

3/7/01 Wednesday's Rock, Grace Maryanka  
Closing time: 11: 27 p.m., C.S.T.

If you find a large anthill with twelve paths leading from it, then light a fire and boil water in a pot; then soak the whole anthill, rake it level and soak it again; then you will find a hole in the ground, put a brass or pewter button into it as far as it will go; then dig for two and a half to three sazhen(=fathoms) and you will see the king of the ants on a red or blue stone; pour boiling water on the king of the ants and he will fall from the stone; wrap the stone in a taffeta kerchief and start digging again; he will ask you 'have you found it?' but you must say nothing but keep the stone in your mouth and wipe yourself with the kerchief, and you will be invisible as you walk. Thou sky my father, thou earth my mother, thou sacred root, bless me to success(?)

P. N. Rybnikov,  
*Pensi III*, spell for invisibility quoted  
from "an ancient manuscript"

*Some anomalous arrangements in the affairs of history*

Lenin: She can't see us?

Bentham (waving his hand in front of Grace's eyes, then dancing around boisterously, all the while twirling his walking stick in a cavalier vaudevillian manner): No, Sir, I should think not. We seem to be quite incorporeal. Hmm? I wonder, in these interstitial realms, where bodily pain is impossible, if a moral system might instead be constructed on emotional pleasures or pains, or even, if such things could be accurately defined in a manner satisfactory to the acute philosophical mind, metaphysical ones. . .

Lenin: Ebát' man! Would you cease your tedious blathering! We are in a terrible position here. Our bodies are mere semblablas, and, the hard truth of the matter is that in any materialistically definable way, we do not even exist! Our speech is emptier than spit in the wind.

Bentham (Inspired, tries spitting on Grace's face, but the expectorant, although visible, seems as insubstantial as the expectoree. However, a bead of sweat forms just at that instant on the dancer's brow, and slides down her pretty cheek.): Interesting,

Lenin: Interesting! This is disastrous! Man, do you hear what I am telling you. We don't exist!

Bentham: That appears to be so. However, I have not been in existence for some time now, and yet I still attend meetings at University College, still enjoy the admiration of visitors and still partake of these jaunts now and then on assignments for a Collective whose representative seems to be my old black Tom.

Lenin (Sitting down on the leaves, and pushing his palms hard into the temples of his large head. The blue veins bulging responsively.): This is insane! YOU are insane!

Bentham: That does not necessarily follow logically, and is, I humbly submit to you, Sir, but one of several possibilities.

Lenin (mumbling angrily to himself): Idiot revisionist.

Bentham (waving his stick around for emphasis, or just from sheer intellectual exuberance): For example, it is possible that we exist, but that this young woman does not exist, or that we both exist, but are dreaming, or that this young woman exists and is dreaming us, or that some party whose presence we unaware of is dreaming all of us, or that all of this is taking place as the effluent of words alone, say, as in the scenes of a novel, and our existence, although real, is confined to the space of a reader's mind. Perhaps in these imaginal realms certain lucanae, corresponding to lapses in the reader's attention, are torn in the fabric of natural laws — gravity, or some part of the visible spectrum, for example, being imperfectly or spottily applied . . .

Lenin (at last grabbing the stick): Would you please shut the fuck up . . .

Bentham (placing his fingers on his lips, and indicating Grace, whispers) Watch. Listen.

No sooner than she has finished planting the Grand Duke Nicholas Nicholievitch, all six foot six inches of him, and clothing the lacerated dirt of the shallow grave with a couple of bushels of fallen golden leaves, when Grace is surprised by the rapid kettledrum thump and clump of horse hooves. Scattering in all directions, bereft and frantic fowl rustle and cluck, as a determined rider closes ground recklessly through the thickset trees. Grace is still on her knees when the mare rushes down on her. At the last instant, the horse is reined so tightly back, that she dances on her hindlegs, jaws foaming, forehoofs clawing the russet of fading woodlight. Shocked by this sudden appearance of equine vitality, Grace cringes on the grave, the white astonishment of her round-mouthed face eclipsed in the blue shadow of the horse's vertical body. It is a good moment of theater, but Grace is so haggard by her weeks spent camping in the amateur mummeries of the war that she fails to appreciate it. Perhaps she is becoming dour. Returning to Russia has a way of infecting one. The mare drops down, delicate ears twitching to the music of her own prancing, and circles the fallen dancer with high-stepping arrogance. Her tail sweeps singing through the crisp harvest dusk, her lathered neck arches, but somehow she places her hoofs so demurely that eggs and chickens repose as safely at her feet as if they were locked in museum cases and sealed with golden keys. This abrupt intrusion of health and vitality shocks Grace as much as the cruelties and annihilations of the trenches have shocked her. But more shocking still is that this luminous animal is being ridden, not by some noble prince of an elite cavalry unit, but by the Old Believer Abbot, still naked, but no longer bound, his white beard bristling with energy, his old withered limbs resurrected to a condition of fantastic suppleness and strength. Evidently his sentence of "death by torture from the elements" and his supposed exile to Siberia has been commuted by his own volition. The Abbot greets Grace with a radiant, even smile, and leaps from his

mount by the *joven* expedient of swinging one leg over the animal's taught neck, and jumping, like a gymnast, both feet together, into the birch leaves. Time, at this moment, seems for Grace to be slowing — or perhaps her perceptions are speeding up — for as the Abbot leaps to the ground, as naked, new, and as unashamed as Adam, he seems almost to float, so that Grace has the extraordinary leisure to observe the holy man's body in minute detail. Her eyesight seems suddenly to bound forward by several magnitudes of acuity, so that she can see a series of very slight, but very clear, swellings marching up the midline of his torso, the first just above the pubic hair, the second near the navel, the third at the solar plexus, the fourth at heart level between his hard nipples, the fifth just below the indentation of the throat, and the last between his flourishing white eyebrows. These swellings seem also to be emitting a faint glow, each one imparting radii of a particular color on his ruddy, healthy skin, so that this fantastic personage, who previously had appeared so frail and enfeebled, is now oozing an athletic robustness through every pore. By the time his feet touch the aromatic leaves, Grace can feel similar swellings pirouetting up her own body, her spine coming to life with celestial harmonies as this lightforce makes its spiraled climb: the buzzing of bees, flute trills, the gracious strumming of zithers. These notes are color as well as sound: ruby, amber, emerald, gold, sapphire, amethyst — all whirling in wild rings, whose overlapping ripples drown her in bliss. Grace collapses on the grave. In the distance, she can hear the Abbot's voice, as pure as falling water, and in apparent violation of his vow of silence. He says: "So now you have experienced the calamity." In the next instant, he knells down, and raising her whole body with a mere touch of his hand, exhorts her to: "Rise, my friend. Follow! Follow!" The Abbot strides into the hermit's brutish wooden hut, and with the heel of his foot rakes the swept dirt until he uncovers a metal door. Grabbing a pewter ring in the door, he lifts it, and seeing Grace's arched eyebrows and pupils floating like targets, cries: "Come. Come. Don't look so surprised. The pious are neither foolish nor helpless and a century and more of silent prayer is not so easily razed by the torch of a bigoted Archamandrite and a few lawless Cossacks." The portal opens into a corridor whose winding steps lead deep underground, and the Abbot, lighting one of the deceased Duke's primitive altar candles, guides their feet on the tricky, earthen stairs — although in truth, Grace can see well enough by the light of the Holy One's body, and the candle seems to be more of a devotional gesture than a necessity for illumination. At the bottom of this narrow spiral, a wide passage suddenly opens before them, bathed, as it seems, with jewel-light, and lined on both sides with what appears to be drawer-facings of brightly polished birchwood. The Abbot, in response to the wild, unspoken curiosity that he sees careening through Grace's eyes, opens one of these drawers. Then Grace, even more astonished than before, sees the lantern of a radiant white body, naked, except for the diaphanes of light, which like the Abbot's and her own, dance up the midline of the trunk. It is one of the Monks whom she had seen murdered by the Archamandrite's Cossacks. But if this man is dead, his corpse is charged with more vitality than any living person's. The Abbot puts his fist to his mouth, fanning his fingers out as he makes the "clack" of a duck call. "The trumpet shall sound! And the dead shall be raised, be raised incorruptible!" he sings, and the Monk in the drawer suddenly opens two bright, black eyes and smiles. Grace instinctively jumps back, banging rudely into a drawer on the opposite side of the corridor, and arousing the protest of the corpse who has been sleeping within. "Hey there, you lout, have a little respect for the dead!" The voice

causes Grace to rebound to the other wall, and this ignites an outburst of crippling hilarity from the Old Abbot. So consumed is the saint by this scherzo that he loses his breath and doubles over, and for a fleeting instant, Grace fears that she might have to inter a second victim of 'death by laughter.' Then, suddenly growing calm, her guide straightens his naked body, puts his finger to his lips, and tip-toes, like Nijinsky in *The Afternoon of the Faun*, to a tall set of double doors, which are wide enough to allow a brace of horses to pass through, galloping abreast. As the Abbot opens these doors, three ascending notes sound: "Ah, Ah, Ah," as if sung by a choir of angelic female voices, and in the even more intense illumination of this chamber, Grace's eyes finally adjust to discover the most amazing sight. Here are drawers, crates, old casks and chests overflowing with all kinds of theatrical props and costumes — uniforms, gowns, ecclesiastical robes, beggars' rags, wigs, false beards, capes, armor, ancient and modern weaponry — bodkins, scimitars, pistols, pikes, swords. There are official seals and stationary — including those of the deceased Grand Duke Nicholas Nicholievitch — there are jewels, bars of bullion, stacks of scrip from many nations. There are prosthetic limbs, masks, fake noses, ears, teeth, lips, plant-on wounds, even attachable genitals. Grace is speechless, and turns her astonished face to the barebutted naked Abbot, who merely shrugs, and says: "Hey, you never know."

Bentham: My word! Do you realize what we are seeing here?! This must be a distribution point for the famous mattermitter!

Lenin: What the devil is a mattermitter?!

"He is getting better, I think. Dr. Kramer says so, too. He is strong. He will recover." Krupskaya said these things to Comrade Stalin, perhaps to cheer herself, perhaps to disappoint Stalin, but she did not really believe them. She had been working with the alphabet cards all morning, trying to teach her husband to say "con-gress", "cell", "peasant", "wor-ker", "rev-o-lu-tion". Sometimes he mumbled a catchall monosyllable, the ubiquitous and essentially meaningless "Vot-vot", but without her help, she knew that Vladimir Ilyich was incapable of saying a single word. That vast brain whose machinery had moved the whole world was rusting to a halt. Lenin was dying.

Stalin answered Krupskaya, trying to sound sincere, but unable to hide his cynicism under the mask of concern: "Really? Let us hope that you are correct, and that his indomitable will will carry him through this crises, as it has carried him, and the whole Soviet, through so many others."

Krupskaya was afraid that Comrade Stalin had come to deliver on his promise, and that somewhere under the bear's uniform there was hidden a phial of potassium cyanide. "Look, Comrade Stalin, he understands perfectly. Although he still has a little trouble speaking. Watch." A letter opener, a pen, and some spectacles were lying on the tray beside the wheel chair. "Vladimir Ilyich, Darling, come, give Comrade Stalin the spectacles." The trembling paw of the invalid whacked at the tray spastically, and when the spectacles finally arrived under it, Krupskaya steadied his hand with her own. "See, he knows perfectly well."

“Yes,” said Stalin, “it is easy to see how much he is improving.” Then he added in a loud voice. “Comrade Lenin, may I have the pen?” The hand whacked the spectacles again and Krupskaya quickly buried the flicker of hatred in her face with a reassuring smile, but not before Stalin had caught the original message of her expression. Comrade Stalin bowed stiffly to his helpless predecessor, strolled over to a table a few feet away, and idly picked up a book that was lying open, print side down, where someone had left off reading. His eyes fell upon these words: “Once there was a blacksmith. ‘How is it,’ he said, ‘that I have never seen trouble? It is said there is evil in the world; I will go and search for it.’ But Krupskaya gently yet insistently removed the book from his hands before he could pursue the text further. “Russian Fairy Tales,” explained Krupskaya, “he likes to have Maria read them to him. It keeps his mind off Politburo business.” Stalin snorted to suppress a sardonic grin, and looked back at the figure in the rattan wheelchair whose head, wobbling on its short thin neck like a baby bird’s, returned a wild-eyed, infantile smile. “Yes,” he answered. “Politburo affairs would tax him just now,” and then seeing Krupskaya’s face darken, added, “Just when he is making such a fine recovery.” For a moment, the two enemies looked at each other with undisguised contempt, but their face-off was interrupted by a loud shout from the Commissar of Commissars.

“What is it, Vladimir Ilyich? We were just talking of the weather and did not hear?”

“Maa er mi er!”

“Yes, yes, my darling, Maria will come back and read some more.”

The giant head on its fragile spring was whipping back and forth like a maddened terrier’s, throwing streamers of spittle right and left — and left and left and left. “Maaa ER mi ER! Mah ER Mi her!”

### **Thoughts on the Coming of Spring**

In this impossible slough of suffering  
And death, the proscenium where souls gather,  
As audience to their own bodies’ writhings,  
On both sides of the stage lights, they dream of revolution . . .

The vapors have gathered into dewy globes,  
Whose mirrors catch the glories of the moon,  
Then dissolve in the greater glories of the dawn.

What can we say of these globes that come and go,  
Reflecting countless pictures of each other,  
Each one of which reflects a style of pain.

What we can say is that saying has a power,

Exceeding the power of causes and effects.  
What we can say is that saying is a style,  
And not a thing of vapor or of dew.

In a forest, in the autumn, in a war,  
The leaves fall damply on the littered corpses,  
But the sayings that say everything and nothing,  
Say that the actors rise when the curtain falls.

3/14/01 Wednesday's Rock, Grace Maryanka  
Closing time: 9:00 a.m., C.S.T.

It is now and only now, when in the regions afflicted by the famine there is cannibalism and the roads are littered with hundreds if not thousands of corpses, that we can (and therefore must) pursue the acquisition of [church} valuables with the most ferocious and merciless energy, stopping at nothing, in suppressing all resistance . . . no other moment except that of desperate hunger will offer us such a mood among the broad peasant masses, which will either assure us of their sympathy, or, at any rate their neutrality . . .

Every religious idea, every idea of God . . . is unutterable vileness . . . of the most dangerous kind, "contagion" of the most abominable kind. Millions of sins, filthy deeds, acts of violence and physical contagions . . . are far less dangerous than the subtle, spiritual idea of God decked out in the smartest "ideological" costumes . . .

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin

Standing before the naked Old Abbot in that underground whose polished birchwood chambers were filled with the hibernating, meditating bodies of monks and their fantastic accumulations of booty, Grace began experiencing a series of "popping" sounds, not sounds actually, but rather sounds' inaudible synaptic equivalencies, as if she were ascending into a pearly, rarified altitude with tremendous acceleration. As a dancer, Grace knew her body well, but in this instance she was discovering that the body's knowledge was a living thing that surpassed the knowledge of the mind. Every pore, every fingernail, every eyelash, hair and tooth in that instant became a locus of perception. An outward thrust of sentience exploded from her body's molecules and into the world at large, as if each minute portion of her physical being had transformed itself into an eye. But these eyes, billions upon billions of them, were not mere photoreceptors, gathering information for processing by the brain. No. Their function was not merely sight, but insight, and the popping sounds that overwhelmed her were her old mental excitation patterns suddenly being expanded into a vast space by a surge of internal energy. She felt on fire. She wanted to cry out from this onslaught of excruciating bliss. But when she opened her mouth, the deafening crash of the egress and ingress of colliding air molecules silenced her vain attempt to speak. Yet amazingly, her mind, although inundated by this onrushing spate of physical sensation was curiously empty too, as if she were floating in an enormous space alive with streaming kaleidoscopic

colors. She kept trying to bunch together words in her astonished mouth, and deliver them somehow to the Old Abbot, words that would form questions, the answers to which might mercifully reconnect her to something familiar, something that she could identify as Grace, but nothing came through her parted lips, but a crashing hush of sunbursting silence, more terrible than the Earth's last dawn in the very lap of fire. Tears poured down her cheeks and the confluence of these rivers coursing their way through the almost infinitesimal blond peachnap of her beautiful finegrained skin, seemed to her like walls of molten lava rolling down a mountain steep and crushing great trees in its furious, implacable rampage. Her eyes would neither open nor close, but froze in a half-open position that allowed her, no, compelled her, to become hypersentiently aware of both her inner and outer vision, not as two separate entities, but as one tremendous thing. The world of imagination, of dream, of remembrance and of vision joined suddenly with the world of the underground polished birchwood chambers and their fantastical denizens and treasures. Now there was but one world astonishingly connected by entwining filaments of light, whose pulsations birthed a third realm, neither subjective nor objective, but rather some marvelous hybrid, whose attributes far outstripped in Olympian magnificence the two gods who had combined to create it. Finally, after a gargantuan struggle, Grace slowly began to stammer: "Ca . . . Ca . . . Ca . . .," drooling the one truncated syllable like an idiot savant who is trapped inarticulately in the throes of galactic birth, but she could not, or rather her disembodied and amazed tongue would not, say more. The Old Abbot, filled with a madcap delight, repeated her impotent stutter. "Ca . . . Ca . . . Ca . . .," he said mockingly, hilariously transported by his protégés' predicament. "My dear Grace, I think you are trying to say the word 'calamity.'" Indeed. Indeed she was. The only word that she could think of, but not yet utter, that seemed, however woefully inadequate, apt. "Not to worry," said the Old One, "you will soon acclimate yourself, even to this disaster." But as he finished saying this, he was doubled over by another fit of hilarity from whose breathless grip he could only extricate himself by means of prancing around the self-illuminated corridors, his vigorous old genitals flopping in time to his faunish cavorting. Grace was trapped as a helpless, unquestioning novitiate commandeered by a lunatic angel, an angel who chanted the bizarre mantra "Blesséd be the workings of the Mattermitter! Blesséd be the abundance of the Calamity!" as he danced obscenely about her in a jewelsheen of neverdying light. Suddenly, the Old Abbot, without breaking free of the rhythms of his dance, dove into the cache of costumes, wigs, false-beards, prosthetic appendages, and in a blur of velocity, began donning and discarding one disguise after another, all the while chanting: "Blesséd be the workings of the Mattermitter! Blesséd be the abundance of the Calamity!" In all her days at the *Ballets Russes*, working with the geniuses of Nijinsky, Fokine, Diaghilev, Bakst she had never witnessed such a dazzling performance. The Abbot's voice, although it restricted its revolutions to the *idée fixe* of this single chant, modulated over such an astounding spectrum of notes, melodies, rhythms, musical phrasings that he seemed to be issuing from his one pair of vocal chords entire orchestrations of harmonies. His accompanying movements and costume changes were so exquisitely expressive that — in a whirl of *ballonnés*, *chassés*, *ecartés*, *eschappés*, *élanés*, *jetés*, *relevés*, positions, arabesques, attitudes — he seemed to be able to picture forth, not only all of Grace's personal biography, but the entire course of the war, indeed, the entire thrust of history, with all of its sorrows, tragedies, aspirations, disappointments, loves and its occasional

ecstasies hurtling relentlessly towards some very real, and very immediate apotheosis. Grace, who had spent her life since the age of seven, as a performer, suddenly realized the thrill of the audience. She felt simultaneously humbled and exalted. Then suddenly, miraculously, *she knew*. This was the electro-magnetic, nuclear spark of communication whose interchanging intimacies were words igniting words. Here, expressed in art, was the metalanguage, the Ur-sprach, the ultimate “In the beginning there was . . .” This was the language of birds, of sunlight, of volcanoes and of the moon. This was the poetry of fur, feathers, scales, surf, earth and rock. The Abbot’s ballet expressed it all, not through the grossness of corrupted mundane speech, but through that speech which causes all hearts to beat, all feet to move. In the end, Grace could only fall to the ground and repeat the mantra “Blesséd be the workings of the Mattermitter! Blesséd be the abundance of the Calamity!”

That is how Grace, in the underground, discovered that the Mattermitter was a kind of modular meditation device, which these monks, in conjunction with many others, both seen and unseen, physical and metaphysical, activated, fueling in their somnolence that organism which could transform thought into matter and project matter through space and time. The sleepers in the polished birchwood drawers had shut down every aspect of their metabolism and had directed all of that energy into highly coordinated intentions. “Those intentions,” as the Old Abbot explained, “shoot out into the psychode, harmonizing the chaotic potentials of space and time, to psychometrize certain objects — all the objects you see in this chamber — and bring them into the sphere of the Monad’s holy vibrations.” Grace did not understand any of this with what was left — precious little if the truth be known — of her rational mind. But there was an inkling of an inkling of a shadow of an intuition working here that told her, or at least told all of those sentient eyes which now comprised her, that this fantastical technology was the force that drew pilgrims, Archamandrites, Cossacks, chickens, Grand Dukes, and even a former *prima ballerina assoluta* to this isolated forest and hermitage to collect, to see, or to deliver some object deemed necessary by the solar omniscience. Here she had stumbled on, discovered, been commanded to come to one of the nexus points of power for a fast approaching world transformation. These realizations stunned her, yet, the Abbot, sensing her amazement, added to it, when he said: “The encoding and transportation of objects is only a tertiary talent.” Grace blinked as if the rapid motions of her eyelids would clear her mind and open her ears, as the Abbot continued. “The monks here, though some are centuries old, are only novitiates. There are others who possess far more powerful skills.” “More powerful?” Grace mumbled. “We are only moving existing objects about within this very, limited earth domain. Those with secondary skills may produce at will from the ether, any object, being or person, whether these entities have ever existed before, or they can mix and mate objects and beings — pre-existing to non-existing, pre-existing to pre-existing, non-existing to non-existing, post-existing to — well, you get the idea. Centaurs, griffins, werewolves, mermaids, unicorns, sphinxes — that sort of thing. Did you ever wonder how these myths came to be?” “This,” he said, “is how. Reality is bent to the will of the reality makers. By the skillful use of metaphor, these secondary powers create whole new categories of being.” As the Abbot spoke, he had arrived back into his original habit, the coarse, rough-sewn robe of an Old Believer monk, and as Grace kept turning over in her mind the words “tertiary” and

“secondary,” her benefactor gathered and laid in her cataleptic arms certain objects and articles of clothing. They had been moving now, without Grace at first realizing it, back through the corridors which they had originally traversed, the chambers’ self-generating illumination dimming behind them as they ascended. At last they stood together outside the little hut, under broken, wind-wavered forestlight, its golden tissues wrapping and unwrapping, with an unseen magician’s hand, the white boles of the birches, the eggs, the chickens. The Abbot had ceased speaking to her now and was checking her supplies, whispering the names of objects to himself as if that ritual naming comprised an infallible checklist: “Wig. Da. Beard. Da. Nose. Da. Breast-corset. Da. Grand Dukes’ seals. Da. Male genitals. Da. Browning. Da.” Grace stood dumfounded during all of this, and yet, she seemed to detect in the Abbot’s business-like manner a kind of gruff male suppression of emotion. They had only known each other a short time, but his large, bright eyes were brimming when he said. “Grace, you have a journey to take, a mission to accomplish. The Mattermitter brought these things for you.” Then he carefully took the objects from her arms, which hung outstretched in the empty air, and he tied all in a neat bundle and fitted the pack to her back so that she could comfortably port them. At this point, he gently pressed her arms, first the left then the right, down to her sides, then holding then releasing her hand, he deftly nudged her north through the forest. Grace did not know where she was going, but she trusted the Abbot as if he were a physical embodiment of the Alma, and she began moving her feet, almost on point, careful not to disturb nor egg nor chicken. A few fluffy yellow chicks scurried like tiny outriders at her feet, leading her steps through the scrip of golden leaves. She was calm. Even happy. But after taking only a few steps, a certain question weighed upon her. She turned back to the small, bent figure of the Old Abbot, who was now standing frailly before the black hovel of the hermit’s hut. “I want to know, good Father,” she asked, “why did you bring all of these chickens.” The Abbot threw back his head, and cackled with childlike abandon. “Oh, my Child, my Child, we didn’t bring *them*, they brought *us*.” Then *she knew*. She turned back to her virgin, unmarked path, the chicks racing with the fluidity of running water before her. There arose in the space around her the stars of all those avian eyes, whose commanders she now understood to possess motivations and purposes beyond even the wisest human powers to comprehend. *Tertiary, secondary*, these were human attributes. It was these animals, these despised and lowly ones, who were masters of the *primal* skill. Again she stopped. Again she turned. The golden slides and counterslides of light washed over her as the great blue slab of broken, mosaic sky deepened from Prussian to purple. Time stopped, and Grace and the Old Abbot stood facing each other across the breathing space of the forest. The popping sounds resumed, and Grace, more rooted to the earth in this moment than even the ancient creaking trees, let the wind caress her and the calamity engulf her. Finally, she spoke: “But Father, what is the primal skill.” But now, the old monk, having resumed, it seemed, his ancient vow of silence, cowed by his decrepit habit of near-senility, said nothing. He only shrugged his humped shoulders and pursed his ignorant lips, turning the palms of his trembling white hands upwards in a questioning, but accepting gesture. Grace was trying to extract some comfort of meaning from that enigmatic pose, when she was suddenly surprised by a large, white hen, which flew into her beseeching, outstretched arms. *The* arms, not *her* arms, closed reflexively, and the hen clucked contentedly in their cradle. In the distance, now, the far distance, and at that cusp of time when daylight dies to starlight, Grace could

faintly see the shadow of the old, old monk, placing his hands together, and bowing slowly his palsied, bearded head. He then turned, abandoning the night's vast maw of darkness to be swallowed by the hut's more humble one.

All morning Krupskaya has been warding the vestibule outside of Vladimir Ilyich's study, still stinging from the "syphilitic whore" remark inflicted upon her by the visitor she was expecting and dreading. She had sent Maria in to read to the invalid, because she knew this calmed him, and because calmness was part of the fiction that she wanted to foist off on the Politburo. This was but one of many fictions that her husbands' fawning ideologues wove like nightmarish fairy tales. Indeed, the new government's chief and most necessary product was fiction. Its malversations were essential to them, in so far as it kept them from absorbing the horror of what their brave New World was producing. Call it the bludgeoned imagination's revenge on the abstract dialectics of their congresses. Out there, in the savage immeasurable wilds of the Soviet countryside, the luckier humans were scavenging horse manure, hoping to extract from it a few grains of wheat, while the damned fed on their own children. Krupskaya, this wife of the revolution's chief progenitor of confabulation understood that it was easier to wallow in a false triumphalism than to contemplate the gruesome anthropophagi, who no longer had human visages at all, but instead were fitted by depravation with demonic birdlike beaks, frog heads, faces slit with thin, wide lips, their open mouths gasping like stranded fish, for nourishment in the petulant, freezing air. But weren't they all trying to forge something positive out of the ruins of capitalism. imperialism and class warfare? And besides, compared to the general rabid foam of lies, what were her little fibs, partly even believed by herself, that the Commissar of Commissars was recovering? Maria's voice had been wafting over her for some time, but Krupskaya's mind dwelt on the gray blur of that monster-man with tigerish yellow eyes whom she expected any moment, just as the starving peasants expected death. She was dead tired. But she convinced herself that she was not sleeping as she walked back and forth before the door, no, not sleeping, yet her waking mind drifted into hypnogogic imagery. A murky chamber where thousands of women were stripped and jammed floor to ceiling in cages like hens in a poultry farm. Their bodies were spattered with purple blotches, blisters, buboes, wens, boils. Effluent from dysentery slimed the floor. Krupskaya forcibly blinked herself awake, but in another moment she nodded and found herself viewing the giant cask of a latrine, where leering soldiers were watching as naked women perched like ravaged, plucked birds twisted their bodies into the most outlandish positions. No shame. No prudery. Only the human need to relieve bowels or to urinate. Raw fingers combed through the remaining hair of half-shaved skulls. Would you take me for your wedded bride? Half-human, half-flightless avian creatures from a world too much like this one to be mere visions. Eighty-four! Eighty-four! Eighty-four! *Zachto?* Why? What for? And she was awake again. She had sat with Vladimir Ilyich after the Doctors had asked him to multiply 12 x 7. For three hours, this flower of the Soviet intelligentsia belabored a twenty-one page notepad with spastic scrawls, attempting to solve the problem by addition: 12 plus 12 equals 24, 24 plus 12 equals . . . what? why? what for? *Zachto?* The mind upon whose creaking, rusted machinery the fate of the world revolution rested had ground heavily to an exhausted halt, and in that terrible leadened depression, the blood of millions pooled. The torpor of this unspeakable mass of hopelessness hung on Krupskaya's eyelids as the

soft shooshoo of Marie's soothing voice scrolled over her from the study. But here, in this country of the damned, sleep itself had been politicized, and historical imperatives had pushed even the elect beyond the pale of succumbing to this simplest of biological necessities. She thought of her visitor's imminent arrival and startled when she heard these words: "He then turned, abandoning the night's vast maw of darkness to be swallowed by the hut's more humble one." What on earth was Maria reading? Krupskaya briskly entered the study, trying not to look at the face of her husband, stewed as it was in its cauldron of infantile idiocy, and took the book from Maria's hands. She read, letting her exhausted eyes scan down the page to quickly get the gist.

Once there was a blacksmith. "How is it," he said, "that I have never seen trouble. It is said that there is evil in the world; I will go and search for it."

He met a tailor.

"Let us go together. I too live well and have never seen evil; let us go and look for it."

They walked and walked.

It was night, they had no shelter, and finally they beheld a big hut.

It was empty and uncomfortable.

In came a tall woman, scrawny, crookéd, one-eyed.

They took fright.

She came to them, took one of them, the tailor, slew him, and put him into the oven.

"Grandmother, I am a blacksmith."

"I can forge everything."

"Then forge me an eye."

"Maria, what is this?"

Maria blinked and stammered, "A Fairy Tale. You know that this is what Vladimir Ilyich likes to hear."

"But this isn't what I heard you reading."

Marie looked at the words and wondered how they could have been so transfigured.

In the vestibule, a short, stout man in a gray padded smock looked on, his jaundiced stare burning ferociously through pockmarked, colorless stone. Black hair and long black mustaches bristled from the expressionless face with living vindictiveness. This man had fixed his yellow eyes on the scene before him. But what he was seeing was a vast cell. It was crammed so full of starving enemies that they could neither move nor raise their hands. They stood, like thirsty penguins, trying to catch something with their mouths. In the Gulag-cold that splits both truck tires and the steel rims they clutch, in which the breath freezes into those tiny glass shards that tinkle to the earth in showers known as “the whispering of stars”, the stone face cracked a sardonic smile. ‘Soon,’ he mused, ‘it will not matter that these others regard you as stupid or dishonest or cruel. You will have what you want: their lives, and the power to end them.’ The penguins snapped at chips of ice rained on them by their jailers. ‘Da. Da. That’s right.’ The women did not see him. But Lenin did, and the Commissar’s face and voice, like some high-grade imbecile’s, shrieked with childish alarm, “KO! KO! BA! KO BA!”

“Oh, look now!” cried Krupskaya. “He is upset again!” Read! Read!”

He took an awl, heated it, put it on her good eye, took an ax, and drove in the awl with the butt of it.

### **Head Count**

What we seek are connections, which may sustain us  
In our single loneliness, four ways across  
The immeasurable struggles for health and wealth  
And happiness. In one direction is the free  
Animal, alive in its fur and feathers, in one  
Is our spouse, our truest mate and emblem of completion,  
In one is our angel, ecstasy’s bright message. We are  
Ourselves, the fourth, the one, the center of suffering and joy.  
What we seek is our connection to the circumference,  
All other centers centered in our own.