ultimate love,
bright as a consumptive's flush.



With rejoicing I shall blanket the roar
of the assemblage,
oblivious of comfort and home.
Men,
listen to me!
Crawl out of those trenches:
you will fight it out another day.

Even if,
rolling in blood like Bacchus,
a drunken battle rages at its height --
even then words of love are not outmoded.
Dear Germans!
I know
Goethe's Gretchen
springs to your lips.
The Frenchman
dies smiling on a bayonet;
an airman crashes down with a smile;
when they remember
your kissing mouth,
Traviata.

But I'm in no mood for the rosy pulp
the centuries have chewed.
This day let me embrace new feet!
You I shall sing,
redhead
with rouged lips.

Perhaps, outliving these times
as harrowing as bayonets' steel,
in centuries with whitened beards
we alone shall remain:
you
and I,
chasing after you from city to city.

You shall be wedded beyond the sea,
and shall bide in night's lair --
in a London fog I'll imprint
on you the fiery lips of the street lamps.
In a sultry desert, where lions are alert,



you will unfurl your caravans --
upon you,
beneath the wind-torn sands,
I'll place my cheek burning like the Sahara.

Inserting a smile in your lips,
you will look
and see a fine toreador!
And suddenly I,
for a bull's dying eye,
will fling my jealousy into the boxes.

If you carry your faltering steps to a bridge,
thinking
how good to be down there --
then it is I,
the Seine pouring under the bridge,
who call you,
baring my rotted teeth.

If you, driving fast with a man, burn up
the Strelka or the Sokolniki --
then it is I, climbing high,
expectant and stripped like the moon,
who make you yearn.

They will need
a strong man like me --
they will command:
get killed in the war!
The last word I shall speak
is your name,
blood clotted on my shrapnel-torn lip.

Shall my end be on a crown?
Or Saint Helena?
Having saddled the rollers of life's storm,
I'm now in the running
for the kingdom of the world
and
a convict's fetters.

I am fated to be a tsar --



on the sunlit gold of my coins
I shall command my subjects
to mint
your precious face!
But where
the earth fades into tundra,
where the river bargains with the North wind,
there I'll scratch Lily's name on my fetters,
and in the darkness of hard labor,
kiss them again and again.

Listen you, who have forgotten the sky is blue,
who have grown as hairy
as beasts.
This is perhaps,
the very last love in the world
to dawn like a consumptive's flush.

3.
I shall forget the year, the day, the date.
I shall lock myself up with a sheaf of paper.
Through the suffering of enlightened words,
do your creation, O inhuman magic!

This day, on visiting you,
I sensed
something wrong in the house.
You had concealed something in your silks,
and the smell of incense expanded in the air.
Glad to see me?
That "very"
was very cool.
Confusion broke the barrier of reason.
Burning and feverish, I heaped on despair.

Listen,
whatever you do,
you cannot hide a corpse.
That terrible word pours lava on the head.
Whatever you do,
each sinew of yours
bugles
as from a megaphone:



she's dead, dead, dead!
It can't be,
answer me.
Don't lie!
(How can I go now?)
On your face your eyes excavate
the gaping hollows of two deep graves.

The graves grow deeper.
They have no bottom.
It seems
I shall plunge head first from the scaffolding of days.
Over the abyss I've stretched my soul in a tightrope
and, juggling with words, totter above it.

I know
love has already worn him out.
I detect many signs of boredom.
Find our youth in my soul.
Invite the heart to the body's festival.

I know
each of us must pay for a woman.
Do you mind
if, in the meantime,
I clothe you in tobacco smoke
instead of Parisian chic.

My love,
like an apostle of olden days,
I'll carry down a thousand thousand roads.
Eternity for you has fashioned a crown,
ad in that crown my words
spell a rainbow of shudders.

As elephants with hundredweight games
complete Purrhus' victory,
I sacked your brain with the tread of genius.
But in vain.
I cannot tear you out.



Rejoice!
Rejoice,
now
you have finished me off!
My anguish is so sharp,
I'll run to the canal
and thrust my head in its maw.

You gave your lips.
You were so coarse with them.
I froze at the touch.
With repentant lips I might have kissed
a monastery hacked from frigid rock.

Doors
banged.
He entered,
sprayed by the streets' gaiety.
I
split in a wail.
Cried out to him:
"All right,
I'll go,
all right!
Yours she'll remain.
Dress her up in fine rags,
and let shy wings, in silks, grow fat.
Watch out lest she float away.
Round your wife's neck,
like a stone, hang a necklace of pearls!"

Oh, what
a night!
I myself tightened the noose of despair.
My weeping and laughter
wretched the room's face in horror.

The vision of your bereft countenance rose;
your eyes made it shine on the carpet
as if some new Byalie had conjured
a dazzling Queen of Hebrew Zion.



In anguish
before her whom I had surrendered,
I went down on my knees.
King Albert,
having surrendered
his cities,
is a gift-laden birthday boy compared with me.

Flowers and grasses, turn gold in the sun!
Be vernal, lives of all the elements!
I desire only one poison --
to drink the deep draught of verse.

Thief of my heart,
who have stripped it of everything,
who have tortured my soul in delirium,
accept, my dearest, this gift --
never, perhaps, shall I think of anything else.

Paint this day a bright holiday.
O crucifixion-like magic,
do your creation.
As you see --
the nails of words
nail me to paper.

