

The Prose of the Trans-Siberien and of Little Jeanne of France

Dedicated to the Musicians

[Note: This dedication, which is not in the original book,  
appeared in later versions of the poem.]

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 dreamt 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 Bruge-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 Sacre Coeur

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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