

The Nutcracker

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The Nutcracker

Hold your caps and grab the loiterers,
the bells are jingling, and our little troikas
jingle merrily through the snow.
Take the reins and flick the bridle,
hear the horses clip-clop go.
History passes and is never idle
in these realms of earnest Russia:
tumuli of Tartar bones,
Scythian princes, mammoth tombs.
The wind around us shrieks and moans,
and smoke inhabits peasants' rooms —
to leave them bleary-eyed and vexed
at all the hardships coming next.

Why do the varied hearts of men
run out to toil and plant again.
Scythian chariot, Mongol hordes,
ravished city, burning farm,
the glittering pennants and the swords
must come to stasis and to calm.
Vast the carnage, fields of corpse,
the haunt of kites and jabbing crows:
from night to day the horrors shrink
towards a hermit's wayside cross,
the history of an eyelid's blink.
Shuttered up, now closed and gone
to a landscape travelling on.

Oh, what a joy this is: now, children, hold
on tightly through these drifts of smoke: we pass
the mining towns that glimmer in the cold,
which in the summertime are lost to grass.

Here the patriarch and bearded clerics
emphasize the holy books.
There is Baku of a thousand derricks
bristling with its gangland crooks.

Here we pass the rushing rivers, thick
with boulders under Asia's blue-eyed vault.
Now dawdling on the Darya we pick
our way through buttercups to rustic halt.

Oysters, caviar, bejewelled eggs;
monasteries and churches, onion domes:
the land of boyars, khans and atabegs
requires that hovels serve as homes.

Grand St Petersburg subdues the Baltic:
domes and palaces on marbled streets.
Vladivostoc, in the all-too-Nordic
blue Pacific, broods on steel-clad whaling fleets.

Princess Orlova has a chill, poor
creature, stays at home: the doorman snores.
And driven out from village barn and store
the children sleep together out of doors.

That's all there is, this soil, this sky, the rain
that falls in the springtime, or as snow.
The wind's monotony and greyness stain
the steppes as far as steppelands go.

The years of growing are a puff of air,
the gift of motherlands you never reach:
imagination's tricks will hold you there.
Beware, my little ones, what grown-ups teach.

My name is Drosselmeyer, cabinetmaker,
craftsman extraordinary, court magician.
I am the purveyor of dreams and the fabricator
of all that you could wish for. Children listen

It's more lamentable than you can know,
this world. Nor is the toy the thing it seems.
The window thickens out with clotted snow
that's white as paper, and it folds in reams.

What would you write there? Tell me. I can see
into the souls of children. I have hidden sight.
Think into yourself and tell me. You can be
anyone you want for this enchanted night.

Anyone at all. You choose. The midnight hour
will soon be welcomed as the Christmas tree
adorns the dining room and every flower
will mark the places set for grown-up's tea.

You hear them chattering. What do they say?
Mere empty, casual things, as you will soon.
What do they know then? Nothing. Children, pay
attention, if you please, to fork and spoon.

If you will listen you will hear the walls
reverberate with Rimsky-Korsakov,
and wheezing bodies in the first-row stalls
drown out music with each stifled cough.

The eyes of the children, the delighted ones
who follow pas de deux and flounce of tulle,
will help the tipsy aunt that they had once
thought all too lovable to play the fool.

Such commotion as the clocks mark time,
Watch the little minutes march up and down.
What is missing at the midnight's chime
but mouse and nursemaid gone to town?

Listen: over steppelands running,
as the steady rain is drumming,
Subutai of silvered hair
attacks the Kipchaks: Bolgar burns.

Ryazan, Kolomna fare
nowise better: now he turns
northwards on to Vladimir.
The steppes are burning: cities fall
to massacre, and antique knights
are lost upon the rally call:
the ravens fatten on the sights.
A plague, a pestilence from God
with blood the horses' hooves are shod.

Children, look away in horror:
the Mongol years are come again.
Executioner and coroner,
our Party Chairman wields his pen.

At Stalingrad the conscripts die
in ditch and cellar, by the wall.
A prey to rats the figures lie
beyond all counting or recall.

Kharkov's taken and retaken:
the womb of Russia foams with blood.
True patriots are never shaken,
never yield their foot of mud.

At Leningrad the rations halve
and halve again, there's no supply.
The blockade tightens, people starve:
they eat their parents and they die.

Depredations break and smother
the single conscience and its voice.
Crying children, ask your mother
whom she pleasures out of choice.

Nighttime and the cannons roar
carnage as the mornings broke:
a long, consuming total war,
with the sunlight comes the smoke.

The shells are falling, people scatter.
A man on fire runs through the street.
A woman with a fearful tatter
defends herself with stumps for feet.

Confused and struggling, starving men
lock and tussle, knife each other.
A darkness falls and once again
the blood of Cain is on his brother.

Till the world be painted red,
and all our foes be shot or fled:
do not flinch from my decrees,
that turn the torment into death.

Our foes are clever, by degrees
they'll gain their fatal second breath.

The renegades lie all around,
they may be children or your wife,
your onetime comrade, new-made friend:
they lurk malignantly with life
sufficient to undo our end.

Root them out, be proud to feel
as Stalin does, the man of steel.

Children, unlike you, he had no friends,
or much of family: the others died.
His mother sewed and drudged to make amends.
Doting Yekaterina, how she tried.

His bully of a father in a brawl
beaten, drunk as usual, also died.
Poor sickly Josif didn't grow up tall
or take the trials of childhood in his stride.

He got the smallpox: what a sight he was
who trudging sad as outcast through the snow
saw himself as solitary because
of inequalities he'd overthrow.

Lenin's follower, he was to make
himself as needed, as the Party teaches
He planned and organized, and for the sake
of unity made hardly any speeches.

A humble man and fatherly, an air
of fool about him, from the peasant class;
No great ambitions, efficient, always there:
so crept the whiskered tiger through the grass.

It's understandable that Josif grew
by turns intractable or even wicked.
Grown-ups were shocked to have his 'things to do'
and promptly awarded him a one-way ticket

No stops permitted, to west Siberia, where
he hunts and fishes, whiles away his time.
He liked the place: the bracing, piney air,
the girls got up in cheeky pantomime.

He even married one: Yekaterina,
just like his mother: adorable, tongue-tied.
But life, once difficult, grew only meaner:
a chill arrived and so she died.

Lenin is our first of men,
intrepid leader once again,
returned from penury abroad,
clandestine meeting, boarding house.
He's brought the party to accord,
changed flighty mistress to a spouse.
Abnegation, martyrdom,
sacrifice yourself, he said.
Russia's but a crucible,
laboratory, a launching pad.
In argument invincible
to take from owners what they had:
the civil war will never end
while the bourgeoisie has a friend.

Inspired our Josif, what to do
while still bewildered at what fortune sends?
He had the Bolsheviks to help him through,
a sort of far-extended group of friends.

Not, it must be said, the most desirable:
quite outrageous were the things they said,
but Josif dazed and inconsolable
was all too easily, alas, misled.

They said authority stole from the poor
and made such rules up there was nothing left.
All thinking, honest folk would see, therefore,
that property indubitably was theft.

He tried the seminary, but was expelled,
became a tutor, failed, and then a clerk.
He tried so many callings, but excelled
at none of them: became the party's nark

In unimportant places. At Batum
he planned and agitated, wrote at length
and took 'indomitable' as nom de plume
and quietly lost each trial of strength.

But kept his sons, those workers, whom he taught
to question servitude and all its rules:
a true man's loyalty is never bought,
in Russia patriotism speaks to fools.

The river bubbles from its source.
The peasant stops, unyokes his horse.
By his hut two poplars stand
that always have and always will.
All he asks for is his land,
no more than that. The air is still.
The last leaf folds upon the ground:
a fullness and a blessedness
on all his kith and country folk
who meekly to the grave progress
across the lands where thunder spoke
to nothing and to no one. Calm
is now the village croft and farm.

Draw your troikas up and listen close,
you cannot hide from him, our bogeyman.
His glance grows heavy and his eyebrows gross,
but he can catch you out, oh yes he can.

Logically the nightmares have their ways
of adding calmly to a madman's views;
they make officially each culling phase
no less unreasonable than changing shoes.

Remember that, and smile as each one talks,
agree there must be reason, must be cause,
indeed in this suspicion terror stalks
and culls according to our hidden flaws.

The nutcracker, children, is a thing of fear.
It grows more ravenous from year to year.
It listens to you, asks when no one's near,
tell me, quick and quietly, what you hear?

The souls of children should be white as snow,
the which they will be when not led astray,
so tell the Party Chairman what you know
and he will happily make others pay.

Has your school-friend's father sold a pig
he shouldn't have, or hidden seed corn in
a barn? Whatever the peccadillo, big
or trifling, not to say so is a sin.

Recall that, childhood, as we go
across the shadowed world of snow,
estates of privilege, realms of class,
are both now gone. All the same
the misery that each must pass
in bringing in this new age fame.

But sit to teatime in this tinsel
world of radiant children born
upon the cusp of time to be
the first arrivals in the dawn
of Soviet audacity.

All is possible but waits
upon the feckless artists' fates.

Where Neve's waters on the Baltic break
it's far the currents there have had to roam.
Tell us what their gypsy authors make
in their uncomfortable and second home,

What the under-tutored public reads
to find that life is not the same in books.
Tell us that the faithful writer heeds
the recipes devised by Party cooks.

That Akhmatova, tall, beautiful,
in love with poetry and more with life,
composed her monumental sadness: such their pull
all Russia chose her for their second wife.

That Mayakovsky's Mystery Bouffe
made the party faithful catch a cold,
saying Dostoevsky had the truth:
for which they promptly shot poor Mayerhold.

For showing Stalin as a beetle yearned
one Osip Mandelstam: a childish whim
he would regret and quickly: unconcerned,
our good, bluff Party Chairman stamped on him.

If Eisenstein's October filming brought
a cast of thousands to the palace stairs,
far more terrible was Ivan's court,
the Oprichnina and bloodied lairs.

Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony
brought to gloomy nineteen forty-two
the frozen memories, the endless sea
of names and documents now lost to view.

In Ilya Repin, Roerich, Levitan:
the mists of Russia murmured and took shape.
The rest were banished, dwindling to a clan
of also-rans that plotted their escape.

Paint the picture as you can:
Stalin was a wicked man:
Controlled the papers, made up lies:
all his policies were doing well.
One by one, each kulak dies

who cannot furnish, cannot sell
what the party thinks he should.
The bones poke through as stomachs bloat,
for no one hoards and no one saves
a single cow or pig or goat.
Hardly strength to dig the graves.
But folk are animal, mere freight
in Lenin's automated state

But look into the household fire and see
the imp there flickering, the jinn that flames
into a bubbling, mocking dance to be
all you wanted with a thousand names.

Close your eyes, dear children, all you dream
of mother Russia, of the peopled land
of serfs and boyars and its fools can seem
a long way off unless you understand

That you and they and all are marching on
as the early sunlight floods the steppe.
So stays your fatherland when you are gone:
the whole wide continent is step in step.

The future changes, beckons. When you gaze
on this harsh world before you, all delay
is now prohibited, and sun's last rays
will rise tomorrow on a better day.

What you give and gladly's never shut
in selfishness or wasted. He above,
who once was worshipped in a forest hut,
acknowledges the staying bond of love.

Each small action here that disappoints,
each road to hardship that goes on and on,
the broken nails, the dirt, the aching joints,
the hurts and heart's privations undergone,

All this and more: the endless dreary towns,
the bureaucratic communes built the same,
the clothes and hemlines tattered, hand-me-down,
have served to bring the bourgeois past to shame.

That world of writing was the czar's.
Modernism's commissars
arrive and tell us what to do.
All is altered. All must change.
They shout at us and shoot a few
and off they go. When out of range
we scratch around and try to make
some sense of truth in what we're told.
We see the new tracks in the grass:
the orchards blossom, fruit, grow old:
the seasons stir us as they pass.
What are the truths and doctrines we must tether
all our hopes to in this stormy weather?

The great conspirator, the man of smiles,
whom hardship, disappointment, long privation,
his being overlooked or slighted never riles,
but forged himself the father of the nation,

He will harass you. Now children, look
in photographs he seems the kind buffoon
whose name is praised in school and history books,
but he will catch you napping, late or soon.

Safety is illusory, a dream
when people blurt and bleed out things to say.
And honesty's a tiny, ringing scream
down corridors, which then is scrubbed away.

For he can beat and beat you till the bones
will come up gently through the skin:
speaking quietly in his forthright tones
he'll demonstrate evasions never win.

Could he hurt you? Yes, of course he can
if what you say or do is seen an error.
The Party Chairman is a dangerous man,
the land of Rus become a holy terror.

The lands around you are a dream.
Our truths will tell you what must seem
intoxicating, natural
is not that way at all, in fact
is muddled and provisional.

Now is then the time to act,
to trust the party, every word
and stake your winnings, bet by bet,
and do your muscle-straining best
to go beyond the quota set,
believe the party for the rest.
It's all so simple: comrades try
not to quail or question why.

Unexceptional, immemorial,
unnoticeable to passer-by,
but something indestructible
remains within the peasant's eye.

The painters found it spoke to them
of mysteries in common earth:
even drunkenness would not condemn
the stumbling bailiff or the serf.

But in their bones and daily bread
there stayed the greater, burning cost,
a cost indelible as people said
that something undiscerned was lost.

Where does this come from in a land
of forest, steppe and vacant sky?
The great pines rise. On either hand
the path is crossed by bending rye.

Here they stand, have always stood,
though sky be colour of the mud:
a strip of marshland, water, wood:
astringencies that taint the blood.

Wide views, high clouds, the land a sea
of waving grasses, scattered woods:
both sadness and futility
are mother Russia's sisterhoods.

The rooks are cawing in the birch
whose branches dwindle into wraiths.
Beneath the hill there stands a church:
repository of many faiths.

Perhaps the settlers, those old men of toil,
illiterates now sunk beneath the soil,
hold in their imponderable old bones,
or in their drinking, or their matted hair,
more golden wisdom than had Kiev's thrones.
He who knows the bushy fox's lair
is close to some primeval, rural faith.
Its fields and forests and its dark-brown earth
that stretches on, is inexhaustible
with clouds and distances, a rolling girth
that's prodigal and more, the bountiful,
as though in pod-soil humuses will seep
the lore of customs that are races deep.

Where candles toil and waver in the air
as peasants mumble on in fervent passion,
why dry-eyed images hold hands and stare
at true believers in their distant fashion.

Alexy stole Vassily's plot of land,
and Nicolas when drunk beats up his wife,
Peotr is shifty, stupid, underhand:
You made it difficult, dear Lord, this life.

Perm to Vladivostok, women pawn
themselves for lace-trimmed petticoats and tights.
The tavern does its roaring trade till dawn,
and young Ludmilla's never home at nights.

The labouring cart goes up the hill, its creaking
woodwork with the harness jingling. Look
and see now, children: hear them speaking
of the paths that sad-eyed sorrow took

Across a land that was more cloud than hills
where plundering Turkomen and Mongol lie.
Pain with effort is as spirit wills:
and road to servitude dissolves in sky.

Beyond the conifers and hanging lights
the north wind circles, and the north wind bites.
Beneath the-ever-crystal, rock-hard lake,
and on through wastes of taiga, on through snow
the patient nodding donkeys creak and take

ebullient and aromatic flow
to steel-lined vaults in Moscow's spotless banks.
The figures glitter, spin, the digits blink
and sourly glow again in greenish fire.
Into perspex now the totals sink
to rows of zeroes, blanks, and then expire.
To oil concessions, camps and mineral claims
blow out the blizzards of forgotten names.

Across the township-studded plain
the power stations catch the light,
and heavy with their long-eared rain
the clouds continue out of sight.

New generations rise: they go
to school, to workplace, have their lives
commendably set out for show
in decent, working, honest wives.

Enough of visions, enough of change,
the lies diminish and condemn:
the promised land is out of sight:
the dark brown loam is tired of them.

But sometimes when the wind is free
it rolls across the open ground
leaving what was meant to be
but wondered at and never found.

New hopes, new people eat their bread
with salt of exile where it's said
they live no more by being bred
for sacrifice or simply led.

One by one the lights come on
in streets of gaunt industrial cities:
beside some local Rubicon
the folk await their destinies.

The quiet of evening and the loss
of brightness as there drift across
the wastes of tundra and of taiga,
the ever-falling snow that haunts
the mink and bear and arctic tiger,
where the Volga eddies out and flaunts
itself in staging post and Cossack town
in undone miles of silver coils,
where seeping out, by slow degrees,
the thickening water softens soils
in fields, in gardens, through the trees:
till the hoar frost reaches skies
and the sturgeon, spawning, dies.

Birch and alder, then the fir-tree screens
the streams now tumbling into deep ravines.
High up, the Urals like an unclothed breast
displays bravado in each reddened slope,
and though the glittering morning come to rest
as dull galena in its mineral stope,

forever toiling up the winding path
beneath the head-frame where the tailings spill
as quiet as minnows in the crystal rivers:
a glint of gold and green and then there's still.
A wad of sound, the wind: the aspen shivers,
and of a sudden through the lands of Rus
there's hope from exile and a home for us.