Back then, I was still so young
I was only 16, yet I remembered nothing of my childhood
I was 16,000 leagues from my hometown
I was in Moscow, the city of one thousand and three bell towers and seven stations
But, I hadn’t yet had my fill of those seven stations or the one thousand and three bell towers
For my adolescence had been so ardent and wild
That my heart at every turn burned like the temple of Ephesus or like Red Square
In the setting sun
And my eyes lit up the ancient paths
And I was already such a bad poet
That I didn’t know how to finish anything

The Kremlin was an immense confection
Iced in gold,
With great almond cathedrals all in white
And the honey gold of the bells
An old monk read to me the legend of Novgorod
I was thirsty
And I decoded the cuneiform characters
When suddenly, the pigeons of Saint-Esprit all took flight
And my hands took off as well with the rustling of a bird
That was my last memory of the last day
Of the last voyage
And of the sea.

Yet I was such a bad poet
I never knew how to end anything
I was hungry
All the days and all the women in the cafes and all the wineglasses
I wanted to drink them all and smash them all
All the shop windows and all the streets
All the houses and every single life
All the wheels of the carriages that turned wildly along the cobblestones
I wanted to pitch them all into a fiery furnace
Oh, I would have ground all the bones
And pulled out the tongues
And dissolved every massive body, foreign and naked under the clothes that raised in me a panic

I presaged the coming of the great Red Christ of the Russian Revolution . . .
Oh, the sun was an open wound
Spreading like a deep flame.
Back then, in my youth
I was barely 16, but I remembered nothing of my birth
I was in Moscow, hungering to feed myself on flames
And I could never have my fill of the towers and the stations that my eyes lit up like stars

A cannon sounded in Siberia It was war
Hunger, cold, plague, cholera
And the muddy waters of the Amur River carried away a million corpses
In each station, I saw the last trains leaving
No-one could go, because there were no more tickets
And the departing soldiers wanted to stay where they were . . .
An old monk sang to me the legend of Novgorod.

Me, the bad poet, who wanted to go nowhere – I could go wherever I wanted
The shopkeepers, too, had enough money
To make a killing.
Their train left every Friday morning.
They said there were plenty of dead bodies.
One shop owner imported alarm clocks and coo-coo clocks
Another, hat boxes, rollers and corkscrews from Sheffield
One other, coffins from Malmo filled with jam jars and sardines
And there were plenty of women, eager to sell their hidden treasures, vacant thighs for hire
Coffins
They were all licensed
They said there were plenty of dead bodies
The women traveled at half-fare
They all had credit with the bank.

Now, one Friday morning, it was finally my turn
It was December
I left to accompany a jeweler going to Harbin
We had two seats on the Express and 34 boxes of gems from Pforzheim
Junk jewelry “Made in Germany”
He dressed me in finery, but boarding the train, I lost a button
- I remember, I remember, I have thought of it often -
I slouched on the boxes and I was happy playing with a shiny pistol he gave me

I was very happy and carefree
Playing the brigand
We had stolen the treasure of Golconda
And, thanks to the Trans-Siberien, we were going to hide it on the other side of the world
I would protect it from robbers from the Urals who had attacked the saltimbanques in a Jules Verne story
I would protect it against the Manchurian bandits, the Chinese Boxers
And the mad little Mongols of the Grand Lama
And from Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves
And the protectors of the terrible Old Man in the Mountain
And against those most modern of thieves
Hotel rats
And the international express train specialists.

Yet, yet
I was as sad as a child
The rhythms of the trains
“The iron horse marrow,” as the American psychiatrists say
The sound of the doors closing, of the axles, grinding on frozen rails
The gold coin of my future
My Browning pistol, a piano, the curses of the card players in the next compartment

The surprising presence of Jeanne
The man with blue glasses who paced nervously in the passageway, looking at me as he passed
Women arguing
And the whistle of steam
And the eternal sound of the wheels spinning wildly in the groove of heaven
The frosted windowpanes
Unnatural!
Behind them, The Siberian Plains, the low-lying sky, the tall shadows of the Taciturn mountains rising, falling

I slept in my motley blanket
As wildly colored as my life
My life only kept me as warm as that Scottish blanket
And my continent, seen through a vent from a speeding train
Was not as rich as my life
My poor life
That blanket
Unraveling over those boxes filled with gold
With which I rolled on
And dreamed on
And smoked on
And the sole flame in the Universe
Is a single sad thought . . .

From the bottom of my heart, tears rise
If I think, Love, of my mistress
She is only a pale, immaculate child I found deep in a bordello.

She is only a child, blond, laughing, sad,
She never smiles; she never cries;
But, when she lets you catch her glance,
A silver lily trembles in her eyes, the poet’s flower.
Sweet and quiet, with not a single fault,
She quivers at your touch;
But when I approach her, from here, from there, from anywhere, from nowhere,
She steps away, closes her eyes – and takes a step.

For she is my love and other women
Are just golden gowns on bodies of flames,
My poor friend is abandoned,
Naked, no great figure - she is too poor.

She is a slender, innocent flower,
The poet’s flower, a silver lily,
Cold, alone, already faded
Oh the tears rise up when I think of her heart.

This night is the same as 100,000 others when a train flies away in the night
- Comets come crashing down -
And a man and a woman, still so young, play at making love.

The sky is a torn circus tent in a fishing village
In Flanders
The sun is a smoking ball
The moon, a girl on a trapeze.
A clarinet, a trumpet, a bitter flute, a sad drum
And here is my cradle
My cradle
Always next to the piano where my mother played Beethoven sonatas, like Madame Bovary
I spent my childhood in the hanging gardens of Babylon
I played hooky in the train stations, among the leaving trains
Now, I make trains run after me
Basel to Timbuktoo
I played the horses at Auteuil and Longchamps
Paris to New York
Now, I make the trains run the length of my life
Madrid to Stockholm
But I lost all of my bets
There was only Patagonia left, Patagonia suited my immense sadness, Patagonia and a voyage in the South Seas

I am en route
I have always been en route
I’m on the road with little Jeanne of France
The train somersaults and falls back on its wheels
It falls back on its wheels
The train always falls back on its wheels
“Blaise, tell me, are we far from Montmartre?”

Far away Jeanne, you’re seven days away
You are far from Montmartre, from the hill that suckled you, from Sacre Coeur where you
sheltered yourself
Paris is gone and its massive flames
Nothing but cinders remain
The rain falls
The peat bog swells
Siberia turns
Heavy sheets of snow build
And a bell of folly rings like a final wish in the blue air
The train beats in the heart of the leaden horizon
And your sad sneering laugh . . .

“Tell me, Blaise, are we far from Montmartre?”

Your worries
Forget your worries
All of the crumbling stations along the way
The telegraph wires on which they hang
The smirking poles that swing and strangle them
The world stretches, grows, then contracts like an accordion tormented by a sadistic hand
Trains escape into tears in the heavens
And in those holes
The vertiginous wheels, mouths, voices
Mad dogs bark at our heels
The demons are loosed
Heaps of metal
All is in fake harmony
The broun-roun-roun of the wheels
Shocks
Leaps
We are a storm inside the head of a deaf man . . .

“Tell me, Blaise, are we far from Montmartre?”

Of course, you bother me, you know full well we are very far
Overheated madness bellows in the locomotive
Plague and cholera rise like ardent coals in our way
We disappear in a tunnel of war
Hunger, that whore, cling to the clouds helter-skelter and piles up stinking bodies like shrapnel
Do as she does, do your job . . .

“Tell me, Blaise, are we far from Montmartre?”
Yes we are, we are
The scapegoats have been worked to death in the desert
Listen for the bells of the mangy flock
Tomsk Chelyabinsk Kansk Ob’ Tayshet Verkne-Udinsk Kurgan Samara Penza-Tulun
Death in Manchuria
Is our landing place, our last refuge
This trip is terrible
Yesterday morning
Ivan Illitch had white hair
And Kolia Nicolaï Ivanovovich has been biting his nails for 15 days . . .
Do like they do, like Death, like Hunger, do your job
What costs 100 sous, on the Trans-Siberien costs 100 rubles
The seats are fevered, under the table, measles
The devil plays the piano
His gnarled fingers excite all the ladies
Human Nature
Harlots
Do what you must
Until we reach Harbin

“Tell me, Blaise, are we far from Montmartre?”

No, but . . . give me some peace . . . leave me alone
You have odd-shaped hips
Your belly is bitter and you have the clap
That’s all that Paris sat in your lap
But you have a little bit of soul . . . because you are unhappy
For pity’s sake, come close, near my heart
The wheels are windmills in a wonderland
And the windmills are a beggar whirling his crutches
We are mutilated bodies floating in space
We roll along on our four wounds
Our wings are clipped
Our wings of the seven sins
All trains are playthings of the devil
A Barnyard
The modern world
Speed can’t help us
The modern world
Distances are too far
And at the end of the voyage it’s terrible to be a man with a woman

“Blaise, tell me, are we far from Montmartre?”

For pity’s sake, come here and I’ll tell you a story
Come into my bed
Come to my heart
I’m going to tell you a story . . .

Come! come!

In Fiji, spring reigns eternal
Indolence
Love swoons over the lovers in the tall grass and syphilis prowls among the banana trees
Come to the lost isles of the Pacific!
With names like Phoenix, The Marquesas
Borneo and Java
And Celebes shaped like a cat
We can’t go to Japan
Come, then, to Mexico!
On high plateaus tulip trees bloom
Climbing vines are the tail of the sun
Like the palette and the paintbrush of a painter
Colors that numb you like a gong
Rousseau was there
It changed his life
It’s a land of birds
Bird of paradise, lyre bird
Toucan, mockingbird
And the hummingbird hidden in the heart of the black lily

Come!
We will make love in the majestic ruins of an Aztec temple
You will be my idol
A spotty child idol – ugly and bizarrely foreign
Oh come!

If you’d like, we’ll fly there and circle the land of 1000 lakes,
The nights are measurelessly long
Our prehistoric ancestors will fear the motor
I will land
And I will build a hangar for my plane from the fossil bones of mammoths
The primitive fire will rekindle our fading love
Samovar
We will make love in fine bourgeois fashion near the pole
Oh come!

Jeanne Jeannette Ninette nini ninon nichon
Mimi mamour ma poupoule mon Pérou
Dodo dondon
Carotte ma crotte
Chouchou p'tit-coeur
Cocotte
Chérie p'tite-chèvre
Mon p'tit-péché mignon
Concon
Coucou
She sleeps.

[Note: This section above has been left untranslated. The words are a lullaby of terms of endearment mixed with rude slang.]

She sleeps
All of her short life, she’s never learned a thing
All the faces seen in the stations
All the clocks
Paris time, Berlin time, St. Petersburg time, and the time of every single station

And in Ufa, the bloody face of the cannonier
And the silly glowing clock dial in Grodno
And the perpetual advance of the train
Every morning we set our watches
The train goes and the sun lags behind
Nothing works, I hear the bells sound
The giant bell of Notre Dame
The sharp bell of the Louvre that marks the Saint Bartholomew Day massacre
The rusting carillons of Brugge-la-Morte
The electric chimes of the New York Public Library

The campaniles of Venice
And the bells of Moscow, the horloge of the Great Red Gate told me the time when I worked in an office
And my memories
The train thunders on the turntable
The train rolls
A gramophone growls a Gypsy march
And the world, like a clock in the Jewish quarter of Prague spins madly in reverse.

Pluck the petals from the compass rose
Where unchained storms rumble
The trains roll wildly along a gnarled network
The devils playthings
There are some trains that never meet
And others that get lost en route
Station masters play chess
Backgammon
Pool
Billiards
Parabolas
The iron road is a new geometry
Syracuse
Archimedes
And the soldiers who cut his throat
And the cars and the vessels
And the prodigious engines that he invented
And all of the slaughter
Ancient history
Modern history
Whirlwinds
Shipwrecks
Like the Titanic I read about in the papers
So many images I cannot describe in my verses
For I am still such a bad poet
For the universe overwhelms me
For I am not insured against train accidents
For I don’t know how to get to the bottom of things
And I’m afraid.

I’m afraid
I don’t know how to get to the bottom of things
Like my friend Chagall I can make a series of insane paintings
But I didn’t take any notes while traveling

“Pardon my ignorance
Pardon my forgetting the ancient game of verse,"
As Guillaume Apollinaire says
Everything about this war you can read in the Memoirs of Krupotkin
Or the Japanese papers so cruelly illustrated
What good is it to document my self
I give in
To the flutterings of my memory.

Starting in Irkutsk the trip slowed down
Became too long
We were in the first train that skirted Lake Baikal
The locomotive was decorated with curtains and paper lanterns
And we left the station to the sad accents of the hymn to the Tzar
If I were a painter, I’d pour on a lot of red, a lot of yellow on the end of this trip
For I believe we had all gone a bit mad
An immense delirium reddened the drained faces of my traveling companions
As we approached Mongolia
Roaring like a forest fire
The train had lost its allure
And I noticed in the constant grinding of the wheels
Insane accents and the sobs of an eternal liturgy
I saw
I saw the silent trains, the black trains return from the Far East passing like phantoms
And my eye, like a lantern, still follows those trains
In Talga, 100,000 wounded in agony, left to die

I visited the hospital in Krasnoyarsk
And in Khilok we met a long convoy of mad soldiers
I saw in the infirmary gaping wounds and injuries bleeding furiously
Amputated limbs dancing about or flying up into the raucous air
Fire was in every face and in every heart
Idiot fingers drummed on all the windowpanes
And under the weight of fear, every glance burst like an abscess
In every station, the train wagons burned
And I saw
I saw trains, 60 cars long dashing away at full throttle hounded by rutting horizons and clouds of
crows chasing desperately after
Disappear
In the direction of Port Arthur.

In Chita, we had a few days of respite
Stopped for five days due to congestion on the route
We stayed with Mr. Jankelevitch who offered me his only daughter in marriage
Then the train left.
Now, it was me playing the piano and I had a toothache
I can still see, when I want, that calm household, the father’s store and the eyes of his daughter,
who came at night to my bed
Mussorgsky
And the lieder of Hugo Wolf
And the sands of the Gobi
And in Khailar a caravan of white camels
I must have been drunk for over 500 Kilometers

But I played on and that’s all I saw
When one is traveling, one should close one’s eyes
Sleep
I wanted to sleep
With eyes closed, I knew every country by its smell
And I knew every train by its sound
The trains of Europe beat in quarter time; the trains in Asia beat 5/4 or 7/4
Others play muted lullabies
And there is something in the monotone sound of the wheels that recalls the heavy prose of
Maeterlinck
I deciphered the confusing texts of the wheels and I gathered the scattered elements into a violent
beauty
That I possess
And which drives me

Tsitsihar and Harbin
I won’t go any further
That’s the last station
I got off in Harbin as they were setting fire to the Red Cross office

O Paris
Great warm hearth with streets criss-crossing like embers and the old houses bending to warm themselves
Like grandparents
And the posters, red, green, multicolored like my brief little yellow life
Yellow, the proud color of novels about France
I love to brush up close against buses in grand cities
Those on the St Germain-Montmartre line bring me to the base of the Butte
The motors blare like golden bulls
Twilit cows graze at Sacré-Cœur

O Paris
Landing spot of wishes, crossroads of worries
At least the news agents still have a bit of light on their doors
La Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits and Grands Express Européens sent me a prospectus
It’s the most beautiful church in the world
I have friends who surround me like a guard rail
They’re afraid that if I leave I’ll never come back
All the women I’ve met are arrayed on the horizon
With pitiful gestures and sad semaphoric looks in the rain
Bella, Agnes, Catherine and the mother of my son in Italy
And there, the mother of my lover in America
There are some siren cries that tear at my soul
While over in Manchuria a belly quivers as if giving birth
I wish
I wish to have never traveled
Tonight a great love torments me
And despite of myself, I think of little Jeanne from France
In one sad evening I wrote this poem in her honor
The little prostitute
I am sad I am sad
I will go to the Lapin agile to remember my lost youth
And drink a few glasses
Then I will return home alone

Paris
City of the singular Tower of the great Gallows and the Wheel
Paris 1913
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