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Action at a Distance:

German ballads and verse entertainments
from Goethe to Morgenstern

in English translation

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Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832)

SIMILE

I picked a posy of meadow flowers
in one of my leisurely thoughtful hours
and brought them home. The heat of my hand
was more than delicate blooms could stand;
they drooped. I found a water glass,
and something wonderful came to pass:
They drank and lifted their little heads -
on a field of green the yellows and reds -
every one of them hale and sound
as if they stood in maternal ground.

They lived again when my songs were sung -
German songs - in a foreign tongue.

THE SINGER (from *Wilhelm Meister*)
for Cyrus Hamlin, if he likes it

“What is that sound before the gate,
out on the bridge, that ringing?
Let our banquet reverberate
with such melodious singing!”
The king had spoken; servants ran,
brought back an old and wrinkled man.
The king cried, “Let him enter!”

“My greetings, ladies, from afar;
my lords of rank and title.
How rich a heaven, star by star,
with names beyond recital!
A splendid feast, elite, sublime!
I shut my eyes; it’s not the time
to swoon in admiration.”

He turned within him, letting fly
full-throated rich romances.
The lords, they held their heads up high;
the ladies dropped their glances.
“Your song is pleasing,” said the king;
“a golden chain is quite the thing
to recompense the singer.”

“O take this golden chain away!
Reward a valiant vassal
who routs the foe in mortal fray
defending king and castle!
Reward your minister of state;
let him assume the golden weight
with other weighty burdens!

“I sing like any bird that sings
on leafy branch; and therefore
the song itself in beauty brings

the only prize I care for.
But if I dare make one request:
give me a drink of wine, the best,
and from a golden goblet."

He raised the cup and drank it neat.
"O cup of liquid treasure!
Happy the house where such a treat
is deemed a paltry pleasure!
My lords, fare well and think of me;
and thank the Lord as heartily
as I thank you this evening."

DIGGING FOR TREASURE

Light of purse and short of pleasure:
 that was my unhappy story.
 Poverty is purgatory,
 riches are the greatest good.
 So I went to dig a treasure,
 undertook an excavation.
 "At the cost of my damnation!" -
 was my written boast in blood.

So I tried the recommended
 herbs and bones and all the fancy
 learned tricks of pyromancy,
 conjuring with all my might.
 When the spirit work was ended,
 then I dug my pits and trenches
 in a fog of sulphur stench.
 Dark and stormy was the night.

Then I saw, though faint and distant,
 something starlike fast approaching,
 ineluctably encroaching
 on the gloom as midnight tolled.
 Now the light grows more insistent,
 like a messenger from heaven:
 it's a boy of ten, eleven,
 with a chalice made of gold;

with a coronet of flowers
 and a look of mild emotion.
 All at once I get the notion
 he may offer me to drink.
 Must I fear infernal powers?
 Any minister that carries
 such a gift is not Old Harry's
 man or minion, I should think.

“Drink the cup of honest living;
then you’ll understand my teaching.
Stop this frantic overreaching;
conjurations are in vain.
Learn to dig without misgiving.
‘Work till sunset, friends for after;
weekday tears and holiday laughter’ –
let that be your new refrain.”

AN EXERCISE IN THE STANZA OF GOETHE'S "HOCHZEITLIED"

The vampire extended and lowered his fangs,
and punctured the neck of the beauty;
but not to assuage metaphysical pangs -
he did it for reason of duty.

A vampire is what they had raised him to be;
he'd siphoned a mouse on his grandfather's knee
and earned a Carpathian master's degree;
what else could he do but go drilling?
He went; but it wasn't fulfilling.

WEDDING SONG

In praise of the Count we tell stories and sing,
 whose castle this was and whose dwelling;
 his grandson was married today like a king,
 with banquets you folk have been swelling.
 Now when the campaigner returned from abroad,
 dismounted his charger, and gratefully trod,
 fresh-covered with glory, his own native sod,
 no servant or goods did he see here
 of all he expected to be here.

Well, welcome back home, but it's hardly the same
 "back home" that you dreamt about always:
 now most every window has burst from its frame;
 a hurricane rattles the hallways.
 How best to proceed in the coldness of night?
 I've managed in many a nastier plight.
 The morning has always put everything right.
 To bed, then! - the moon is still shining;
 to bed, or to straw - but reclining!

Now while he relaxes in slumber so sweet,
 from under the bed there's a bustling:
 it must be a rodent with nothing to eat,
 no morsel - then let it keep rustling!
 But wait! It's a comical tiny galoot,
 a dwarf with a lantern who's terribly cute,
 who talks like Demosthenes - gestures to suit.
 The Count finds him deeply amusing,
 though really he'd rather be snoozing.

"Dear Count: we have used these apartments for feast
 and festival since you departed;
 and as we imagined you still in the East,
 our feast was about to get started.
 So if you're intrepid and wish to abide,

the dwarves will be munchingly pleased to provide
a banquet to honor the dainty new bride."

The Count: "You'll have plenty of headroom -
feel free to make use of my bedroom."

Three horsemen appear now, as rigid as stone,
assuming their festival stations;
adorable mini-musicians intone
their sleek serenades and cassations;
then wag-after-wagon of intricate gear,
too much for one person to see or to hear -
the splendor of palaces wouldn't come near;
and last, in a gold-plated carriage,
the bride and the guests of the marriage.

Diminutive toppers now scramble and squeal
to claim their positions on benches;
for formal cotillion and galop and reel
they pair off the swains and the wenches.
The dances begin with a shimmering swirl
of woodwind cascades, and the company twirl
their partners around in a dizzying whirl.
The Count's a reluctant believer -
suspects that he's running a fever.

And then there's a clanging and banging of chairs,
a thumping of trivets and trenchers;
refreshments go round for the amorous pairs,
the front- and the very-back-benchers:
there's midget salami and all you could wish
of bacon and potroast and pheasant and fish,
with elegant wines to enhance every dish.
The racket proceeds undiminished,
then one little tune, and we're finished.

And speaking of racket - STOP YOURS, or I'll fail
to sing you the rest of my story;
for what he had seen on diminutive scale

came true in spectacular glory:
with trumpets and sleek serenaders to play;
with carriages, horsemen, and bridal bouquet;
the people do homage, they witness the day.
And we now rehearse and review it;
tonight we relive and renew it.

THE BARD AND THE CHILDREN ("BALLADE")
For Energetic Singing

"Come in, sir, and give us a ballad or two.
 I'm here with my brother; we're glad that it's you.
 Come in from the wind and the weather.
 Our mother's in chapel, our father and crew
 gone shooting at wolves in the heather.
 So give us a story, then give it again;
 we'll learn it the while it's recited.
 A bard is for sure the most welcome of men;
 the children are rapt and delighted."

"A night of disaster, the foe is at hand.
 The count must abandon his palace, his land;
 his gold is where no one shall find it.
 And as he escapes from the murderous band,
 his mantle - say, what lies behind it?
 Yea what does he cradle so close to his heart
 when driven abroad and benighted?
 A daughter without whom he cannot depart." -
 The children are rapt and delighted.

"And now it is morning, the world is so wide;
 the peasants and villagers gladly provide
 refreshment, the forest a dwelling.
 He begs as he travels, he swallows his pride:
 a minstrel with tales for the telling.
 But nothing encumbers his fortunate child,
 who's not to be grieved or affrighted;
 his mantle protects if the weather is wild." -
 The children are rapt and delighted.

"Now year after year is like rhyme after rhyme.
 The mantle is threadbare and faded with time
 that once did protect and sustain her.
 The singer looks on with emotion sublime,
 for only her birth can explain her:

so sweet and so gentle in every small thing,
 a blossom serenely unblighted.
 She makes an old mendicant rich as a king." -
 The children are rapt and delighted.

"One day there's a horseman of princely demean;
 she begs for a penny, he answers in spleen:
 'No alms! My design is another.
 Old man, you must give me your daughter for queen -
 my bride, and my children their mother.'
 'You want,' says the minstrel, 'what's more than my life.
 In springtime the troth will be plighted;
 you'll find that you've taken a princess to wife.'" -
 The children are rapt and delighted.

"A priest of the sacraments marries the twain.
 She trembles with pleasure, she cringes with pain;
 abandons her father so sadly;
 who wanders the mountain, who wanders the plain;
 who carries his torment so gladly.
 And so have I pictured my blessed increase;
 behold, though I've not been invited,
 my child and my grandchildren living in peace." -
 The latter sit stunned and delighted.

He blesses them. Now there's a crash at the gate:
 "It's Father, dear sir, and the danger is great!" -
 There's no place to hide or contain him.
 "Enticing my children! The old reprobate!
 Arrest him, you men, and restrain him!
 He'll rot in a dungeon for being so free!" -
 "Here's Mother!" - Alarmed and excited,
 she makes for her parent an eloquent plea. -
 The children are shocked and delighted.

The henchmen retreat and the worthy is freed,
 as daughter and grandchildren all intercede.
 The prince's embarrassed vexation

at watching his family grovel and plead
 rekindles his fierce indignation:
 "O dastardly brood of a mendicant race!
 My fortunes and house have been slighted;
 and slighted by *me*, to my doom and disgrace." -
 The children are stunned and affrighted.

The worthy reveals neither anger nor dread;
 he blanches at nothing his kinsman has said,
 who furthers to rage and to glower:
 "I long have regretted my marital bed,
 and these are the fruits of the flower.
 Nobility cannot be taught or acquired.
 My rashness has now been requited:
 I married a beggar, and beggars I sired." -
 The children are shocked and affrighted.

"My darlings, you've heard an unjustified curse:
 he calls you ignoble and servile and worse.
 No matter! Myself shall embrace you.
 This castle was mine until taken by force;
 now no one will dare to displace you.
 I've come to assume my possessions and name;
 inveterate wrongs will be righted.
 This key and my seal will establish my claim." -
 The children are stunned and delighted.

"I follow behind my legitimate lord,
 the monarch who now has returned and restored
 my clan to its former refulgence.
 Whoever dishonored his oath and his word
 the monarch will treat with indulgence. -
 Composure, my son; I have pardoned your kin.
 Two fortunate stars are united.
 Be princely in future; your children have been." -
 The princes are thrilled and delighted.

OLD RELIABLE ECKART

“We’re miles from the cottage, we’re losing the light.
 O save us, good Lord, from the dangers of night:
 the Terrible Sisters go riding.
 They’ll find us alone on a desolate stretch,
 they’ll guzzle the beer we’ve been ordered to fetch
 and leave us with nothing but trouble.”

The children were shaking and shrinking for fear.
 Directly a comical fellow drew near:
 “Be quiet, my precious! The Sisters
 are thirsty from hunting an arduous haunt;
 just give them refreshment, as much as they want –
 their curses to you will be blessings.”

And just as he promised, the Terrors appeared,
 all ghastly and grizzled, unspeakably weird,
 but happily slurping and burping.
 When beer is exhausted, the Furious Pack –
 refreshed, reassembled, remounted – go back
 to coursing the ridges and valleys.

The children now bolting for home in despair,
 the fellow who comforts them follows them there:
 “My darlings, now don’t be despondent.”
 “But surely we’re facing a flogging or two.”
 “What nonsense! Just do what I tell you to do:
 Be quiet as mice in the vestry.

And now shall I tell you who gives this advice,
 who frolics with children when children are nice?
 They call me Reliable Eckart.
 You’ve probably heard of the Miracle Man;
 but who can give evidence? – nobody can.
 You’re holding it now: it’s delicious.”

Arriving at home, and arriving there late,
 they set down the pitchers politely and wait

for mother and father to scold them.
But poured into glasses, the verdict is "fine";
the seconds are better, the thirds are divine –
the pitchers can not be depleted.

Carousing continues the following day.
If somebody wonders, and somebody may:
"These pitchers, they *must* have a story" –
the mice are as quiet as children at first,
then weaken and wobble and finally burst;
and presto! the pitchers are empty.

So listen, my children, and always obey
what parents and teachers and aldermen say –
relax not a jot or a tittle.
And if you remember that secrets are gold
when closely protected and coppers when told,
you'll always have beer when you need it.

“GREAT IS ARTEMIS OF THE EPHESIANS” (Acts 19:28)¹

At Ephesus the goldsmith kept
 a busy shop; he pounded
 as best he could and hardly slept;
 he smelted, skimmed, and founded.
 As a tender youth he'd knelt at the feet
 of Artemis on her sacred seat;
 and with his father watching, smiling,
 at home had done the job of filing
 the golden girdle beneath her breast,
 where many graceful animals nest;
 and consecrated his life's ambition
 to cultivating the old tradition.

Suddenly there's a hullabaloo:
 ruffraff with nothing better to do
 declare a god in the human brain,
 somewhere behind the blank inane
 forehead - a god with ludicrous pretensions:
 too grand for merely physical dimensions.

The master's curiosity here is meager:
 "Let my boys investigate, if they're eager."
 He considers his time is better spent
 on deer that serve the goddess for ornament;
 and hopes that he'll deserve the grace
 of doing justice to her face.

Now anyone who disagrees
 may suit himself; but tell him, please:
 it's not good policy to irk
 the craftsman or to snub his work.

¹ "Groß ist die Diana der Epheser" - Goethe of course follows Luther in calling the goddess *Diana* and in making Demetrius a goldsmith (rather than a silversmith); why the German text refers the reader to verse 39 (rather than verses 28 or 34, where the motto actually appears) is obscure.

ACTION AT A DISTANCE

The queen is standing among her dames,
 the banquet hall is resplendent.
 She wants her purse for wagers and games,
 so she summons a young attendant:
 "It's right at hand;
 it's on my sitting-room stand."
 A minute after dismissal
 he's reached the ends of the castle.

Meanwhile a cup of peach sorbet
 was being politely nibbled
 by a sweet young thing. The cup gave way
 with a crack, and the nectar dribbled.
 It ruined her dress;
 it made an embarrassing mess.
 A minute after dismissal
 she'd reached the ends of the castle.

The boy returning met on the stair
 the girl in vexation and bother.
 What no one suspected was this: the pair
 had long been sweet on each other.
 Good fortune shone,
 and they concocted their own.
 O passion of breasts upon breast!
 They kissed and they cuddled with zest.

At last they remember their separate plans.
 Girl withdraws for refitting.
 Boy advances through sabers and fans
 to a couch where the queen is now sitting.
 Of course she's impressed
 by his sherbeted vest.
 (No queen is less likely deluded –
 the great one of Sheba included.)

She calls for the stewardess, says to the same:

“Our recent bone of contention
is back on the floor. I refer to your claim
that the spirit has no extension.

‘Whatever is *there*
brings forces to bear;
but nothing works at a distance –
not even the heavenly systems.’

Now look! a spiritous liquid was spilt
right here, just now. But the malice,
the humid malevolent workings were felt
by a vest at the ends of the palace. –

A sorry sight,
but it proves me right.
I’m glad you came to deface it.
Relax; I’ll pay to replace it.”

DANCE OF DEATH

The watchman at midnight surveyed from his perch
 the ranks of the dead as they lay there.
 Full moonlight was bathing the yard and the church
 as brightly as if it were day there.
 But what is that movement? – in one grave, in two.
 Now men and now women emerge into view
 with cerements trailing behind them.

And all of them eager to stretch out their bones
 in roundelay figures and stances:
 the lords and the beggars, the beauties, the crones;
 but shrouds interfere with their dances.
 As modesty cannot inhibit the dead,
 they cast off their linens – now linens are spread
 haphazardly over the hillocks.

Fantastical gestures and mad pirouettes,
 contortions, convulsions of pleasure –
 the skeletons rattle like dry castanets,
 as if they were tapping the measure.
 Which looks to the watchman so laughably queer,
 the voice of tempter inveigles his ear:
 Go get yourself one of the nightshirts.

He did and he ran, and the sanctified door
 he bolted and barred in position.
 The moon from the heavens continued to pour
 its light on the grim apparition.
 But slowly the dancers began to disperse,
 retrieve their belongings and climb in reverse.
 It's finished: they're back in the coffin.

Except for a straggler who gropes in the tombs.
 "And woe to the culprit!" he glowers.
 It must be a comrade in death, he presumes;
 then picks up a scent from the towers.

He batters the door and is firmly repelled;
good thing for the watchman: the blessings have held,
the carvings, the glint of the crosses.

A shirt, though, the dead man can not be without;
he hasn't the time for reflection.
He clammers from goblin to gryphon to spout,
from one to the other projection.
The heart of the watchman is colder than ice;
his Gothic façade is traversed in a trice,
as if by a long-legged spider.

The watchman would gladly return what he took -
the face of his guest is appalling.
He tries to return it - a prominent hook
malignly prevents it from falling.
But look! the retreat of the moon has begun;
and listen! the ponderous chiming of "one,"
the crashing of bones on the pavement.

SELF-DECEPTION

A window curtain to and fro –
I think that I can spot
my lovely neighbor keen to know
if I'm at home or not,

and if the fit of jealous rage
of which I swore today
that nothing ever could assuage
it – never! – 's passed away.

But no; unfortunately she's
felt nothing of the kind.
I see it's just the evening breeze
catches her window blind.

OLD AGE

Old age is really quite a civil fellow:
he knocks repeatedly, he doesn't bellow.
But no one says, "Come in and be so free."
He can't stand there forever, and so he
admits himself because they don't invite.
For that they call him rude and impolite.

SONNET XV

*(on the suitability of Petrarchan sonnets
for amatory interpersonal communication)*

THE GIRL

I love the fire-dance of your phonetics,
and yet I doubt the truth of your expressions.
The tender heart's ingenuous professions
must be distorted by prescribed athletics.

The poet undertakes an energetic s-
urgical probing of his grand obsessions;
but shrinking from the pain of deep ingressions,
allows himself aesthetic anaesthetics.

THE POET

An acrobat? A surgeon? Call me rather
the lucid pyrotechnical magician
whose art of dazzling every day increases.

Alas! Where love's unstable nitrates gather,
it's likely that a premature ignition
will blow myself and all my arts to pieces.

THE SEVEN HOLY SLEEPERS OF EPHESUS
(from the *Westöstlicher Divan*)

Six young men the court indulges
flee before the wrath of Caesar -
who is worshipped as a godhead,
but as such is disappointing:
one persistent fly that buzzes
puts him off the goodly dinner.
Servants wave their fans and feathers
madly, but they can't dispel it.
Still it buzzes, biting, stinging;
disconcerts the lordly banquet;
round and round it goes - malicious! -
like Beëlzebub's lieutenant.

"Really, now" - the boys consider -
"can a god be stung by insects?
Does a god, like any mortal,
eat and drink? It's most unlikely.
My god made the vault of heaven,
sun and moon and starry blanket.
Come, let's flee the court!" A shepherd
finds the boys in flimsy footwear,
indoor finery; he hides them
with himself in rocky caverns.
Sheepdog begs to be admitted,
won't be driven off by cudgels;
faithful, though his leg is shattered,
Fido joins the hidden party,
joins the happy few in slumber.

Now the prince they've run away from,
love-offended, thinks to punish:
fire and sword both act too quickly -
he prefers to seal the cavern,
wall them in with bricks and mortar.

They, however, go on sleeping;
 at the throne of God their guardian
 angel makes report as follows:
 "Now the right side, now the left side,
 I have never ceased to turn them
 that the fumes of mold and mildew
 not assault their tender bodies.
 And I cleft the rock precisely
 so the sun in rising, setting,
 paints their tender cheeks all rosy:
 what beatitude in slumber! -
 On his unaffected front paws
 even Fido's sleep is blissful."

Years and decades come and go, and
 finally the boys awaken;
 Caesar's prison wall has crumbled
 from the dank neglect of ages.
 Says the handsome boy Jamblika -
 he the first in wit and learning -
 when he sees the shepherd waver:
 "Let me run and fetch provisions,
 risk my life and risk a goldpiece!"

Ephesus for many years now
 has embraced the Word of Jesus.
 (Peace and honor to the Prophet!)

Off he went. The watch, the tower -
 everything he saw was different.
 First he had the bread to think of;
 soon he found a nearby bakeshop.
 "Rascal!" cried the crafty baker;
 "you, my lad, have dug a treasure!
 That outlandish goldpiece proves it.
 Give me half to keep the secret!"

And they squabble. – So the business
comes before the king; the king, though,
wants to share, like any baker.

Now the wonder works its wonder
through a hundred signs and symbols.
He can prove that he's the master
of the palace he erected;
treasures pulled from out the stonework
he can specify minutely.
Soon a clan of fine Ephesians
lay the claim that he's related,
that the bloom-of-youth Jamblika
is their great-great-great . . . whatever;
and they name his son and grandson
with ancestral veneration.
He's surrounded by a people
of erect and brave descendants
come to honor him, the youngest!
All the marks of recognition,
all the evidence is perfect;
to their perfect satisfaction –
and to his – the truth is patent.

Back he goes to find the cavern
with the king and crowd behind him –
that's the last that king and crowd will
ever see of him, the Chosen:
For the Seven Holy Sleepers
– or the eight, including sheepdog –
they who left the world behind them
have been led to Paradise by
Gabriel, their guardian angel.
So the will of God ordained it.
And the cave now has no entrance.

Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805)

DIVISION OF THE EARTH

“Receive the world!” quoth Jupiter in heaven
 to all mankind. “Receive it, wide and fair.
 In perpetuity this fief is given –
 let every brother claim a share.”

Then all who heard with two strong hands for grasping,
 both young and old, they helped themselves to goods.
 The farmer took the fruits of field and pasture;
 the hunter halloed through the woods.

The merchant lays a store of bales and batches.
 The abbot wants a cask of mellowed wine.
 The king proclaims a toll on roads and bridges:
 “A tenth of everything is mine.”

Much later, after all the shares were taken,
 the poet straggled in from who knows where.
 He looked around for what was not bespoken,
 but nothing wasn't – there was nothing there.

“O shall I be forgotten altogether –
 I, the most faithful son, and I alone?
 So he complained to Jupiter the Father
 and threw himself before the throne.

“If you prefer to dwell in dreams and visions,”
 quoth Jupiter, “there's nothing I can do.
 Where were you when the world was requisitioned?”
 And he replied, “I was with you.

My eye was captivated by your countenance;
 harmony of the heavens held my ear.
 Alas! intoxicated by your radiance,
 I've lost the earth, I fear.”

“No use!” quoth Jove. “The world is gone and given:
 the harvest, hunt, and market; all the rest.

But if you wish to live with me in heaven,
come often – you will be a welcome guest.”

THE LADY'S GLOVE

To watch a lion combat
another ferocious cat,
before the arena
King Francis sat.
Picture the scene: a
troop of worthies attend the king;
in a gallery high above the ring
the lovely ladies chat.

A wave of the hand -
at royal command
a gate goes up, and onto the sand
a stately lion advances
with sidelong glances;
gives a yawn of disdain
and shakes his mane,
the majestic crown;
then stretches and settles down.

At a second sign from the king
the bars of a dungeon
rapidly swing;
and a lunging,
plunging
tiger enters the ring.

At once he's aware
that a lion is there.
But instead of making a beeline
for the opposite feline,
he starts to roar,
to growl and paw the floor,
to thrash and flail
his menacing tail
and stick out his tongue morosely;
then circling not-too-closely,

he trains an eye on
 the dangerous lion
 and settles down with a grumble.

Now Francis motions again –
 from out the double doors of a pen
 a pair of leopards tumble.
 Courageous, eager to fight,
 they pounce on the tiger at sight,
 who grapples them with his terrible claws.
 But the lion's roar
 is hard to ignore;
 which leads to a general pause:
 cat against cat in murderous rage,
 encamped on the circular stage.

Just then a glove went sailing
 over the railing,
 launched by a lady's hand
 to drop in the sand
 where the dreadful animals lay.

And Mistress Cunegonde, with a smile –
 of what? mischief? mockery? guile? –
 turns to Sir Delorges:

"Mon Chevalier!

If, as you assure me night and day,
 nothing burns more brightly than your love,
 why not prove it? Run and fetch my glove."

No sooner said
 than into the fray
 with brazen tread
 the hero sped,
 and from jaws of dismay
 he plucked he prize away.

The exploit, up above,
was watched by every lady or knight
with partly wonder, partly fright.
Nonchalant, he shows them the glove.

He garners universal praise;
fair Cunegonde - her tender gaze
reveals that soon
a vastly greater boon
will be conferred, but in a private place.
He throws the glove back in her face:
"Your gratitude, my lady, I disdain" -

and never addressed her again.

WALLENSTEIN'S CAMP

[Scene 8]

(A band of Bohemian miners enter playing a waltz tune, slowly at first, then faster and faster. The First Trooper dances with the Barmaid, the Sutler Woman with the Recruit. The Barmaid runs off, and when the Trooper turns in pursuit he finds himself embracing the Capuchin Friar, who has just entered.)

CAPUCHIN. Well, here's a lovely how-do-you-do!

Is there room for me to celebrate too?

Is this a Christian mob, or a mix
of infidels and heretics?

The Lord Almighty suffers from gout
and hasn't the strength to intervene -
is that what you think? - when a pack of louts
has kicked the traces and dares to flout
the Sabbath ordinance with obscene
cavorting, feasting, and drinking bouts.

Quid hic stasis otiosi?

What do you stand there idle for?

The Danube is a cauldron of war;
Regensburg lies in enemy hands -

Don't look for help to Bavarian lands.

Meanwhile the army's here in Bohemia,
in absentia but not abstemia;

caring more for the bottle than battle;
whetting its whistles, not shooting off missiles;
plowing the wenchies, not digging the trenches;
munching on oxen, not Oxenstirn.

(I could go on like this indefinitely.)

Christian Europe in sackcloth and ashes -
the soldier says: I serve where the cash is.

Weeping and anguish fill the world;
the heavens teem with signs and wonders;
from blood-red clouds the Lord has unfurled
the cloak of war, His chariot thunders.

From heaven's window He puts out His rod,
the fiery comet, to frighten nations.

The earth is a house of lamentations;

the ark of the Church is swimming in blood.
 Remember the Holy Roman Empire? -
 Now it's the Empty Roman Hellfire!
 The Rhine Valley is a blind alley;
 monasteries are set-upon-asteries;
 parishes are impoverished
 and poverty imperishable;
 abbeys and academies
 are shabbey and calamities;
 and every blessed German territory
 tells the same unholy terror story.
Why? - Don't look far for the reason:
 innocent people are paying the price
 for the army's perseverance in vice;
 soldiers and officers live like heathens.
 For sin is a powerful misery-magnet:
 it draws disaster from every side:
 like tears from the onion
 and pain from the bunion,
 all evils follow from justice denied.

Ubi erit victoriae spes,
 si offenditur Deus? No one will go
 to mass or to sermon; you sit and drink
 all day in taverns - how do you think
 you'll ever be able to vanquish the foe?
 The good woman in the gospel found
 the penny she had dropped on the ground;
 likewise Saul found his father's ass
 and Joseph his brothers - it came to pass.
 But try to find among the soldiery
 some fear of God, some common decency -
 you'll come up empty wherever you turn,
 no matter how many lanterns you burn.
 Now you remember the gospel teaching:
 John the Baptist, praying and preaching
 lived in the desert when lo and behold!

the soldiers came running and wanted to be told
 the way to Abraham's bosom - quick, would he
 heal them and wash them of every iniquity!
 Et ait illis: He said, my brothers,
 Neminem concutiatis:
 don't go burdening and tormenting others!
 Neque calumniam faciatis:
 Don't denounce or defame or deride!
 Contenti estote: be satisfied
 stipendiis vestris: with the wages you're paid,
 and curse the impious habits you've made.
 Did I say curse?
 We've heard a commandment, clear and plain:
 Don't take the name of the Lord in vain.
 But nowhere is blasphemy more unbridled
 than here, where the Friedland troops lie idled.
 If churchbells had to be rung in the steeple
 for every lightning bolt that you people
 discharge from the tip of your filthy tongue,
 then nothing else would ever get rung.
 And if they plucked a hair from your head
 for every evil prayer you've said,
 then overnight you'd be bald as a bat,
 even if Absalom lent you his locks.
 Now the Judges were soldiers - no doubt about that;
 Joshua's trumpeters blew Jericho flat.
 And David struck down Goliath, who dieth.
 Soldiers! - but here's the paradox:
 We never read that anyone crieth,
 "A dash and a darn! A plague and a pox!"
 Nobody has a cesspool for a mouth.
 And you know, you don't have to open your mouth
 much wider to say "God help me, please!"
 than to launch a string of obscenities.
 But the heart is not an infinite cavity;
 it overflows when it's full of depravity.

Another commandment: Thou shalt not steal.
 Of that you're innocent by a technicality,
 because you don't even bother to conceal
 your open rapacity and venality.
 Nothing escapes your sticky paw,
 your vulture claw,
 your gaping maw,
 your iron jaw.

Money's not safe in a sunken tomb,
 the calf's not safe in its mother's womb.
 You know every disreputable trick in
 the book; you pocket the eggs and the chicken.
 King Solomon says, *Estote contenti*:
 Be more than happy with less than plenty.
 But what's the point? I don't suppose
 that trouble ever starts from below;
 As the head goes, so the members go.
 And what *he* believes,

(indicates a portrait of Wallenstein)

nobody knows.

FIRST TROOPER. Sir Bishop, you can scold and slander
 the soldiers - fine; but not our commander.

CAPUCHIN. *Ne custodias gregem meam!*
 He's an Ahab, a Jeroboam,
 who worships idols; and his outrageous
 heterodoxies have been contagious.

TRUMPETER AND RECRUIT. I warn you not to repeat such tales.

CAPUCHIN. I say he's a braggart and spitter of nails.
 We all remember his blasphemy:
 "Every fortress must fall to me.
 Stralsund is mine, though I reckon it be
 suspended from heaven by a golden chain."
 Well, a lot of gunpowder was fired in vain.

TRUMPETER. Someone silence that caterwaul!

CAPUCHIN. A demon-agitator, a new King Saul,
a Holofernes in search a sword.
He denies, like Peter, his master and Lord.

BOTH TROOPERS. That's quite enough - not another word.

CAPUCHIN. Hence he's notorious for banishing cocks
from his tender hearing. He's Herod the Fox.

TRUMPETER AND BOTH TROOPERS (*threatening him*).
Let me at him - I'm going to ring . . .

CROATS (*intervening*). Stay, little Father, don't fear a thing;
sing your ditty - it suits us fine.

CAPUCHIN (*screaming*). A Nebuchadnezer, a puffed-up king,
an author of sin, heresy, and dissension.
What kind of a stone is a "Wallenstein"? -
A stumbling block, a stone of contention.
Call him the Duke of Friedland, indeed!
As long as the Emperor lets *him* lead,
Our blessed land will never be freed.

(With his last three lines, thundered rather than spoken, the Capuchin has been making his retreat, while the Croats hold off the other soldiers.)

Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811)

TERROR DOWN BY THE LAKE
An Idyll

JOHANNA

That Margaret is a cunning little vixen,
 cleverest in the village. "Mommy," she says
 and ties a kerchief ostentatiously
 under her chin against the evening vapors:
 "Please leave the back gate open for me, would you?
 One of my little lambs has taken ill
 and needs a dose of oil of lavender."
 Then she flits away; but not to the pen –
 down to the lake, the beach. It was a trick! –
 Of course today was very hot, as though
 May were the month of harvest. Everybody's
 arms and legs were adrooping, like the flowers. –
 How fine the night is! How the countryside
 is bathed in silent splendor by the moon!
 And how the mountain peaks, now upside-down,
 have plummeted into the crystal lake!
 Merciful gods! if even glaciers do it,
 how can sweltering human hearts resist?
 I too – if only decency permitted,
 I'd glide down from the bank into the water;
 I'd frisk and frolic like a slippery pike.

MARGARET

That's Fritz! How terrible! I'm scared to death!
 Could that be Fritz? Oh no! Maria – Joseph!
 Who's talking rubbish from the lilac hedge?
 How strange to hear the silver poplars whisper:
 "Lavender oil" and "decency" and "pike" –
 as if it came from Fritz's bright-red lips!
 Now Fritz is in the mountains, gone to shoot
 the stag that not long since churned up our corn crop;
 but if I hadn't seen him grab the shotgun,
 I could have sworn that that was him. Uncanny.

JOHANNA

Yes, the goddess of chastity, Diana,
 under the mirror, in her golden frame:
 the hounds resting beside her, groaning, panting;
 and she, exhausted from the hunt, entrusts her
 bow and quiver to the attending nymphets.
 Could she have picked a more secluded grotto,
 a darker pool to fresh her weary limbs?
 And here Actaeon, most wretched of men,
 would never have discovered her. His front
 would be unhorned up to the present day.
 The lonesome sound of waves lapping the rock
 enchants me! How the elm tree drops its branches,
 entwined with sloe and lilac, down from the rock!
 - a jealous lover might have done the twining,
 to keep the very moonbeams from intruding
 upon my Gretchen, as the good Lord made her.

MARGARET

Fritz!

JOHANNA

At your service, darling.

MARGARET

Oh, you're loathsome!

JOHANNA

Good gracious! How she dives, that little duck!
 See how the troubled waters cook and eddy
 and close above her head, just like a whirlpool!
 Only the hair, tied back by a silk ribbon,
 still floats and glistens there upon the flood.
 In Halle once I saw three saltwork divers;
 to watch this muskrat, though, makes me forget them.
 Come up, girl! - I'm afraid you're drowning. Margaret!

MARGARET

Heavenly Father, save me!

JOHANNA

What's the matter?

Has such a thing been known in God's creation?
 It's only me – the hunter Fritz. Tomorrow
 I lead you to the altar. Have a look! –
 no use; the duck has made another dive.
 When night has fallen once again, I'll know her
 by heart from head to foot and will be able
 to tell her every feature with my eyes closed;
 today, observed by accident while bathing,
 she's coy, as if about to take the veil
 and not be seen again by men, forever.

MARGARET

Indecent, hateful man!

JOHANNA

Listen to reason!

Accept your fate with fortitude at last.
 Be seated in the shallows where the gravel
 gleams like the Rhine Gold, and then please be still.
 Child of my heart, why do you tremble so?
 The lake, as wide and radiant as it is,
 is like a cloak you're wearing; and, moreover,
 as modest as the cloak you wear to church
 on Sundays: velvet, with a trim of gold.

MARGARET

Fritz, dearest of men to me, please listen.
 Do you still wish to lead me to the altar?

JOHANNA

Do I still wish it?

MARGARET

Firmly wish it – do you?

JOHANNA

Of course. The wedding bells have been arranged.

MARGARET

If so, I beg you: turn your face away!
Be gone this very minute! Leave the lakeshore –
leave me alone!

JOHANNA

Oh, how the shoulders glisten!
And when the waves retreat, oh, how the knees
emerge and shimmer – do I wake or dream?
Her little hands, with fingers interlaced,
keep her afloat and hold the body upright
like a wax figurine there on the gravel.

MARGARET

Very well, and may the Virgin forgive me!

JOHANNA

You're climbing out? Oh, Gretchen dear! You scare me.
I'll press my face into this alder trunk
and keep my eyelids tightly shut as well.
Nothing on earth would I less like to do
than anger the beloved child of my heart.
Quickly, quickly! Here's your chemise, my darling!
And now the petticoat, bordered in blue!
Silk stockings then, and don't forget the garters
that show a flaming heart in the design!
The kerchief too? Well, Gretchen, are you ready?
And may I turn around?

MARGARET

You shameless man!
Go out and find the shameless local wench
that pleases you – take that one home to bed.
You won't be leading Margaret to the altar!
For this I promise: he who saw me naked
will not see me again, naked or clothed!

JOHANNA

Lord God, my Father, in my great distress
 one remedy remains to me on earth.
 There is a bridal bed for me tomorrow,
 I don't deny it; but it isn't yours -
 it's Siegmund the farm-foreman's. That's my promise.

MARGARET

What did you say?

JOHANNA

What did I say?

MARGARET

You joker!

You're just my Hanna, wearing Fritz's coat;
 and speaking from the lilac bush in Fritz's
 husky baritone to embarrass me.

JOHANNA

Ha, ha!

MARGARET

I should have known it right away!
 Lying in the water, my pinkie finger
 ought to have itched and told me everything.
 And then, when you said: "Look, the little mermaid!
 How she frolics!" and then: "What do you think?
 Shall I slip down to join you there, my child?"
 I could have answered: "Darling Fritz, why don't you?
 Today was warm, a bath will be refreshing;
 the lake is large, or small, enough for two."
 That would have served you right, you brazen hussy.
 That would have proved you're three times worse than I am.

JOHANNA

Fine thing it would have been! A decent girl
 should not, you know, make jokes about such matters
 - I read that someplace in a Big Black Book.

But now please let me help you lace your bodice:
I wouldn't like your hunter to surprise us
in earnest while we stand here making jokes.
He'll be prowling the lake on his way home;
and it would be a shame - don't you agree? -
if he could never see you, laced or unlaced.

Annette von Droste-Hülshoff (1797-1848)

OLD ROOMMATES

The best of friends as college boys,
 the best of friends forever!
 But years go by, the pains and joys
 of life estrange and sever.
 Who has time for paper and pen? –
 some business always brewing.
 But each will wonder now and then
 what the other is doing.

One winter morning there appeared
 at Emanuel's fender
 a man with an eccentric beard,
 extravagantly slender,
 whose crafty eyes were just a crack
 of self-congratulation.
 "It's me, you pompous Jumping Jack! –
 without an invitation."

"Good Lord, it's Franz!" the doctor cried
 and pumped his hand, all tearful.
 "Welcome! You seem transmogrified:
 so debonair, so cheerful."
 "And look at you," the friend replied.
 "Life must be soft and cozy.
 Your waist is sixty inches wide;
 your cheeks are fat and rosy."

They drank good burgundies galore;
 the fire was sweetly raging.
 Each told a friendly lie and swore
 his friend was hardly aging.
 Each fisherman knew just the fly
 to make his mackerel hunger;
 and each consoled himself: "But I –
 look at least ten years younger."

Emanuel, whose tongue was loose,
 proclaimed, as day was waning:
 "My practice is a golden goose" –
 and yet he loved complaining.
 At length he cast a doubtful eye
 on Franz: "Are you indebted?"
 "No," said he; "not a day goes by
 without some profit netted."

Two years or less he'd had to work
 to buy himself this visit.
 The train had been a jolt-and-jerk;
 the steamer, though, exquisite.
City of Leyden was its name
 ("of Grief") – how contradictory!
 That ship deserves eternal fame:
 the SS *Wingèd Victory*.

This tirade brought to Manny's mind
 the wretch who once, with brandy,
 had tried to swallow thirty-nine
 dry meatballs down like candy.
 The wretch in turn brought up the Case
 of the Missing Half-Decanter.
 The doctor squirmed and wiped his face
 and launched a counterbanter.

Remember those? Remember these?
 Remember such-and-suching?
 They touched a thousand memories
 both beautiful and touching.
 As evening falls, the chamber fills
 with youthful exhalation.
 The sour breath of pumps and pills
 gives way to inspiration.

By morning of the following day
 the doctor's cheeks were burning;
 his eyes were focused miles away;
 the walls were slowly turning.
 The waking household staff were met
 by a racket from the sanctum:
 old roommates sang a screech-duet,
 were in their cups and clanked 'em.

"I'm cured of gout and kidney stones.
 Goodbye to probes and leeches!"
 The doctor looked at Skin-and-Bones
 and thought: "I'm cream and peaches."
 And having pondered Franz's petit-
 bourgeois accounts receivable,
 he thought: "This makes my claim to be
 a magnate more believable."

When three delightful days had passed,
 the time had come for starting
 the long farewell before the last
 embrace before the parting.
 "Farewell, Emanuel, my friend!" . . .
 "I wish that you were staying!" . . .
 and then the *Grief* came round the bend,
 billowing smoke and spraying.

Three months have now gone by - trala! -
 the doctor lives contented.
 Goodbye to hypochondria
 and all it represented!
 But if the demon ever dares
 to slither out of hiding -
 down to the river he repairs
 to watch the steamboat gliding.

Eduard Mörike (1804-1875)

TO PHILOMELA

Your plaintive song its musical scale ascends,
upsurging like a liquid at bottling time;
it climbs and climbs the tapered neck, then
look! - how the delicate head foams over.

O Songstress! I would gladly compose for you
an odelet full of yearning; I falter though:
my inauspicious metaphor has
startled my thirst and has parched my palate.

Forgive me! cold beer beckons at Sportsman's Inn;
it's bowling night - I can't disappoint my friends
the county court administrator,
notary public, and forest ranger.

SWEET ORTRUDE ("SCHÖN-ROHTRAUT")

King Rugbert's lovely daughter, what's her name?

Ortrude, Sweet Ortrude.

What does she do the livelong day? -
sewing or spinning is not her way.

Goes out hunting and fishing.

O, to be her happy squire!

Hunt and hound were all my desire.

— Steady now, my heart.

And after a month or two had turned,

Ortrude, Sweet Ortrude,

Old Rugbert took to his employ
a freshly furnished hunter-boy

to ride the hunt with Ortrude.

O, to be the son of a king!

I love her more than anything.

— Steady now, my heart.

One day they rested under an oak;

she teased him then, Sweet Ortrude:

Why give that look of dreamy bliss?

Have you the heart to steal a kiss?

Good Lord! the boy was trembling.

But then he thought: she said I might;

and kissed her mouth with keen delight.

— Steady now, my heart.

Silently they rode for home,

Ortrude, Sweet Ortrude.

The boy was flush with happiness:

If they made her now an emperess,

I swear it shouldn't grieve me!

The woods would murmur, he dared embrace
an emperess and kissed her face.

— Steady now, my heart.

JUST KIDDING

Just to bring my sweetheart a "Good morning!"
 bright and early, maybe stay for breakfast,
 delicately I try her door - it's open.
 There before the mirror stands my slender
 little tree: en négligé, with washcloth.
 Beads of silver trickle down her forehead,
 glisten on her rosy cheeks - how charming!
 What a sweet dishevelment of tresses!
 What a fluttering of robes and kerchiefs!
 But she quails, she bristles at the intrusion:
 "Halt! About face! March right out this instant!"
 Little fool, I cried, don't be so foolish:
 now that we're engaged, it's right and proper.
 Let me stay - I'll imitate a blind man,
 walk with a limp if need be, sink my head in
 torrents of those curly locks, I'll even
 manacle myself with fearsome pigtails -
 "Out you go!" I'll stand in yonder corner;
 modestly, with back to you, I promise.
 "Well, all right; but please don't be a nuisance."

And I languished meekly in that corner,
 faced the wall like some ridiculous schoolboy
 penalized for bungling his Catullus;
 never grumbled, spent my burning kisses
 on a patch of whitewashed wall to quench them -
 must have been an hour, maybe longer -
 cross my heart. But anyone who doubts me,
 doubts my version in the smallest detail
 (and I couldn't say that I would blame him),
 let him check the story with my sweetheart:
 her lies will be half again as dainty.

DEPARTURE

Coach and driver are ready for departure,
and the posthorn blows its "All Aboard!" now.
Say, whatever happened to the fourth man?
Call him, or we'll have to leave without him!
- Meanwhile, there's a sudden summer cloudburst;
count a hundred, it's already over;
almost too fast to quench the burning road dust;
still, any relief is more than welcome.
Coolness and sweet fragrance fill the spacious
square; in all the houses, window after
window of flowers opens to the sunlight.
Here's the young man at last. Come on, step lively!
All Aboard! - The coach is off and running.
Look! Here on the still damp pavement where the
coach was waiting right before the depot,
it has left behind a sheltered dry spot,
long and wide; you can even see the coach wheels
clearly marked, and where the team was standing.
Yonder, though, in the lovely little house in
which the youth had lingered when they called him,
stands a girl behind the window shutters,
gazes at the white spot on the pavement,
holds a kerchief to her face - she's crying.
Is it such a serious matter? Doubtless;
but her lamentations won't be endless:
girl's eyes are so quick, you know, in drying.
Long before the flagstones in the market-
place have all been lightened by the sunshine,
you can hear that wild young creature laughing.

THE FOSSIL COLLECTOR
to two friends of the author

Clambering up and down the thousand
 brookside trails of Frickenhausen,
 soaking up this fine and dandy
 summer's day, with hammer handy,
and for company the two of you:
 Ladies, I have had my wish come true.
 But now the hillside! – Many classic
 specimens of the Jurassic
 lie together mixed and jumbled
 where the rains unearthed and tumbled
 them into convenient ditches:
 star-shaped crinoids, ammonitic
 spirals, terebratulidic
 brachiopods; we've stumbled on a
 mine of Mesozoic fauna –
 naturally, my collector's pocket itches.
 One of life's most welcome chores
 is inch-by-inching on all fours
 and, as afternoon advances,
 stealing frequent rapturous glances
 upward at the castle-crested
 Alb, that towers above our nested
 valley floor and sternly shadows
 vineyard plots, woodlands, and meadows.
 What a charming magic act
 the Alb performed behind my back!
 Now it basks in golden rays,
 hovering in a liquid haze;
 now it sombers all below it
 like a blue-black wall of night.
 Painter's art could never show it
 as a dream or vision might.
 Look! the shadows seem to plummet
 and the ridge to keep advancing,

sending wave on wave of dancing
yellow rainlights from the summit.
Finer sight you'd never hope to see.

If I only had the leisure
to enjoy this natural treasure!
How I'd hate to think it wasted,
unforgivably untasted!
Ladies: undertake the duty
of beholding all this beauty -
also of beholding it for *me*.
I'll resume the less euphoric
task of sorting prehistoric
petrefactions from the slurry
on my hands and knees. Don't worry:
Fossils are a form of poetry.

ONE LAST TIME BEFORE I DIE

Hung in the window of that sun-bleached garden room,
 a wind harp, stirred to music by the gentlest breeze,
 wafts its sad fluctuation of long drawn-out tones
 into unkempt October's garden-solitude;
 I love to hear it as the afternoon recedes.
 And not unworthy of its charmed vicinity,
 a weathervane atop the courtyard tower groans
 when clouds before a stormy blast go scudding by.

I had a garden once – I wish it still were mine!
 A little back-gate used to give on open fields,
 away from houses. Lord, how many times I threw
 the deadbolt open on that grimy lattice-door,
 restrained the overhanging shrubbery, and pushed –
 on rusty hinges, heavily, the door swung out!
 It had, I knew, the gift of music manyfold,
 a quite acceptable soprano for its age
 (unless the weather prompted a contralto sulk).
 One day the door revealed to me – she must have been
 startled, I guess, out of enchanting memories –
 still greater depth of feeling and a finer skill.
 I opened her as usual, and heard her launch
 a tender aria that struck my ear at once
 as long familiar. – What? I'm stunned: Is this a dream?
 Say, wasn't that the melody of "One last time
 before I die?" From *Titus*, right? – I made the door
 repeat the passage, and I hadn't been deceived!
 Slower, more unmistakably, more soulfully
 the old chanteuse began da capo: "One last time!"
 The five or six first notes, I mean – the theme broke off;
 but those few notes were limpid and beyond reproach.
 – I paused a moment; then I asked her what on earth
 she yearned so sweetly to recapture. Whence that song,
 o elegiac door? In your day (which I judge
 to be the 'nineties) did a lovely, modest girl,
 the pastor's grandchild, leave and enter by this gate;

and did you, through the open window, hear her play
a golden-flowered dulcimer of green japan
and sing her clear bright melody? Remember too
her mother? – mistress of this house, who took such pains
to keep the garden tidy; how when evening fell
after a sultry day she quenched her cabbage plants;
the parson, meanwhile, took some friends from town (who were
just leaving) down the road a piece to see them off;
he'd entertained them in that little arbor there –
a dear man, though his anecdotes ran on a bit.
These things are gone forever; they will not return!
We younger folk pursue, of course, the same pursuits
(approximately) nowadays – no slouches we!
But everyone prefers things as they used to be.
The time will come when we too will have quit this house,
this garden, and have wandered off to distant parts.
Then you will sing your elegy for us as well;
and some true heart may pass this way, may think of me
and all those who were close to me, may think to grace
your crumbling frame with flowers from these happy fields.

A VISIT TO THE CHARTERHOUSE
epistle to Paul Heyse

When still a bachelor, I was ordered for my health
to take the air on Kindelsteig – you know the time.
That village was a paradise for twiddling thumbs.
A stout game-warden tried to keep me entertained;
he showed me all the countryside, and very soon
had introduced me at the local charterhouse.
To tell the story right I'd have to first describe
His Worthiness the Prior; how we immediately
got on together, both in earnest and in jest,
despite my Swabian heresy; and the garden house
in which that dignitary's musty leatherbacks,
his favorites, were marshaled on a modest shelf;
and how their pages rustled with Praeneste's groves,
or flashed with Tivoli's cascades, as we enjoyed
our glass of wine. – I'll write of this another day.
One corner in the choir is now his resting place;
the monks, the few diehard Carthusians, have dispersed.
A cooper's hammer rings out from the cloister walk;
the church is dense with steaming malt; the garden house
is barely visible through a maze of climbing hops –
atop its faded, weather-beaten roof the stork,
on one leg, sadly contemplates his field of beer.

That was the scene of late, when after fourteen years
I visited the former splendor. Let it be!
To each thing its allotted span. My host had long
foreseen this travesty and a thousand other woes –
about which he refused to grieve himself to death.
I took my overcorned corned beef and watery ale
in what had been the prelate's house (it's now an inn);
the very room in which I'd made acquaintance with
the Prior's old monastic hospitality –
and the delights of his exquisite dinner board:
the largest eel I'd ever seen, and salted cod,

and greenhouse artichokes, "that more than hold their own,
 for meatiness, with any 'choke Prince Taxis eats"
 (so swore the chaplain, and, to prove it, wiped his lips).
 The highest praise, however, I bestowed upon
 a tawny, aromatic vintage '34
 the monks had cultivated on their sunniest slope.
 After the coffee, our elated host unlocked
 his treasure chest of curiosities to show
 carved figurines, old coins, intaglios, and the like –
 objects both sacred and profane lay side by side;
 an ivory St. Sebastian and, in ivory too,
 St. Lawrence with his fire-grate did not disdain
 to share the neighborhood with a nude Andromeda,
 chained to the rock, in boxwood (and a masterpiece).
 Another thing that caught my eye was an antique
 mantelpiece clock that perched atop the cupboard there;
 its face was pewter, under which, to my distress,
 the pendulum swung in all too palpable haste.
 I read the words in large black characters on the dial,
 for all to see: *Una ex illis ultima*.
 The priest with whom I'd been conversing blundered in
 to translate: "One among these hours shall be thy last" –
 he didn't mind it showing that he'd been to school.
 This Father Steward was a man of tempered steel
 on whom the burden of erudition lightly sat;
 I thought he'd look much better in armor than in robes.

And so I sat there lost in revery, till my eye,
 browsing at ease along the wall, was brought up short.
 Could that – what's that I see? Is that the Prior's clock?
 Indeed it was! And just as merrily as it had before,
 the disk went bobbing back and forth – "Run for your life!"

I stood a while in contemplation before the clock
 and must have let a wistful sigh or two escape,
 whereat the only customer in the room but me,
 an older gentleman who had yet to say a word,
 suddenly turned to address me with a friendly smile:

"It seems to me we know each other - I believe
 we met within these very walls some years ago."
 And then I recognized him back: it was the town
 doctor, the quondam charterhouse physician too;
 an archroque at the time, as I remembered well,
 whose prankish teasing filled with monks with greater dread
 than any potion he'd professionally concoct.
 I had a hundred things to ask the man about,
 not least the clock. "Oh yes indeed," he said, "that's it:
 a legacy from the Prior (may he rest in peace!)
 to Father Steward, who in turn, upon his death,
 bequeathed it to his landlord - that's the brewer here."
 - So this was Father's final residence? - "Nowhere else
 quite suited him; a year went by and Anak's son,
 neatly disguised in coat and boots, turned up again:
 I'm here for good, he said, unless you can drive me off.
 They came to an arrangement: for a modest sum,
 he took a room on the summer side, ate with the house,
 and worked a strip of garden plot. He never lacked
 for things to keep him occupied, like the Chartreuse
 that he resumed distilling, an elixir which
 had earned the monastery a pretty penny once.
 And evenings, when the downstairs room was a black swarm
 of farmers, there he sat contentedly with his pint,
 blue handkerchief, and snuffbox, midst the heat and smoke
 of happy drinkers; gossiped, read the news aloud,
 talked politics and agriculture - in a word,
 he felt at home here, more so than in better days.
 They say he even entertained some reckless thoughts
 of marriage once - there was a giggling butterball
 who worked here then, I think she was a stable hand -
 but that's facetiousness. One morning I was called
 to Father's bedside - he was, quote, severely ill.
 A touch of stroke had knocked and left its calling card;
 Father was not so much in danger as in dread.
 Later I found him, after five or six days' rest,

back on his feet, in better spirits, and composed.
 I noticed something oddly missing, though: the small
 mantelpiece clock that always used to face his bed,
 a gift by which I knew he'd set particular store.
 Embarrassed, when I question him, he hems and haws:
 The clock . . . unfortunately . . . oh, the clock? It broke.
 Sly dog! I thought; I'm sure it's buried within his trunk,
 perfectly well preserved there, under lock and key –
 unless he's gone and smashed the thing to smithereens.
 That most unpleasant little motto! Since the stroke
 the clock had seemed to taunt him like a wicked witch;
 of course that made him peevisish." – Splendid anecdote!
 I hope, at least, you didn't make the poor fool squirm
 by grilling him unmercifully. – "Well, not quite;
 I let it go with a gentle roasting on a spit.
 For that he bore a grudge, I think, until his death."
 – Which wasn't imminent, I gather. – "He enjoyed
 four years or more of happiness and blooming health
 before that ultimate, obnoxious hour arrived,
 without a hint of warning. If you take the road
 down in the valley, heading toward the market town,
 you come to a little churchyard where His Reverence lies.
 A white headstone with just his monastery name
 petitions you for one Our Father as you pass.
 The clock, however – let me try to make this brief –
 had simply vanished. How? No one could understand.
 And there the matter rested. Years went by; the clock
 was long forgotten, when the brewer's wife, by chance,
 while rummaging in a nook behind the chimney stack,
 discovered an old box done up with miles of string
 and several pounds of sealing wax, from which emerged
 the deadly you-know-what. It was a grand event.
 The best part was the label, though: To my dear friend
 Brewmaster Ignaz Raussenberger, the Charterhouse."

That's what the scoundrel told me with heartfelt delight.
 And really: who could have refused to laugh along?

DOMESTIC SCENE

Bedroom. Preceptor Ziborius and his young wife. The light is out.

Sleeping yet, Rika? – “Not yet.” – You didn’t by any chance pickle cucumbers? – “Yes.” – And how much / vinegar did you put in? – “Something under two quarts.” – Two quarts?! What jug did you draw from? Don’t say the jug on the sill / facing the yard, on the left. – “Yes, dear.” – Curses! My whole experiment’s probably ruined; just when I figured I might / finally see some results! Couldn’t you ask me? – “You were in school.” – You couldn’t have waited? – “Sweetheart, how long can I wait? / Cucumbers wilt in the heat.” – When was it, last week, I specified: jug number seven for home use. – “You and your numbers! Good grief, / who could remember them all?” – Seven is not that hard to remember; seven is seven. Pencil a memo in large / Arabic digits. It works. – “Yes, but your jugs go chasing the sun, from window to window. Kitchen work has to get done; / cooks can’t go squinting for jugs. Love, it’s starting to rattle my nerves, this vinegar brewing. Up until now I’ve refrained / (barely!) from making complaint. That you’ve installed yourself in my laundry, where things were already tight, and have moved in a still, / that wasn’t trouble enough. Or that I found my resedas displaced, carnations and roses; potting shed full of retorts, / jugs where the cuttings should be. Now every window, all round the house, is standing-room only, beaker to beaker in rows, / each of them swaddled in straw. Even my stove is blockaded by four of them; one ugly monster hangs from the chimney on hooks; / that’s an experiment, what? We’ve become laughingstocks both. Now don’t be offended!” – Beg pardon? Who’s been laughing? – “The dean’s / wife, and I wish you had heard. Bet she was parroting his lampoons; he’s smug and malicious, and the inspector of schools’ / brother-in-law, which is worse.” – Out with it. – “She compared the preceptor’s house to a fortress: bastions in ferment, the bays / larded with engines of war.” – Vulgar twaddle, pure spite! I claim I’ve a right to my hobby-horse just as he does, your chum’s / husband the almighty dean. He takes pleasure in keeping dozens of caged-in canaries;

my pleasure is to concoct / acid with backbone and bite.

Pause. He seems pensive. She says to herself:

“Now I regret that I threatened him with the director of studies.

He’s never trusted the man; / now he’ll be anxious, poor thing.”

He continues:

As preceptor I’ve always done well by my duties; a recent

honored advancement in rank / testifies clearly to that.

What, in the practical sphere, I intend someday to accomplish,

working at home, for the state / and for the various trades;

what substantial advantages I’ll secure for my loved ones,

all in the ripeness of time; / let me not speak of that now.

Show me the man, though, who dares to object when an overworked teacher

spends an enjoyable hour / tending a vinegar vat!

Dares to accuse me of spinning my wheels, of eccentric behavior;

chancellor, inspector of schools, / superintendant, who cares?!

Let someone launch an attack! I take all comers; they’ll find me

armed to the teeth, with a bronze / chestplate defending my heart!

Rika, you’re laughing! . . . Don’t try to hide it! I feel the convulsions.

What’s got into you now? / Pulling my leg, silly wench? –

“Lovable, foolish man! Could anyone keep a straight face here?

No, I’d never have guessed / vinegar burned with such heat!” –

Stop your clowning! I’ll tell you, to me this is no joking matter. –

“Calm down, dearest; we’ll find / some way to end our dispute.

I’d never dream of taking away your one satisfaction;

clearly too much is at stake, / and I know just what you mean.

When from the teacher’s rostrum at school you gaze through the window

over the courtyard and glimpse / vessels you treasure like gold

basking in rays of the glorious midday sun, which conspires to

bring to the fullness of term / strong fermentation of wine;

sure, it refreshes your heart and eye in a brief idle moment

more than my flower pots could, / colorful though they might be.

Add to this charming prospect a pipe of consoling tobacco;

all the frustrations of school / vanish with hardly a trace.

Furthermore, since you’ve begun using homemade vinegar base for

cooking low-budget red ink / (that saved us quite an expense!),
 even the nightmare, I think, of correcting homework assignments
 isn't so hateful; you seem / comforted by the perfume.
 How could I ever begrudge it? It's just that you've gone to extremes now.
 'Eye to the goal; in all things / Measure!' That's what you profess." -
 Stop it! When acid production has made you a well-to-do woman . . . -
 "Sweetheart, that's just what you said / once when you tried to farm silk." -
 Well, was it my fault the feed mixture failed, the worm culture fizzled? -
 "Business is always a risk; / so is the new one, no doubt!" -
 What about glory and fame? To you I suppose they mean nothing. -
 "Hadn't we glory enough / back in pre-vinegar days?" -
 I've been named corresponding member of three institutions. -
 "Too bad one of them won't / buy a few bottles a year." -
 You, you lack any sense of entrepreneurial gumption. -
 "Since you acquired that sense, / you've lacked good salad with meals." -
 Ingrate! Every variety I manufacture is splendid. -
 "I've tasted seven and nine; / summa cum laude they're not." -
 Seems to amuse you today, I perceive, to one-up me in verses. -
 "Haven't you spoken in verse / from the beginning yourself?" -
 Ought you in jest to exploit a professional pedagogue's weakness? -
 "I keep the elegy beat / involuntarily too." -
 I gave you lessons, to make our innocent chatter more piquant. -
 "Has a peculiar effect / when we're at each other's throats." -
 That will suffice! I beg you to speak your native Ulrikan. -
 "Wouldn't a mixture of prose / discourse and distichs sound odd?" -
 Nonsense! No more discussion. To argue with women is fruitless. -
 "Vinegar making in flues, / that I call fruitless, my love." -
 Must your pentameter dog me, snarl at the foot of my cadence? -
 "You know it can't well resist / when a hexameter calls." -
 Well, you seem to find it convenient to get the last word in.
 Do so! I swear you won't hear / one more syl-LA-ble from me. -
 "Fine and dandy; for once let's have a hexameter solo."

Pause. The husband grows restless; he is obviously tormented by not hearing the couplet closed or being free to close it himself. After a while his wife comes to the rescue with a laugh and says:

"Dearest, I've been too severe; / really your vinegar's fine.
 If it turns out even better in future, all right then: the credit

all goes to you, for your wife / isn't a quarrelsome nag."

He likewise laughs heartily and kisses her, saying:

Rika, soon as it's light I'll clear off all the front windows!

And in the chimney will hang / only the splendor of ham!

LONG, LONG AGO!
(an Irish folk song)

*25 September 1866
 To Auguste Stark, née Mährlen
 upon her wedding*

*Rededicated in the English language
 12 September 1992
 To Christina Engstrom and John Martin
 (albeit addressing, in the mask of Eduard Mörike, only the former)
 upon their wedding*

There is a fine old love song from the cloudy north
 that's like the sound of distant bells, or like the sea
 when waves are breaking in that gentle monotone
 one loves to listen to while thinking of times past.
 Suffused with sweet melancholy but still uncloyed,
 the sad refrain keeps coming back: Long, long ago.
 - You know the song, you sang it once; and we may never
 hear it again with such great charm as from your lips.

□

How can it be that here amid the lively throng
 of guests assembled now for this delightful feast
 I hear a secret whispering, and I can't ignore
 that simple melody in my ear: Long, long ago - ?
 - Abstracted, lost, as though removed in time and space,
 I see for moments my dear friend, your father there,
 with whom I shared the intimacies of youth, with whom
 my heart is always young again, though I am old.
 The plans we made, the hours of joy, the bitter pain -
 a thousand images from the past crowd on my mind:
 our jokes, so hard to tell from earnest; love and hate;
 many mistakes, of course, and much that proved its worth.
 - But he himself, imagine what he feels today
 to see his daughter joining such a noble man
 in marriage vows, to see your lovely head, my child,
 crowned by the smiling woman who, in you as bride,
 shows us again the beautiful bloom of her own youth.

□

Your life now takes a different turn; you're leaving us
to go where there awaits you a new hearth and home;
many an eye will fill with tears to send you off.

- The sun stands in the heavens, and for all the world
it's still today; but when today is yesterday,
how changed the aspect that the world presents to you!
- And so the years go comfortably gliding by.
And what they hold in store is maybe half your choice,
the rest ordained in councils of diviner love.

□

Henceforth, when far from us, at your beloved's side
you celebrate remembrance of our present feast;
when you transport yourselves in spirit once again
to this resplendent wedding-hall, crowded with guests,
whose warm and friendly faces come to life again
amid the garlandry and the cheerful ring of glass:
then, at the quiet evening hour, let candlelight
suffuse the room and make the piano corner bright.
Sing him the ancient air that lingers on in the mind:
Long, long ago. - And what his kiss will then express,
the eloquence of his hand on yours - does it need words?
That love may keep its bloom and faithfulness persist,
whatever else we're cheated of by time and change.

ON A LAMP

Still undisturbed, o lovely lamp, you decorate –
suspended here so gracefully by slender chains –
the rafters of this nigh-forgotten pleasure hall.
Along the surface of your marble bowl, whose rim
is braided by an ivy wreath of green-gold bronze,
a happy band of children twines a circle dance.
The whole effect is charming, playful; but a touch
of earnest thought suffuses the entire form:
a true, authentic work of art. Who notices?
But beauty, blissful, looks to shine within itself.

AN IMITATION OF MÖRIKE ("DENK ES, O SEELE!")

a sapling in the pine wood,
 who knows where?
a rosebush, who can say
 where lies the garden?
one day that tree that rosebush -
 think, my soul!
will sink its roots into your grave
 and grow there

two black colts at pasture
 in the meadow
turn and head for home
 jumping and frisking;
one day with measured steps
 they'll draw your coffin,
perhaps before the hoof
 has thrown its iron -
the one I see now
 flashing in the sunlight

Gottfried Keller (1819-1890)

COUNT VON ZIMMERN HIS JESTER

What is that puffball gliding up
 and down the castle stairs? –
 Why, that's the Count his pet and pup,
 pastime and banish-cares:
 his jester man, still half a child,
 full pink and not a wrinkle;
 like summer breezes soft and mild,
 with cap and bells that tinkle.

No malice in that beardless lad –
 mischief is more the word;
 but he's good-natured when he's bad
 and wise when he's absurd;
 and what his jumpy fingers may
 have dropped or spoilt or twisted,
 it always seems to save the day –
 on target when he's missed it!

Now once, to worship Holy Mass,
 the count and court repair
 to chapel, but they find – alas! –
 no acolyte is there;
 and so the priest must needs employ
 Sir Fool for want of better –
 who *tries* to act an altar-boy
 in spirit, to the letter.

– And serves adroitly (they relate),
 as though he'd served before;
 but often, when the prize is great,
 disaster's at the door:
 for when it's time to raise the Host
 before the congregation,
 alas! – *no bell* to mark the most
 mysterious transformation.

A dark and heavy silence falls;
the Count grows weak and wan -
whom some presentiment appalls
of evils coming on.
But who's at hand to put things right?
The fool! - and forward springing,
he shakes his cap with all his might
to set the bells a-ringing!

Then from the pyx a wondrous glow,
a radiance goes abroad;
splendor and fragrance overflow
the little house of God;
as if among fresh violets lay
the Kingdom and the Glory;
Lord Jesus stops along His way
to smile upon the story!

Conrad Ferdinand Meyer (1825-1898)

DARK-SHADOWING CHESTNUT

Oh dark dark-shadowing chestnut tree!
My wind-inspired summer tent,
your far-flung branches meet the lake;
your thirsty leaves bend down to drink,
o dark dark-shadowing chestnut!
Below the landing small-fry bathe –
they squabble, or they shout for joy –
and children paddle, shining white,
behind your latticework of leaves,
o dark dark-shadowing chestnut!
When lake and shore sink down to sleep,
the evening boat goes rumbling by;
from its red lantern lightning shoots
across the water's curving breast
like broken characters of flame –
until the enigmatic words
are quite extinguished in your leaves,
o dark dark-shadowing chestnut!

FINGERBELL²

Where's the hearth of Fingerbell;
 where's his lonely cottage?
 Children: in the shady dell –
 there he cooks his pottage.
 Just a lad, or hardly older;
 yet he has a hump to shoulder.
 When he walks, you'll never see
 more fantastic labors;
 when he sits, the chin and knee
 look unlikely neighbors!

He's a wicker man by trade,
 loves to weave and work it;
 sells the baskets that he's made
 on the village circuit.
 Happy life! He'd be contented
 if he weren't so circumvented –
 shunned: because the rumor drones,
 "Fingerbell's a wizard! –
 knows the simples, knows the stones,
 tongue of newt and lizard."

Not a word of which is right –
 scandal undeserving;
 silly folk in feeble light
 find the boy unnerving.
 No one loves a freak of nature;
 young and old avoid the creature.
 But he's undeterred by that,
 holds no heavy grudges;
 sporting foxglove from the hat,
 round he tramps and trudges.

² Fingerbell: a popular name for foxglove (or digitalis) – the German *Fingerhut* means literally "thimble" (finger hat). The title of Meyer's poem is "Fingerhütchen," a diminutive.

Late one night, relieved of load,
 Fingerbell is sadly
 far from home and on the road,
 needs a sitdown badly.

Banks of moss are tantalizing;
 soon the friendly moon is rising.
 Nothing spooky, rum, or queer
 makes him apprehensive;
 still, his bed is nowhere near -
 so he's glum and pensive.

Hush! What's that uncanny sound?
 Such a lovely ringing
 sounding from the green surround,
 fine melodic singing:
 "Silver bark, serenely gliding . . ." -
 here the tune breaks off, subsiding.
 Fingerbell sees nothing wrong,
 though of course he's wary;
 in itself the charming song
 isn't strange or scary.

Once again the music plays
 from the bosky verges;
 but the rhyming answer phrase
 never quite emerges:
 "Silver bark, serenely gliding . . ." -
 falters once again, subsiding.
 Sweet, as elfin music goes;
 monotone in movement;
 Fingerbell is sure he knows
 just the right improvement.

So he waits until the chance
 comes again, and takes it;
 when the song makes no advance,
 he pipes up and makes it:
 "Silver bark, serenely gliding . . ." -

“Wants no rudder, needs no guiding.”

From the hillside comes a shout:

“Bravo! Well descanted!”

Tiny folk come tumbling out,
they for once enchanted.

“Fingerbellkin, Fingerbell,

time is in your favor!” –

so the hillside folk foretell –

“Do not shrink or quaver!

Silver bark, serenely gliding,
wants no rudder, needs no guiding!

What a masterstroke that is;

brilliant innovation!

All you singers – copy his

fine elaboration.

“Fingerbell, come into view,

handsome and sagacious;

step into the moonlight, do! –

turn around. Good gracious!

From the front you look adorable;

otherwise you look deplorable!

Wretched fellow, from behind

so grotesquely weighted!

What’s the use of noble mind

ill-incorporated?

“Heads that house a fertile brain

should not have to dangle

from a mountain peak of pain

at a crazy angle.

Nasty hump, your days are ended!

Crooked limbs, at last be mended!

Fingerbell, salute to you –

we the elves restore you.

Now your spine is straight and true.

Life is all before you.”

Soon the elves are out of sight
 in the bosky verges;
 out into the moonlit night
 just their sound emerges:
 "La-di-da - serenely gliding,
 la-di-da-di - needs no guiding."
 Fingerbell is sick of rhyme -
 what are all these songs for?
 All he wants is sleepy time;
 home is what he longs for.

Then he drowns on the spot,
 sleeping long and sweetly;
 when he wakes, the sun is hot,
 day has dawned completely.
 On the hillside sheep are bleating,
 cows are mooing, both are eating.
 "Yes," he thinks, "I know this hill;
 I recall the singers
 and their work, for good or ill."
 So he takes his fingers . . .

. . . feels between the shoulder blades:
 "How's my hump this morning?
 Elfin magic fails and fades;
 dream work dies a-borning.
 No! It's real! I'm disencumbered!
 No relapsing while I slumbered!
 Gracious! Here's an upright me -
 all my fears were groundless.
 I'm a roebuck running free,
 and my joy is boundless."

He's a roebuck, he's a pup,
 limbs now do his bidding.
 Wait! His back is swelling up!
 No, it's not - just kidding.
 And he counts no blessing higher

than the night he spent in choir
with the spirits; they're to thank
for his new-found glory
since the night he slumped and sank
in this little story.

Detlev von Liliencron (1844-1909)

TO A WOMAN WHO DIED

I wish I had you back!

A thousand crows
that flapped their gloomy wings around my head –
they simply vanished when your doves appeared,
the white ambassadors of your cheerfulness.

I wish you hadn't died!

The earth is cold,
lies heavily on your box, and won't let go.
I never visit: that's not where to find you.
Auf Wiedersehn in heaven?

Who needs heaven
if all we do there is warble halleluiahs?
No occasion to hear your laugh again –
your laugh, your nonsense, or your words of comfort.

Today is such a lovely day. Where's Fetcher?
Run to the cabinet for your fancy shotgun
and take the field: it's not too late for gamebirds.
Don't make your usual detour to the beech grove
or bed down on the moss and fall asleep.
Stay focused, keep your eye peeled for the birds,
and don't disgrace yourself in front of Fetcher.
While I'm at it, to hell with organ-grinders:
you know their wayward harmonies on the wind
set you to dreaming – then you come home birdless.
On second thought: the heath is bleak in autumn;
if music charms you, let yourself be charmed.

Tonight for dinner we'll be having pea soup;
I've uncorked a Margaux – it's on the sideboard.
Be sure to bring your hunger, also humor.
Then read to me from all your favorite poets.

And if the night's still young, we'll play the piano
and sing some Schumann, Robert Franz, and Brahms.
I'd rather not discuss your money problems.

In any case, the shopkeepers are not
the sort of devils who can really roast you;
we'll figure something out.

And by the way:
I've put some fine old cognac in your hip-flask.
Give my regards to woodland, heath and fields
that lie beyond my view. Forget the money.
And while you're gone, I'll poke into the kitchen
and do my best to keep that soup from burning.

I wish you hadn't died!

A thousand crows
that flapped their gloomy wings around my head -
they simply vanished when your doves appeared,
the white ambassadors of your cheerfulness.
I wish I had you back!

THE OLD STONE CROSS IN NEW MARKET (Berlin-Cölln)

Long ago, in old Berlin,
 so rich in song and story,
 a wizard of the violin
 performed his repertory.
 And when he played in solemn key,
 you bowed your head and bent your knee
 before the heavenly glory.

Alas, he loved his cups too much;
 beer was his bread-and-butter;
 Bordeaux and Burgundy and such
 would land him in the gutter.
 And then he'd go from bad to worse:
 begin to castigate and curse,
 to blaspheme and to splutter.

The world would seem to lunge and lurch.
 One day, in his insanities,
 he climbed the belltower of the church
 and shocked it with profanities.
 And when he reached the weathervane,
 he fiddled an obscene refrain
 to the roster of inanities.

Believe me, it was no chorale,
 but more like heathen dances;
 the sort of tasteless bacchanal
 where a priest of Dagon prances.
 Good Lord! the pious rooster-bird
 was scared to death: he'd never heard
 such Philistine romances!

The town can scarce believe its ears;
 the burghers grouse and grumble;
 they storm the church in hopes and fears
 their drunkard's going to stumble.

Already they surround the splat
 his corpse will make, when thin and flat
 he's had his frightful tumble.

But God the Father frowned and said:
 Professor, stop abusing
 the privilege of the talented -
 I see that you're confusing
 a peccadillo and a sin.
 And yet you play the violin
 divinely; how amusing!

And therefore I'm inclined to grant
 you one last opportunity
 to learn the lesson that you can't
 defy Me with impunity.
 I hope this graceful somersault
 will teach you to amend your fault
 and join the Lord's community.

A gentle nudge - he's on his way;
 he's sailing past the railing,
 like Icarus on that sunny day,
 with knees and elbows flailing.
 Kerplunk! he's on the paving-stones,
 cold sober but no broken bones -
 not dead, not even ailing!

A miracle! - could such a fall
 turn out so uninjurious?
 The crowd is stunned; and yet they all
 were *there*: it can't be spurious!
 And so they raised a monument,
 a cross of stone, to mark the event
 and make the Devil furious.

The fiddler never drank again;
 the entire city rang of it.

He preached the Word of God to men
by fiddling, and he sang of it.
But sometimes, as a last resort,
he maybe took a tiny snort
so as not to lose the hang of it.

ABDALLAH'S EARS

Through the steppes of Central Asia
 on a splendid summer evening
 hard I drove my horse Abdallah.
 As he knew the way was homeward,
 happily his hooves went flying -
 lightened by a dream of oats.

Nothing on the wide horizon,
 not a sound to pierce the silence;
 not the chirp of lonesome cricket,
 nor the flap of startled pheasant,
 nor the howl of far hyena;
 nowhere houses, nowhere people,
 nowhere forests, hills, or valleys:
 all there was was shifting sand.

Nodding with his mighty forehead
 in a constant rhythmic motion,
 gracefully my horse Abdallah
 let his jet-black mane go streaming.
 And in likewise constant motion
 were his ears, alert and slender;
 both of them now pointing forward,
 both of them now pointing backward.
 Now he's got the right one forward,
 got the left one tilted backward;
 now he's got the left one forward,
 got the right one tilted backward -
 back and forth. What puzzles me is:
 what on earth can he be hearing?
 Not a thing disturbs the silence,
 nothing to confront or fear.

Then I thought: perhaps my stallion
 hears a sound that has escaped me
 in the plenitude of silence,

in the peacefulness of evening.
What the devil can it be?

Savage horsemen fast approaching
who've been sent to intercept me?
Does he hear their sabers rattling,
does he hear their saddles creaking,
still so many miles away?

Or perhaps it's some exhausted
outcast on a fringe of desert,
soon to die of thirst, and heaving
one last sigh toward heaven's gate?

In a grove of stately palm trees,
where the steppe gives way to lushness,
does he hear the fervent pledges
of a handsome pair of lovers;
hear a spate of fervent kisses,
each more fervent than the last?

Sounds of distant lamentation?
Drinking songs at someone's wedding?
All the earthly joys and sorrows –
every prayer, hymn, and curse?

Does he sense the *stars* vibrating;
hear the angels' halleluiahs;
catch the music of the spheres?

Translator's Metalogue

That's where good old Detlev left it;
 but I can't escape the question:
 does that sharp-eared beast Abdallah
 hear the clunk of my translation?
 Or (to raise the general issue)
 does he know the world he lives in,
 though it stretches wide as steppeland,
 is, from any reader's viewpoint,
 just a narrow, two-page poem?
 And what's more (forgive me, Detlev),
 it's a fairly pointless poem,
 shaggy doggerel in trochaics -
 though perhaps it's partly pointed
 if the stallion knows he's in it;
 namely, that he's made of words.

Reinterpreting Abdallah's
 grand obsession as proleptic,
 ontologic self-awareness
 has the strange effect of turning
 what was really just a joke in
 highly sleep-inducing meter
 (some would call it "Hiawatha";
 some would call it "Kalevala" -
 call it what you want to) into
 something like a pre-postmodern
 sendup in the mode of later
 language-drunk extravaganzas -
 say the famous *Disparition*
 (nicely named *A Void* in English)
 by the brilliant Georges Perec.

There we learn the joy of watching
 characters within the novel
 tumbling to the meta-scandal
 that the world of words they live in
 strangely lacks the letter *e*.

As I sit here drinking claret,
moving verse from head to notebook,
there's the host of *Lunch with Mozart*
serving up the usual rubbish,
bland forensic infotainment,
on the theme of "What killed Wolfgang?"
Did Salieri slip him poison?
Did he wolf a wormy porkchop?
(Trichinosis has been gaining
on its rival - tricky rival.)
Did Archbishop Colloredo
punch a voodoo doll in Salzburg?
I think Mozart died of boredom
caused by his acutely hearing,
in advance, these waves of hogwash.
What's it got to do with music?
Get a life, he said and died.

Gentle reader! Let me try to
overhear your thoughts. I'm hearing:
Wait, by now this metalogue is
longer than the German poem.
(Now it is: line fifty-seven.)
Well, so what? Or as the saying
goes in Yiddish, "call me crack-nut."
Call me, too, the mad loquacious
wag whose coda dogged a horse.

Theodor Fontane (1819-1898)

THE TROUBLE WITH ME ("WAS MIR FEHLTE")

Other people storm and capture the ship
 SS Fortuna. But not me - I trip
 and fall down flat on the treacherous boarding plank.
 For this I must have a quirk of fate to thank.
 Or is it some omission I always make?
 Some crucial bull-by-the-horns I fail to take?
 Is one of my four elements out of balance?
 Knowledge? Method? Energy? Natural talents?
 Well, the answer isn't really mysterious:
 I lack the gift of being deadly serious.

Looking back on my life, I think: how numerous
 the people that I've encountered, and how various -
 the high and mighty of every rank and grade
 at court, in business, on military parade;
 both virtuous Penelopes and steamy sirens;
 doormen, superintendants, real-estate barons.
 I was always ready to take them as they came,
 but take them lightly, in the spirit of the game.

For this people eventually make you pay -
 everyone wants to be a bigshot in some way.
 So when, for any preferment, my name is mentioned,
 some pompous ass will submit a well-intentioned
 character assassination to this effect:
 "I'm sorry to say he lacks the proper respect.
 Life isn't real to him, it's a lantern show.
 He won't fit in with the other people we know.
 The most that Herr Fontane will have to say
 on any solemn occasion is 'fa il re.'"³
 Trust me - there's nothing more deleterious
 to one's career than being thought "unserious."

³ Italian in the original: "He plays the king"; in other words, "Isn't he being grand?"
 Theodor Fontane

FRITZ KATZFUSS

Fritz Katzfuss was a fifteen-year-old stockboy,
 redhaired, with freckles, not too fond of working;
 he was apprentice to the Widow Marzahn,
 who pinched her pennies and maintained a food shop
 where Swiss cheese, herring, dates and hard salami,
 where pumpernickel, oranges and salmon
 consorted peacefully, along with dry goods.
 And on the steep, somewhat precarious ladder
 (its rungs had worn away to half their thickness)
 Catfoot would flit when daughters of the city
 came in for soda, bluing, groats or currants –
 and fetch them.

Yes, but could you call it “flitting”?
 Well, to admit the truth, that was the question.
 The girls themselves, whose boyfriends stood there waiting,
 would say you couldn’t; that, in fact, he “dawdled,”
 got flustered and confused – unlike his namesake.
 Oh sure, when Mrs. Battle-Axe was watching,
 he did his job – not very well, but did it.
 The real despair was when you had to send him
 down to the basement for some seltzer bottles.
 Where did he go? Will he be back by Christmas?
 And if he weren’t so lovable a youngster,
 who never grumbled, never tried to short you
 (the opposite: he more than gave full measure),
 it would be unendurable.

No better
 the testimonial of his thrifty mistress,
 the Widow Marzahn: “How that good-for-nothing
 just vanishes! He’s quick behind the counter,
 but tell him cross the yard or climb the attic –
 it takes forever. Kaiser Wilhelm’s Birthday,
 Sedan Remembrance Day – send anybody
 to bring the Prussian flag down and the flagpole
 (my husband never flew the *German* colors),
 but don’t send Fritz unless you want him AWOL

three-quarters of an hour.”

Thus the widow.

To make it short, Fritz Katzfuss was a puzzle;
 more of a puzzle was his strange composure.
 No matter how the customers might thunder,
 no matter if the lightning singed his eyebrows,
 he never lost his temper, whined or pouted.
 His smile was confident and never faltered;
 it seemed to say: “Poor fools, you think I’m stupid,
 I’m just a clerk dispensing small potatoes.
 But *you’re* the small potatoes – I’m above you.
 Now step right up for laundry bluing, ladies;
 blue every shirt on earth – my blue is heaven.”

So time went by. When Fritz was seventeenish,
 a hogshead full of cider was delivered
 that wanted quick removal to the cellar.
 Fritz got a cable on it, and to counter
 the summer heat, which was indeed oppressive,
 he took his dust coat off and maladroitly
 flung it aside so that the collar hook-loop
 was hanging down. And from the forward pocket
 an object slid onto the ground, unnoticed.
 By Fritz, that is – the watchful Widow Marzahn
 sneaked up and took possession of the booklet
 (that’s what it was) and read: “Collected Writings.
 The Poems, Volume One, by Wolfgang Goethe.”
 It was well-thumbed and rather badly battered;
 place marks had been inserted: bits of string,
 the borders from a sheet of postal stamps,
 and (unbelievably) salami casing,
 the grease from which had made the page translucent.
 And what was on that page? The Songs of Mignon,
 which Marzahn spoke as follows: “Thither, thither!
 might I with thee, o my beloved, wend.”

Now it was clear what made Fritz dull and sluggish:
 poetry, Goethe, Mignon.

Poor apprentice!

I don't know what became of you; I do know
that what you suffered under Mrs. Marzahn
I've dealt with all my life. A little Goethe -
there's nothing like it as a shield, or weapon.
So when the Widow Marzahn drove me crazy,
and silly geese with thoughts of laundry bluing
would laugh at me for being slow and giggle,
I only smiled, as you did, Fritz, my hero -
Fritz Katzfuss, my ideal, my mark and model!
The Goethe volume gave me strength and courage,
perhaps a touch of vanity . . . admit it.
My hair's not red, though, and - I have no freckles.

Christian Morgenstern (1871-1914)

HOW PHILOSOPHY WAS BORN

He stares at me – what planet am I from? –
as if he'd never seen a human tom.

Then I start staring – are we both asleep? –
as if he were the first and only sheep.

THE AESTHETE

When I sit I pay no mind
to the needs of my behind;
no - I let my mind intuit
how, if *it* sat, it would do it.

Mind, when pressed to choose a chair,
looks for style and stops right there.
Let the greedy mob go whoring
after *useful* chairs - how boring!

THE RIVER

Old Man River don't say nothing
all the livelong day;
but if he ever started talking,
this is what he'd say:

"Pass the whiskey! Where's my Lulu?"
- no surprise in that.
And so I'm glad he hasn't thought of
bursting into chat.

SIMILE

Palmström trembles like a branch in motion.
Korf is curious: like a what? and why?
Ah! - says Palm - a lovely transient notion
not unlike a bird in levitation
rested on me briefly, then flew by.
Now I tremble like a branch in motion,
deeply grateful for the "good vibration."

KORF'S AMAZING SENSE OF SMELL . . .

Korf's amazing sense of smell
has its lonely side as well:
his receptors start to ring -
no one else can smell a thing.

But he claims (with Stendhal-Beyle):
"Someday I'll be vindicated" -
writes it in his notebook daily;
and for thirty years he's waited.

THE ATOMIZER ORGAN

Palmström invents an atomizer keyboard
to play Korf's Eighteenth Sonata, called "The Sneezewort."

The piece begins with edelweiss clumped in triplets;
then comes the brilliant acacia-blossom aria.

But in the scherzo you get a rude awakening:
between the tuberoses and eucalyptus

are three notorious sneezewort ostinatos
that lend the work its unforgettable nickname.

The effect is like the rapid alternation
of a soggy woolen hat and a sweaty gym-shoe:

HAT/SHOE - HAT/SHOE - HAT/SHOE. And it's contagious -
Palmström is nearly "blown away" by sneezing.

The composer, though, has securely barricaded
himself behind his desk and keeps composing.

THE AROMATERIA

Some fans of Korf's *Symphonia Aetheria*
have launched an Automat-Aromateria:

an après-concert restaurant where, if
you're bored by mastication, you can sniff.

Deposit coin, select a pump, and pump it:
a swivel-mounted thin balsamic trumpet

will squirt your nostrils full of your preferred
aroma. (It's so simple, it's absurd.)

A nifty cash-receipt depicts the source,
botanically correct, of every course.

Many who dine there claim it can't be beaten –
“the only decent meal” they've “never eaten.”

THE SPECTACLES

Korf's an avid reader - loves it!
Hates it when an author shoves it
down his throat in too explicit
terms, as though afraid he'd miss it.

Most things can be said quite nicely
in a dozen words concisely;
in as many lines you've room a-
plenty for St. Tapeworm's *Summa*.

Korf is not to be deterred - he's
out to squelch those wordy-gurdies;
patents spectacles for shrinking
books that yak instead of thinking.

If you read *this* text with Korfic
specs, you couldn't - it's too dwarfic!
Thirty-three such, printed dark,
might produce - one - question mark.

for Raine Daston

PALMSTRÖM TO A NIGHTINGALE (THAT KEPT HIM UP AT NIGHT)

Couldn't you transform yourself into a - trout?

And as for singing, go like him: without?

Otherwise, I fear,

the boon of sleep that I so fondly crave

will not be granted me until the grave.

Do it, be a dear!

Impress your missus in the nest; indeed, astound her

with reticent imitations of a flounder

roosting in the trees.

Or flit about her in ecstatic

flutter like an airborne haddock.

Do it, damn it, please!

PLASTIC ART

Palmström's found a new technique of wedding
monument and mood: he sculpts "impressions -
"marble sketches," if you will - from bedding.

Flinging eiderdown, he improvises
in a medium that's both fast and flimsy;
then he jumps aside and scrutinizes

by the lamp the creatures of his whimsy.
Light and shade commingle to imply a
flock of furies (from the *Oresteia*),

Augustus (with Apollo's help) defeating
Cleopatra, Luke's Annunciation,
martyrs, beasts (familiar and fantastic).

Palmström thinks: if these were not so fleeting,
modern art could make its reputation;
Greece and Rome would be outdone in plastic.

for Christina Spiesel

THEATER II

(Palmström has invented a theater with “mechanically rotating audience” and the infinite spectacle of nature as its repertoire. Korf is duly impressed but prefers another approach.)

“See this yardstick? You don’t know it,
 but this yardstick is a poet.
 Art is in the way you hold it;
 all depends on how you fold it.
 You can make a palm tree grow,
 build a church or bungalow,
 march across the frozen tundra,
 plant a sphinx to pose conundra!
 Tufted clouds that loom gigantic,
 tankers on the wide Atlantic,
 constellations, mountain ranges –
 you can ring a million changes
 on my measure-stick machinery,
 watch it outline *any* scenery.
 True, it works by implication;
 that’s the point: imagination!

Massive sets that we’ve inherited
 should be struck down and emerited!
 No more squatting like a toad –
 let’s compose in lightning code!
 Wield with wit this flimsy rod
 and it’s like a bolt from God
 fructifying native ground
 for poetic sense and sound!” . . .

PALMSTRÖM'S PAPER ~~DUMPLINGS~~-BALLS

Palm takes wrapping paper from his closet,
then begins adroitly to deposit.

No, artistically. And after crumpling
every sheet into a paper dumpling.

After crumpling them, begins installing
round his bedroom as the night is falling.

Lose the dumplings. So that while he slumbers,
flocks of paper balls in frightful numbers.

So that later, in the dead of night,
hears the crackling balls, and taking fright.

When he hears that ghostly sound at night,
Palmström (what's the grammar now?) takes fright.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Korf now publishes the *Daily Lunch* -
a paper such that when it's read
you're fully fed.

(Subscribers also get the *Sunday Brunch*.)

Healthy press runs make it plain
anyone with half a brain
would rather mull than munch.

translated for Susie's birthday

13 June 2001

EUROPEANS AND BOOKS

Korf is disconcerted when he looks
at Europe and its long affair with books;

fails to see why one should tolerate
those stacks of volumes by the hundredweight.

Why inter the living spirit in
a grave of matter? Isn't that a sin?

Spirit is light and ought to roam as light-
ly draped as walking spirits do by night.

But no! – the Euro won't forgive himself
unless he's got it "bound" and on the shelf.

for Peter Demetz *a matonele*
on the occasion of his 75. birthday

KORF INVENTS A SPECIAL SORT OF JOKE . . .

Korf invents a special sort of joke that
doesn't take effect until much later -
when it's told, it bores you to distraction;

but, as if a silent fuse had smoldered,
boing! - you're wide awake at half past midnight,
smiling blissfully like a pudgy baby.

PALMSTRÖM'S WATCH IS AN ANNOYING TICKER

Palmström's watch is an annoying ticker;
so at bedtime he routinely soaks it
in a bath of laudanum or liquor.

By dawn the thing's so "down" it takes a coca-
leaf concoction just to slowly coax it
back to life - or black Jamaica Mocha.

THE DREAMER

Palmström plants a clutch of candles
on his polished marble nightstand;
then observes them slowly melting,

simulating mountain ranges
as the wax congeals like lava
into curlicues and tassels.

High above the viscous valleys
sway the wicks in flame coronas
like a stand of golden cypress.

On the white fantastic ledges -
there the dreamer spies intrepid
caravans of solar pilgrims.

SPECULATIVE

Palmström likes to study things in mirrors,
and he finds especially delightful
breath condensing on a ground of silver.

Wingèd Maya's web of cosmic error
dawns upon him slowly; one insightful
prankster sees the universe as vapor.

NOISE GUARD

Palmström likes a cloak of sound around him;
partly to deflect extraneous noises,
partly to deter unwanted listeners.

That's why Palm has had his bachelor quarters
lined with water pipes that roar and rumble.
Insulated now, he takes to launching

monologues that go for hours, mono-
logues that go for hours, like the golden-
throated Greek who boomed into the breakers:

like Demosthenes on empty beaches.

for Victor Bers

IN PRAISE OF WET WEATHER

In *dry* weather Palmström stays inside –
wet is when the earth is much less busy;
less commotion then to make him dizzy;
people tend to go more dignified.

Just the symbol of the domed umbrella's
lesser heaven regulates the brain;
far from all our frantic tarantellas
is the greater one, and shall remain.

Through the soggy streets and fields of clover
Palmström promenades when clouds collect,
watching people and presiding over
life that's cosmo-logically correct.

THE DANCE

A pig in four-four time, an upbeat owl
 once found themselves together beak by jowl
 beneath a pillar in their author's brain.
 They felt an urge to dance, and so the twain
 together put
 one hand, one foot.
 A fiddlebow begonia played the strain.

The pig's remaining three pink trotters give it
 preternatural gracefulness and flow;
 the upbeat owl on her remaining pivot
 rocks her inner organs to and fro.
 Long the shadow fell,
 the music cast its spell
 over the strange, harmonious tableau.

The author's brain? It wasn't made of granite.
 So the pillar vanished as it came.
 Our asymmetric tango did the same,
 reverting to the nothing that began it.
 A final ghostly ping
 from one begonia string -
 no trace of them was left upon the planet.

PHILANTHROPIC

Picnickers are often quite distressed
to find that meadows have “downside” to them;
nervous constitutions may do best
or better (leastwise mostly) to eschew them.

Hardly have you settled on the green
when ant, mosquito, dragonfly, and bumble
congregate, forgather, and convene
to tickle, drone, reverberate, and rumble.

Here, then, is a bit of good advice
to nervous constitutions: try achieving
bliss in a more tranquil paradise.
To be specific: try (for instance) *leaving*.

NOT A GOOD DAY

My mind goes buzzing round and round
just like a restless bumblebee:
I'm avid, but I haven't found
the food for my avidity.

I'll sip some nectar, but I'm bound
to soon reject it and to flee.
My mind keeps buzzing round and round
just like a restless bumblebee.

"Slick verses, bumble! Seems you've drowned
your grief in virtuosity."
- How asinine! How unprofound!
Don't waste your ironies on *me*.

My mind goes buzzing round.

THE UNICORN

Nothing lives forever – there's the rub.
The Unicorn today is just a pub,

a comfy place to go when evening falls
and pilsner calls.

Who knows? It's not impossible that we
may likewise come to be

pure spirit, purely arbitrary signs
of where some other species dines:

The Golden Human – where some other race
will contemplate its hand and play the ace.

VICE VERSA

A hare sits happily in the clearing,
thinks he's out of sight and hearing -

out of knowledge. But (surprise!)
a patient pair of field-glassed eyes

perched on a nearby mountain peers
at him, the dwarf with soup-spoon ears.

Now turn the tables: man is seen
by God, both patient and serene.

THE CHICKEN

In the station house - it's not designed for chickens -
a pesky fowl
is on the prowl.
Don't they have a stationmaster here
to give that clown
a dressing down?
Well, I hope not. Let me make it clear
where my sympathy lies in such a case:
with a bird that "doesn't know its place."

THE KNEE

A lonely knee patrols the land,
a knee: no more, no less.
It's not a tree or taxi stand –
a knee: no more, no less.

A soldier once was blown to bits
by stepping on a mine;
and just the knee was salvaged, like
a relic in a shrine.

So now it makes the lonely rounds,
a knee: no more, no less.
It's not a key or coffee grounds –
A knee: no more no less.

for Jacqueline Gourevitch

SCHOOLMAN'S PROBLEM II

Can an angel climb Mt. Everest?
No, for mountains he's too light.
When it comes to worldly height,
human foot and shoe are cleverest.

Still, if he's inclined to dabble,
let him get more "down-to-earth":
take the figure, form, and girth
of a girl named Edna Drabble.

Not that you'll have trouble knowing
who's an angel Ednafied:
watch her coming - better, going -
no one else has quite that stride.

THE COAT

The madras coat is lush and loud
when on by day, but like a shroud
when off by night and through the sleeves
a silent ferret weaves.

By night goodnight, a ferret weaves
in ghostly silence down the sleeves . . .
The coat was once absurdly loud;
when off it's like a shroud.

By night it's like a peaceful shroud
that scarce remembers being loud;
by night, when up and down the sleeves
a ghostly ferret weaves.

for Ariel Ron
who put a ferret in my bed

HOLLYWOOD MINUTE

A giant lizard famed of yore
 once knocked on Steven Spielberg's door.
 The great director flashed a grin:
 "T. Rex, my man, I'll squeeze you in."

He squeezed, but just the toothy enda
 Rex would fit in his agenda.
 "Sweetheart, I can give you five -
 this business eats me up alive.

What's on your tiny brain?" The king
 of reptiles spoke the following:
 "I'd like your draftsmen to design a
 consort for me: T. Regina."

"Done!" "But I foresee the queen
 will nurse ambition; so, to please her,
 please have me proclaimed on screen
 Tyrannosaurus Julius Caesar."

"Why stop there?" cried Steve. "Dictator!
 Fancy Pants and Pontifex!
 'Regina (T) seeks Pantocrator;
 object: world dominion, sex.'

Get lost, you fossil! I've a hunch
 you're all washed up - let's not do lunch."
 T. Rex was totally deflated,
 slithered out and abdicated.