



Yuri Shcherbak

## THE LITTLE SOCCER TEAM

Oratorio for vocal soloist and children's choir

*In memory of the poet Leonid Kiselyov (1946-1968)*

### 1. Question Marks. *Allegro moderato*

How should I write this story? How should I put it together so that the descriptive passages on nature and people, the fragmentary thoughts and the odd words all fit, as the framework of a house does when erected by good carpenters, as they spit on their hands, wipe the sweat from their brows, and square their shoulders amidst the merry clatter of axe blades. Where should I begin? With the Little Blue Pond, or the skin-diving scene, the soccer match or the brass band competition? From what episode should the alarming crescendo begin to build up, where should the pastoral voices of the children's choir come in? And, lastly, at what stage should we hear the counterpoint ring out, denoting the conflict between the themes of life and death? Where should the *Hockey Ode* be placed? Perhaps at the beginning of the composition, like a prelude, like a clef, like an introduction, like the first joyous ray of light at sunrise heralding the birth of day? Or the other way round – should the *Hockey Ode* crown my edifice, ending the composition, like a coda, lauding the ice, the glittering skates, the clash of hockey sticks, and the crackle of icebound twigs? And how, at the same time, would I abide by the rigid and time-sanctioned literary canons laid down by various outstanding scholars? What should I make the main plot of my story? Will it have sufficient conceptual integrity? Compositional metaphoricalness? Structural contradictoriness? Intellectuality of plot and genre? Generic narrativeness? Will it be a story at all? What should predominate in it – lofty BEING or lowly EVERYDAY LIFE? Where, at what point, must come the splash of the climax? And then, is it at all necessary? How should I handle the *denouement*? Should I really dismiss this important element in a literary epos? How should I describe the Little Blue Pond so that you go skimming across it yourself and see the red apple frozen into the ice? What would be the best way to tell you about Lionya? About Bondi? About Slavko? About Maxym? About Ilko? About Jurek? About Madame Jeanguyot and the little corporal? How am I to induce you to go skin-diving with me, wearing a mask and tightly gripping an aluminum snorkel in your mouth? Maybe, you can't swim? How am I to solve the multitude of problems you and I are faced with? How am I to make you believe the "All Stars" soccer team really existed? Have you ever heard of Amundsen Street? Do you know that Baidarochny Lane branches off it? How am I to tell you about the Great Snowless Winter in Kyiv, about the sun-scorched rocks of the Bolshoi Fontan district in Odessa, about the ice

drifting down the River Irpen, about the landing of a plane at Borispol airport, about the blonde Polish stewardess who crosses herself in the service galley before appearing before the passengers to announce with a sweet smile: "Ladies and gentlemen, the flight is over, the captain and crew wish you all the best." How am I to put together all the important facts, the side issues and the minor points, and yet not miss some chance thing that might at first glance seem superfluous? It needs real mastery to give a certain weight to the minor, the insignificant, the scarcely necessary things, which have nothing to say in themselves and seem to be of no value at all, but which suddenly, to our dismay and surprise, become the main and dominant factors.... So where should I begin? How am I to tell the story so that it won't turn into a chaotic combination of sounds devoid of rhythm and inner harmony?

## **2. Sincerity. *Lento e dolissimo***

If you want to immortalize yourself and stop the flow of time, write stories. If you want to immortalize the people who surround you, write stories. Mix the words as if they were clay and out of this primary medium create solid verbal flesh in which everything is true, precise and irrefutable; the fresh sowing of nocturnal snow on the gray canvas of fields; the distant yellow smoke of factories; the piercing cold of forced draughts and the parching heat in foundry shops; the change in the color gamut of smelted steel cooling in moulds – from a white-hot glare to a red-blue glow; the tinny purling of white milk jets into pails of a morning; the dazzle of lights on highways at night; the kisses of drivers smelling of petrol because they siphon fuel through rubber tubes.

That's all very well, and without this penetrating preciseness of color and detail, good prose is inconceivable. But we cannot leave man out, can we? For man is the greatest of mysteries, the greatest of galaxies, the greatest of uncertainties. So before we arm ourselves with telescopes, before we set out to challenge distant galaxies, let us take a look at ourselves. Before we pass sentence on others, let us pass sentence on ourselves.

Everything I am writing about here, as is the case in most of my stories, I am writing about myself. Everything good and everything bad, everything false and everything true – all this belongs to me, all this is mine. I am not the first or the last to do so. Those who start writing about others, without looking into their own selves, are doomed to failure.

And never forget about your dreams. Often it is in dreams that the dormant human conscience awakes. Some day someone will write a *Book of Dreams* and this, too, will be a great truth about the human being.

## **3. Kyiv Waltz. *Moderate e tranquillo***

It is difficult to write about Slavko because he is my son. It is difficult to be objective. Slavko is a bit of a lazybones, and a horrible coward at that. To tone down my verdict, I'll say that he's not a big coward, but a little coward. Today he started to bawl on a corner, because he was afraid to go to school to take a test in math. Darkness still shrouded the city, the morning frost had locked the streets in its grip, cars with burning headlights flitted past us on either side. Puffs of steam rose from the cars as from samovars. I kissed the tear-wet face of my son, but there was nothing I could say to set his mind at ease. To me mathematics is somewhat of a nightmare, like moving from one apartment to another – horrible and incomprehensible. When I spent the holidays together with Slavko in Irpen, we used to take a nap after lunch, and the hardest thing of

all for me was to wake up after this sweet sleep of one and a half hours. Frequently I woke up in another time – either in the spring of 1945 or in the summer of 1946 – when I was eleven or twelve years of age; my youthful thoughts would stretch themselves lazily and sigh, not understanding that they were now confined in an old shell; there was no link between the sleepy body and the awakening thoughts; my youthful thoughts scampered off to Khreshchatyk Street to jump on a trailer coupled to a goods tram; in those days such trailers used to crawl along Khreshchatyk Street and were eagerly boarded by students and schoolchildren; the trailer I am on takes me into Khreshchatyk Street, into this sad valley of crumbled brick, twisted beams and burned beds. Powerful searchlights have been installed at the Bessarabka city market to pierce straight avenues into the night sky when a fireworks salute bursts over the city. These blue searchlight beams are the only straight lines in mutilated and ruined Khreshchatyk. Anti-aircraft guns have been set up along Khreshchatyk Valley, and the cheerful girls manning them sing the song: "Gunnery, Stalin has issued the order, and our country is calling us...."

Again I drown in a wave of sleep and again I wake up young and full of boyish energy to grab my sheet music and run to Kuznechna Street to my music teacher, Maria Denysenko. Her son dreams of becoming a heavyweight boxing champion, and while we grapple with a new piece of music, he is engaged behind our backs in an overtaxing sparring bout with his "shadow", that is, with no one in particular, with the air, with himself, and his boxing gloves flicker and glimmer like globe-lightning in a thunderstorm. We play Schumann's First Loss and the bronze candleholders on the old piano tremble as if foreboding future partings and losses I haven't the faintest suspicion of as yet. Presently, my childhood life, my travel into the past, is overrun by a merciless wave of reality – my youthful thoughts wilt and die away like short-lived field flowers; I undergo a shift in time; I come to know the names of those whom I have lost and whom I have found throughout these years – and I hear beside me the heavy breathing of Slavko, a big ten-year-old boy, who sleeps with a tank-man's helmet on his head. I have to make the acquaintance of my son all over again. Slavko cannot forgive me for overlooking his future birth and his fondness for military trappings; he is cross with me for having senselessly squandered my gorgeous collection of military helmets – a Soviet helmet of prewar vintage with a special knob on the top, a German one, a Romanian one, an Italian one, and a fireman's helmet with a sharp ridge like the ridge on Achilles' helmet. Slavko has been going to bed in the tankman's helmet for a total of two hundred and fifty-two nights, and all my efforts to take it off his head while he sleeps have so far been in vain. Whatever ruse we have resorted to – scaring him with threats of baldness, meningitis, or dislocation of the vertebrae – it was all to no avail! On the other hand, the soft tankman's helmet is not nearly so harmful, as the plastic hockey player's helmet in which Slavko used to go to bed for the two previous years; the hockey helmet was edged inside with yellow foam plastic which was a wonderful shock absorber, and hardly any passerby could resist giving the ringing plastic a fillip. Lionya was terribly envious and tried to get Slavko to swap the helmet for a highway patrolman's baton, but Slavko contemptuously turned down the offer. In this helmet Slavko played goalie for our "All Stars" soccer team. True, Slavko has no more talent for goal keeping than I for mathematics, but he doggedly insists on being goalie. That's a hereditary trait. He inherited the gene of "goalism" from me, the only difference being that in 1945 we played soccer in Shevchenko Park with an empty corned beef tin can instead of a white ball with black markings. Slavko is a slow and wary boy: by the time he makes up his mind to dive after the ball, and chooses the right place to dive, the ball is already whistling past him into the net. Nonetheless Slavko became the hero of the world's best film on soccer. I will not go into the technical details of how we made the film with the rapid shooting method, but

will only describe what we see on the screen: a boundless field spreading into infinity, a field like a full-scale model of a planet, empty and abandoned, except for two people – the one who kicks the ball and Slavko keeping goal. But the one who kicks the ball is invisible – the balls, one after another, seem to escape the camera's lens and slowly fly towards the goal. They fly in a straight line like geese bound for a warm climate, or, if you prefer, like flying saucers returning to their home base. And the only person, who can hold them on this planet and stop them from flying on till they vanish over the skyline, is Slavko. Now he soars into the air, stretching his hands towards the ball with an unbelievable slowness; now the ball lazily changes its trajectory and lands somewhere to one side; and now Slavko starts his long dive as if he were falling on an air cushion. There are two people on this planet – Slavko and I, against the background of a boundless field, and we have brought to this planet – a human and foolish vestige of civilization – soccer. Once when we were watching this part of the film for the umpteenth time, the lights went off in our district. The giant buildings surrounding our house became black and only the neon lights on Khreshchatyk glimmered in the night sky. Slavko yelled:

“The light's dead! Save the light!”

The silly little thing! He didn't know that light is not a human being and never dies. It's human beings that must be saved.

#### 4. Dreams. *Staccato ed ansioso*

Slavko and I are walking along a railroad embankment somewhere in the vicinity of Khmelnytsky. Why exactly in the vicinity of Khmelnytsky, I don't know. Suddenly I see a train coming down from the sky. It's making a forced landing like a heavy cargo plane under emergency conditions. I hardly have time to pull Slavko aside, for all our movements are terrifyingly slow. We fall into a ditch and that very instant the train lands on the rails with a screech, but the landing strip is too short – a few paces from us the carriages somersault; there's a thunderous grinding of colliding fragments of rails and ties, and the black innards of the engine turn inside out. We hug the ground, more dead than alive, being caught almost in the center of the catastrophe. The following night, however, I have another dream in which objects that are heavier than air *do* fly: it's a rainy day, there is a great congestion of buses as at the bus terminal. Portable wings are being attached to the roofs of the buses in the same manner as a luggage rack is fixed to the roof of a car. The driver starts the engine and the bus easily takes off into the air. The driver waves his cap, satisfied.

I had these dreams before Lionya was taken ill.

#### 5. Odessa Tango. *Sentimento e melodioso*

Lionya was a bit late arriving in Odessa – he was sitting his University entrance exams— and I missed him terribly; while I waited for him to come I wrote a poem dedicated to him:

*A goatee, a rigid swarthy face  
A buckled sword, a cape of purple  
We're on our way, my friend  
To save the Venetian Republic  
Sunk in infamous vice and disastrous dissension*

Of course, he had neither a sword buckled on his side nor a purple cape. On the contrary, he wore old jeans and a T-shirt his father had brought him from the United States. The shirt had the words "All Stars" on it (hence the name of our team), and the blue-and-red silhouettes of two American football players fighting for a ball resembling a muskmelon – the sort you can buy every August on Station 16 at Bolshoi Fontan. The "Venetian Republic" stood for our holiday home where, firstly, the entire staff had quarreled with their director and wrote a complaint to the local inspectors; and, secondly, all the guests – beginning with Slavko and ending with gray-haired Konstantyn Hnatovych – had fallen in love with someone of the opposite sex. Slavko fell in love with Marucha, the daughter of a Spanish émigré, Rosita, a nice-looking woman who limped from a wound received in Madrid in 1936. Marucha and her mother shared a table with us in the dining hall. The dark, crop-haired Marucha, aged five, went around in a shirt and shorts, which made Slavko doubt her female status. Every time we met at the table, Slavko asked Marucha whether she was a boy or a girl. In the end Marucha started doubting it herself and demanded from her mother irrefutable proof of her female identity. But I think that deep in his heart Slavko had no doubts of the fact that sitting before him was a being from some other, mysterious and unknown world. You see, Slavko inherited the genes of amorousness from me as well: my first love flared up in the winter of 1942 in Syzran, with the arrival of a party of children from besieged Leningrad. Many of them had faces that were peculiarly puffed up, as if filled with water. Our class was joined by a slim little girl, Rita Zhebrovska – to this day I remember her first and last name – and I instantly fell head over heels in love with her, and would wait for hours on end in the bitter Russian frost till she came out of school.

When Lionya and I were driving from the railroad station, I drew him a general picture of the love affairs of the guests at the vacation holiday home in Amundsen Street. Boris Sidorovych fell in love with a girl in white jeans, and even Boris Panasovych fell for a girl in blue elastic slacks. I myself could not help but fall in love with the mother of Bondi Rado, the brave center-back of our "All Stars". I took a snap shot of Anna Rado on color film. She was an unusually beautiful red-haired woman with sad gray eyes; as I saw it, this is what Dante's love, Beatrice, must have looked like. Today I always carry with me in my briefcase the color slide of Anna Rado and a small projector. During my long business trips in winter I project Anna Rado's portrait on the wall in lonely provincial hotel rooms. She appears before me lit up by the August sun of Odessa, or by the sun of the Italian Renaissance, or, perhaps, by some other orb of light, smiling mysteriously, distant and inaccessible in her smoky Budapest; I can come up to Anna, touch her red hair, and follow the line of her lips with my finger; and when I turn off the projector I look on the wall with envy for a long time; to me it seems that Anna has not disappeared but has remained in this hotel of this provincial town like a kindly spirit of beauty and gentleness....

As Lionya and I were driving along Amundsen Street, from which Baidarochny Lane forks off, we noticed a building surrounded like a grave by a steel fence painted black and silver. We came to the conclusion that a graveyard keeper lived there. What if sailors were to enclose their houses with fences of anchors and rope, or fishermen with nets, bakers with buns, and accountants with abacuses! In that case, poets would leave the doors and windows of their houses wide open! The thing that was true in the poem I dedicated to Lionya was the black beard he sported; and his face was really smooth and brown, making him look like a young Venetian; on the other hand, Lionya's temperament differed from that of an Italian: he was slow-moving and sluggish (not on the soccer field, of course) and spoke in a low and rather listless voice. When I complained that we were short of drinking water at the holiday home and in the daytime had almost none at all, and that Slavko had taken advantage of this predicament and had stopped

washing himself altogether, Lionya asked tersely and in a business-like way how things were with the air supply. I assured him that everything was all right in this respect, and presently we arrived at the Kovalevsky villa. At the gate the whole soccer team were gorging themselves on ice-cream, which was smeared all over their faces, and greeted the arrival of their center-forward.

## 6. Truisms. *Molto spianato*

In Tolstoy Square I boarded a trolleybus going down Chervonoarmiyska Street. I was on my way to see Lionya. An elderly woman with a heavily made-up face was standing in the bus. Beside her, on the bright metal railing that passengers hold on to, hung a black evening dress on a hanger. The woman was busily explaining to one and all that she was going to take part in a choral concert and had hung up the dress so as not to get it creased, for there were no electric irons at the place where she was to sing and she, naturally, wanted to look neat. As I was saying, I was going to see Lionya. He was already ill by that time. His soccer season in Odessa was over forever, for in his blood there were already cells that are regarded as the harbingers of death. If you take a drop of blood, spread it thinly on a glass slide, then color it and examine it under a microscope, you may see among the usual erythrocytes and leucocytes certain cells bearing the mark of the skull and cross-bones. Standing beside the elderly lady who was going to a concert with her dress, I realized that there were two ways of describing events: one—the straightforward way, when the narration resembles an ingot, heavy and concrete, whose form and size may be measured, and the other – the fanciful and round-about way, when you don't describe the events themselves, but only the form in which they are cast, that is, their direct opposite, or, rather, everything that surrounds the events, like a vine that creeps round a house; you sketch the course of the vine stems and the leaves trembling in the breeze, and study the structure of the vine's main tracks, their intersections and forkings—and you will understand the dimensions and architecture of the house itself. In this way you can describe a glaring light by means of blackness, and the darkest of tragedies by means of laughter. I approach the events I picture in the roundabout way; now I draw near them and now I retreat, afraid of spoiling everything with one careless word, with one petty untruth, afraid of distorting the real dimensions of the events. Once I asked a wise man how I should depict life with all its joys and tragedies. Depict an open book, I heard in response, and there will be everything in it: sorrow and joy, love and hatred.

## 7. Fishes. *Legato*

My shadow creeps along below me like the reflection of an airplane skimming across the clouds below. Though it is not clouds I see underneath, but the bottom of the sea, a sandy desert covered with an undulating delicate netting – the skeleton of the waves, the sketchy outlines of the water surface, the mosaic patterns of the sea, which are altered by the majestic drive of the south wind. Gray bullheads hug the sandy furrows of the seabed, but I swim on paying no attention to them. Very soon the submarine foothills will start, and beyond them the Great Canyon overgrown with seaweed in which schools of bullheads scurry to and fro as in a jungle. My mask gradually fills with water, and from time to time I am forced to surface to pour out the water; and then, seventy meters away, I see the beach covered with porous rocks resembling horses' skulls, and on the beach – the "All Stars" soccer team. A little way from the shore,

Slavko, Maxym, Ilko and Bondi are acting out the Battle of Trafalgar. Slavko mans the *Sussi Swan* flagship – a white inflatable rubber swan, and his opponent engages him on the “Mickey Mouse”, a red mouse that squeaks frantically every time it is squeezed. Lionya sits immovably on the beach, and I’m sure he is writing poems at this moment. His poems are a thousand times better than those written by any of us who have gathered at the Kovalevsky villa, for even now, on every one of his words lies a shadow – not yet realized but palpable – the shadow of death and eternity; in contrast, our words are touched with the cheap rouge of vanity, ostentation, ambition, and emptiness. The captain of our soccer team sits with closed eyes like a blind Homer, listening intently to the rustle of the surf and the squeals of the children. I bid farewell to that chaotic world profusely adorned with sunny tinsels, and dive underwater. Fastened to my trunks is a plastic bag of rosy shrimps I use as bait for the bullheads. In my hand I hold a short fishing rod. Slowly I swim above the Great Canyon, looking into all its nooks. The novel feature I have introduced into fishing is putting the hook baited with shrimp right under the nose of the fish. If it’s a wise fish, it will turn contemptuously away from such a provocative gift; if it’s bold, it will tear the shrimp off without touching the hook; and if it’s foolish, it will swallow the bait – hook, line and sinker. Unfortunately, there are more foolish fish than wise and bold ones, so all I have to do is to jerk the rod and haul the fish to the surface. I string my booty on what our anglers call a *kukan* – a long nylon line with a short stick tied on one end; the line is threaded through the gills of the fish and out through its mouth. On my *kukan*, which is also attached to my trunks, six bullheads trail along; from time to time they start to rebel, wriggling in agony and slapping my thighs with their cold bodies: naive paroxysms of a desire for freedom. But I do not pay them the slightest attention, for I am fully gripped by the hunting lust as I hang poised in the restless salty sky over the Great Canyon, like a black dive bomber, like a harbinger of destruction to this peaceable population grazing on the green submarine fields. On the whole, my hunting is a sheer absurdity, for these miserable bullheads are rejected even by the cats at the holiday home—lazy creatures spoiled by eating meat patties. But I keep on hunting bullheads, oblivious to everything in the world. On the beach Lionya writes a poem about a crane:

*The earth is so hot  
 The earth is so red  
 A little boy is weeping:  
 Don't hit the crane!  
 He presses it to his side  
 He shields it with his hand  
 And weeping, begs:  
 Oh, mister, don't, don't hit the crane*

### **8. Mazurka. *Giojosco con brio***

Jurek Golembiowski arrived at the holiday home. His father is a famous Polish racing-car driver who has taken part in the big auto rallies – the Tour de l’Europe, the Monte Carlo Rally, the London-Sydney Race, the Danube Raid, The Great Safari of Africa, “Vltava”, the Snow Raid of Sweden and other similar racing and endurance dramas, where the actors pay with their lives for their own mistakes and those of others. Jurek Golembiowski arrived in a Polish 125/1500 Fiat painted blue with red and white stripes and provided with four additional square-shaped fog headlights – called “iodines” because of their yellow color – that can pierce through darkness or

fog for a distance of 150 meters. This apparition torpedoes through the night like a flying electric-power station, frightening the drivers of oncoming cars, and it's a long time before sleepy drivers can recover their wits enough to figure out what was the dazzling wonder that they had met on the road. Golembiowski covered the distance between Kyiv and Odessa in three hours; after all, it was child's play compared with his performance at races. We stood by the dust-covered car that was still hot, watching the famous racer undo the safety belts fastening Jurek to the front seat. Jurek is a small-scale replica of his father – short, with a slightly protruding stomach, and serious looking, and he has a snub nose sprinkled with golden freckles – very attractive. I can determine the season of the year by Jurek's freckles: I count the golden spots on his nose and cheeks and if they come close to a hundred, it is sure to be spring out of doors; I am never wrong. The "All Stars" team met the arrival of the new forward with enthusiasm. Jurek brought along a collapsible bicycle and declared he would play soccer only on his bicycle. Unlike Slavko, Jurek does not sleep in a helmet, but on top of the bicycle, which is no end of a headache to his parents; every night they pile pillows, blankets and sheets on the bicycle. Golembiowski is an old friend of mine, and to celebrate his arrival I badly violated our training regimen, even though the "All Stars" were to play an important game against the literary critics' team that afternoon. Golembiowski and I cracked a bottle of cognac and discussed the events of the past week in world motor racing, in particular Jacky Stewart's wins and Jacky Ike's car catching fire. After that Golembiowski went off to catch up on his sleep, while I made myself comfortable in the shade of a branchy plane tree on the edge of the soccer field. There was something vulgar and shameless about that plane tree, in the barkless nudity of its trunk and its fleshy foliage, but I was in the best of moods after meeting my friend and was, you could say, a happy man, so I paid no attention to such trifles. I blissfully watched our team's workout: Jurek flashed across the field like lightning on his bicycle, driving the ball with his foot; Slavko wallowed in a cloud of dust, and curiously enough he always landed on the same side – the left – regardless of which side of the goal the ball was heading for; Ilko was trying to do a headstand without any success; Lionya juggled the ball a half hour at a time, now balancing it on his head, now on the tip of his nose, or lobbing the ball from knee to knee; Bondi was learning how to do a sliding tackle, since that afternoon he was to neutralize Volodymyr Fil who weighed an impressive 129 kilograms; and Marucha stood by the goal, her little coral-colored mouth open wide, as she looked on, spell-bound at all this tomfoolery. Maxym's shorts slipped down, and he scampered off to his mum as fast as he could. I pictured Anna Rado coming to watch the game today, imagined her rooting for our team and then falling in love with me when she saw me punch an incredible, a smashing goal into the critics' net. After this bit of daydreaming, I picked up the *Pszekroj* magazine Golembiowski had brought with him, and began reading the following reminiscences of Dr. Cypryan Sadowski (Skiba) about the Warsaw uprising:

The Germans had knocked the Parasol battalion out of Wola and pushed it toward Mlynarska Street, and then towards the Evangelical graveyard and Okopowa Street. From this side the enemy presented a direct threat to our command and to us. Radoslaw issued his orders as calmly as usual; he was not depressed by the failure.

"Orderly of the *Zoska* battalion, report!"

"Yes, Sir," – a young girl instantly appeared from behind the gate.

"Here is the order for the *Zoska* battalion: have a well-armed platoon dispatched for a counter-attack."



Within a few minutes a platoon of young men, as handsome as they come, was standing by the walls of the Evangelical graveyard. The young second lieutenant commanding the platoon made the report. Colonel Radoslaw knew only too well what he was sending these young men into. He knew what was in store for them. He bade them farewell.

Then he slowly approached each one of the men and looked deep in their eyes. They, too, realized what it meant. It was both an order and a farewell. The platoon commander walked down the ranks and told the colonel something about almost every soldier. At the end of the line they stopped before the last soldier – a boy thirteen years old. A German helmet was tipped back on the child's head. A pistol was stuck in his belt.

"This is our hero," said the platoon commander to the colonel. "Yesterday he got hold of a machine-gun and killed several Germans."

"I hereby promote you to the rank of corporal," said Radoslaw, laying his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Have you any request to make?"

"Yes, Sir. I... I'd like this pistol to be mine."

"Of course, it's yours. After all, you're a corporal. Anything else you want?"

"A good sleep. Sir."

"All right, go and sleep."

"Oh no, I can sleep later, but now I'll go with the platoon."

They left. Like a storm they burst into the graveyard. You would think all hell had been let loose. Grenade bursts, gunfire, shouts from the soldiers, groans from the wounded. And the beat of our hearts, and the hammering in our heads. It all lasted but a few minutes and died away as fast as it had begun. The Germans fled from the graveyard in a panic. And the boys returned. But how few! Only a handful.

They staggered along, maimed, in uniforms stained with blood. Those who could still move carried the wounded. They were carrying their commander, the second lieutenant—already dead. They were carrying the little corporal who was asleep – asleep in eternal rest. He didn't even have time to sew on his corporal's stripes. The corporal was smiling in his sleep.

I finished reading. I jumped to my feet, seized with horror. I had the feeling that the young insurgents were carrying Slavko. Or Jurek Golembiowski. Or Ilko. Or Bondi. Or Maxym. For some reason I didn't include Lionya in the list.

But no – the "All Stars" were on the field in full strength, passionately practicing before the match with the critics.

### **9. Aviation March. *Maestoso con spirito***

I am driving to Borispol. Before the highway patrol checkpoint I refuel at a self-service station, and, after wiping the petrol off my hands with a rag, I get in the car and again fasten the seat belts. At least in a crash you won't fly like a swallow through the windscreen and bite the dust on the concrete highway. My 100 h.p. Opel-Record 1900 rolls onto Borispol highway. As usual after filling up the tank, the engine seems to run better, more gaily, more confidently, and to spur the car on I step hard on the gas and take the middle lane of the highway. The speedometer shows close to 120. I instinctively duck my head every time the car rushes under a viaduct. Above me is the tranquil sky of a late autumn afternoon, and ahead of me lies pagan Borispol, the distant cupola of the airport terminal with its glass, concrete and steel vaults, the slowly revolving radar scanners, the smell of disinfectant in the waiting lounge, the agitation of

meetings and partings, and the nasal voices of the flight announcers. Behind me the sun hangs low over Kyiv, so that the long shadow of my car runs in front, and I cannot catch up with it, hard as I try. The sun blinds the drivers of oncoming cars – their windscreens flare up as if they have been stamped out of sheet gold. In the far distance, to the left, on the edge of the skyline, something seems to be burning, for a large arch of white smoke is rising there, spanning the highway like a gigantic celestial viaduct. Strangely enough, this scene does not alarm me in the least – the arch of smoke looks so serenely white and pure. My heart beats in time with the big-beat music coming from the car's radio, and I can hardly keep from stepping up the speed. I am on my way to meet the Warsaw plane that my wife and Slavko are arriving on, so that explains my happiness and the quickened beat of my heart. I drive under the viaduct of smoke and glance at the rear-view mirror: against the background of purple sky, against the background of celestial fire burning over Kyiv at the moment, the arch of smoke I have just passed looks blood-red. Alarm creeps into my heart, the illusion of harmony and peace comes to an end. The world is now split into two parts. The one in front is a clear and milky wash touched with pure rose, and the azure of early twilight, a world charged with pensive happiness and peaceful contemplation. The other, reflected in the mirror, is ominously purple, peat-brown, evil and restless. These two worlds merge in my mind; grief and happiness mix in my heart, balanced on some unknown scales to be transformed into the calm wisdom of autumn. I escape from the glowing sky into the coolness of early twilight and the yellow medley of fuel tenders on the concrete slabs of the airport. I go out onto the terrace and look at the sky, or rather the part of it spread over the runway. In a few minutes two stars will appear in the sky, rhythmically flickering on and off; they are the landing blinkers of the dark-blue TU-134 passenger airliner of the Polish LOT Airlines. The plane suddenly loses height, and I pray that everything will be all right. Borispol carefully folds my wife and son in its concrete arms; I heave a sigh of relief. Then the plane taxis up to the terminal, steps are wheeled up to the plane and the doors open. There they are—so distant and dear, so long expected and desired! Slavko hops up and down, waving his hands. I look at him worriedly: is he wearing a new helmet or not? My wife blows me a kiss, and my travelers disappear into the clearance building.

At this point I recall the fiery picture in my rear-view mirror. The Polish pilots brought the latest medicine for Lionya on this flight. Madame Jeanguyot, chief of the department of leucosis at the Bernard Institute of Hematology in Paris, sent the medicine through pilots of Air France.

Madame Jeanguyot had been visited a week earlier by the racing driver, Golembiowski, who told her about Lionya's illness.

### **10. Song of the Lark. *Mezzo tempo***

The strangest thing of all is that I had already met Madame Jeanguyot. That was five years ago at an international symposium on leucosis. At that time the whole staff of our laboratory, including me, were doing research on leucosis. We studied the medical case histories of all the patients who had died of the illness within the past ten years. We became bookkeepers of death, impotent registrars of an unsolved mystery, petty clerks of a strange disease. We drew charts, calculated the correlation coefficients, worked out rates of intensity; in other words, we created that mysterious magic of science which gives the illusion of making some progress, but which in reality brought us not an inch nearer to solving the agonizing problem we had taken on. This depressed us, and although at the symposium where I met Madame Jeanguyot they praised us for being the first in the Ukraine to tackle the problem, we had never felt so helpless as we did then.

Lapin was looking for the leucosis virus, Kriukova was studying immunological reactions, Mazurenko had isolated a virus, but man was not susceptible to, it, only mice. Mme Jeanguyot reported on new methods of treatment, Kassirsky employed vynblastin – but all this advanced us only an infinitesimal distance ahead. The closing ceremony of the symposium was followed by a banquet, at which Mme Jeanguyot sang merry song about a lark and a girl in love. Mme Jeanguyot, slim and gray-haired, wore a striking dress and had the air of a French variety star.

Lionya was placed in the clinic of Yefrem Yanitsky. When I was a student I attended Professor Yanitsky's course of lectures on hospital therapy. I have seen a lot of physicians and professors in my time, but, in my view, none better than Yanitsky. One winter day I visited his office. On the desk before him were a number of paper slips – the latest reports on Lionya's blood tests. Yanitsky was smoking. His face, haired at the best of times, was almost blue from tobacco smoke, there were bags under his eyes, and his gaze was heavy and wise. He rose, went over to the window, and looked at the falling snow for a long time. Then, without turning round, he spoke in a dead flat voice:

"Damn being a specialist in hematology! I've wasted my whole life at it. Don't think this is a pose. I'm speaking the truth. It's a hundred times better to be a cutter in a tailor's shop and to be useful in that way. I'm tired of being helpless. The physicians flee from my clinic. I've nothing to offer as advice to anybody. Everyone appeals to me – "Professor, Professor," looking at me with hope, but I... Lionya is doomed. Nothing can save him. I feel as if we were losing a Pushkin or a Shevchenko. And there's nothing I can do about it."

That day Lionya read me his poem:

*You will recall the hedgehog I brought home one day  
And how he scampered around the room  
By then the years, some prosperous, some lean  
Will drift away like January snow  
Forget the name, the voice, the words  
Remember only August as a horseman  
When a rain was in the offing  
The crank and horseman came at night  
And kissed your hands  
Somebody else will find this page  
And in it like a distant flash will flare  
My love for her who did not sleep  
And fed the hedgehog bits of bread*

### **11. Angel Chorus. *Netto e con sonoro***

In the photograph our "All Stars" team looks like a chart of mankind's acceleration from the time of Malthus down to the present day. We are standing holding hands on a wooden boardwalk running out into the sea – the whole team from the smallest to the very biggest. The first is Maxym, the second Bondi, the third Jurek, the fourth Slavko, the fifth Ilko, the sixth Lionya, the seventh Lionya's father who somehow wormed himself into our team, and the eighth and last – me (height 180 cm, weight 95 kg). We are firmly holding each other by the hand, like a living chain of generations, and it looks as if no power could break or divide us. First in the row is little Maxym, and it seems strange to me that he has no angel wings in the picture. I've seen those white-and-golden wings hanging on the wall in his home; it could be that his father, afraid that

the boy might get caught in the multitude of wires stretching throughout the city, forbade Maxym to use the wings. Or maybe there is still another reason of which I am not aware. In any case I have no doubts as to Maxym's angelic origin. His lean body and thin neck carry a big head with a high forehead; he has a pudding-basin haircut. Maxym's face is lit up by big, lively gray eyes that always radiate goodwill towards everything and everybody around him – his father, mother, center-back Bondi, center-forward Lionya, the literary critics, the dogs and the cats, the clouds, the motor ships, the director of our holiday home, the bullheads and shrimps, the cannas wilting under the Odessa sun, and the footballs we mercilessly kick around. Because of his angel status, which has not as yet been spoiled by a secondary education, Maxym does not understand the conflict of opposites underlying life, of light and darkness, the "All Stars" soccer team and the critics' team, of good and evil, heaven and hell. That is why, during the games, he is equally happy over the balls that land in our goal and those that find their way into the net of our opponents. Whenever one of the players of the opposing team asks him for the ball, Maxym immediately complies with a sweet smile, which is just the opposite to what Ilko, say, would do in the circumstances. Ilko would first exchange a few hot words with his adversary, then complain to the referee, then to his daddy and the spectators, then trip him up, and end by pulling a face at him. Maxym is attracted not by victory, but rather by the game itself – a merry carnival when young and old run about laughing as they chase the ball; but there is one thing Maxym cannot comprehend at all – why are they playing with only one ball? It would be far more interesting and much more fun to have a lot of balls rolling about the field.... When Bondi could not cope with Volodymyr Fil, we assigned Maxym to the job of shadowing that 129-kilogram bully; for the time being we abandoned the "zonal" defense and had to fall back on primitive "man-to-man" tactics. The task of Maxym who weighed 27 kilograms was to block Fil, and in case of an emergency, as we instructed him, he was to use the "bodycheck". Maxym coped brilliantly with the assignment: no sooner would Fil get the ball than Maxym dropped to the ground in front of him, blocking the approaches to the goal with his thin body. The dreaded forward of our 'rivals' team—their main scorer, and a ruffian to beat all ruffians – shuffled around Maxym in dismay lest he crush the boy with his elephantine feet. True, after the game Volodymyr Fil got his revenge. Maxym had a red balloon that was blown up till it was half a meter across, so resplendent and taut that it was on the verge of bursting. Maxym was madly in love with his balloon he called Matviy Ivanovych, or Matiusha for short. So one day, at supertime, Volodymyr Fil, who was a bit under the weather as usual, came up to Maxym and said, "Give me Matviy Ivanovych, I'll gobble him up." "All right, take him," said Maxym invitingly, suspecting no harm. Fil took the balloon and sank his fangs into it, like a wolf into the neck of a lamb. Matviy Ivanovych burst immediately – only a holey rag of rubber was left. Maxym's eyes grew even bigger than usual from terror and he burst into bitter, bitter tears—he felt so sorry for Matiusha. From then on Maxym avoided the terrible critic as if he were a pest. To Maxym it seemed that all people were as fragile and delicate as blown-up balloons, and no sooner did some evil person touch them with his teeth than they were no more. After this incident Lionya wrote a poem:

*Darwin was wrong, absolutely wrong  
Look, there's a handsome lanky boy  
With bushy brows above blue eyes  
He doesn't bear resemblance to an ape at all  
A tender girl is whispering 'good night' on parting*

*Does she look like a dinosaur?  
I know that quite a few will disagree with me  
And say: Why then is our neighbor such an outright pig?*

## **12. Song of the Rain. *Limpido e caimo***

Spring came to Kyiv. The weather was warm, and it rained. During the day Lionya and I took a walk in Chervonoarmiyska Street, and then we sat for a long time in a public garden not far from the Roman Catholic Church. We talked about everything under the sun except illness. Then we again roamed the streets of Kyiv, looking round at beautiful girls, sighing and envying those who had everything still ahead of them – both love and parting. Nobody paid any attention to us and surely no one entertained the mad thought that this twenty-five-year-old fellow, who sported a beard and was a bit too stout for his years (by then Lionya had finished undergoing a course of hormonotherapeutic treatment) had embarked on a farewell tour of the city. The warm spring rain enveloped Baikove Hill<sup>1</sup> in a fine netting; the hill was still a long distance away and we didn't think about it; nor did we want to – we were cut off from the hill by the railroad track, the Lybid Creek, the din of the trucks in Gorky Street, by our youth itself, the fresh faces of girls we didn't know, and by something painfully sad, by that flickering hope beyond expression which stays with a man to his last breath. From behind the clouds the sun looked out for a moment, it became sultry, and a bluish smog quivered over the streets: hot air, water vapor and exhaust limes blended into a light mist, and it seemed we were looking at the streets through smoke-tinted glasses. Then the net of rain moved from Baikove Hill to the central part of the city. We roamed through Kyiv discussing paintings and poems, and it was the most sorrowful procession in the world. In the evening the rain did not abate, on the contrary it filled the spaces between the buildings with a merry splash. It rained profusely and unremittingly as in a film studio during the shooting of an episode with simulated rainfall. As I passed Slavko's room I heard his voice. I stopped in my tracks. Slavko stood by the open window, talking aloud, though he was all alone in the room. I listened intently, astounded.

"Karlsson," Slavko said, "Karlsson, come to me and bring the medicine so Lionya will get well, so that no one will ever die. D'you hear, Karlsson?" Slavko was talking to Karlsson who Lives on the Roof<sup>2</sup>.

## **13. Funeral March. *Largo***

Kyiv was the venue of a brass band competition. The weather was sunny, 20 degrees Centigrade. One hundred and ten brass bands from all over Ukraine marched down Khreshchatyk Street, drums and cymbals thumping, horns and trombones blowing, flutes and clarinets shrilling. It seemed as if a mammoth steam hammer had been installed in Khreshchatyk Street, driving concrete piles into the ground. My God, and what a colorful array of uniforms! Red with golden aiguillettes, green with orange epaulettes, black sailors' uniforms, the bright-blue jackets of airplane builders, white jackets with red embroidery, the steel-blue coats with silver bands of the steel workers – yellow, lilac, beige, dark-green, gray.... And every orchestra played its march, and as every march corresponded to a definite color of uniform the march itself

<sup>1</sup> Site of the famous Baikove Cemetery in Kyiv - *Tr*

<sup>2</sup> Principal character and title of the children's book by the Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren - *Tr*.

seemed to have its own color. You got the impression that the orchestra players held in their hands glittering space vehicles, on which they would later fly into the sky; then the earthly trumpets would turn into celestial horns, proclaiming the collision of clouds and the elements, flashes of lightning and eventide flares of solar energy. All Kyiv poured into the streets to watch this miracle that looked more like the day "When the Saints Go Marching In," as the song goes. Children's hearts skipped a beat from happiness, thousands of little soccer teams marched in time with the music of the brass bands that slowly headed for the Central Stadium. The thunder of brass rolled across the sky, marking the route of this unusual procession, of this gigantic generator of joy.

It was on that day that we buried Lionya on Baikove Hill. From the Central Stadium the wind brought snatches of band music to our ears.

#### **14. Winter Finale. *Maestoso***

Winter came, a Great Snowless Winter in Kyiv, an occurrence specialists record once in seventy-two years. During the school holidays the rest of our "All Stars" soccer team that had been such a success the previous year, gathered in Irpen. Bondi Rado – lean as a grasshopper, the staunch center-back and the best technically trained player in our team, lives in Budapest with his mother – the woman who reminded me of Beatrice, and who immediately forgot me and the unsurpassable goals I punched into the net of the critics' team. Jurek Golembiowski, our fastest bicycling forward, lives in Warsaw and to this day mixes up Ukrainian, Russian and Polish into one "proto-Slavonic" language that is the cause of great anguish to his teacher, Mme Jadwiga Bochnacka. His father is now training for the Monte Carlo Rally, tearing along steep and narrow alpine roads – the most dangerous stretch of the course, on which racers get the most penalty points.

After breakfast we went out onto the plain separating the holiday home from the forest. The earth was covered with gray hoarfrost, and it seemed to us that we were walking across the ashy surface of the Moon. Four cosmonauts – Slavko, Ilko, Maxym and I. Shivering from cold, we came up to the bridge spanning the River Irpen. Ice drifted on the surface of the dark-brown stream. A cold mist rose from the water. On one side of the bridge the railing was broken, so I waited till all the cosmonauts had crossed over. Maxym was thoughtfully picking his nose and, as usual, lagged behind. I suppose he will grow up to be an itinerant philosopher, a sort of 20th-century Skovoroda<sup>1</sup>. Slavko and Ilko took off to the trenches, left-over traces of wartime, and lay low, ready to repel Maxym's assault. But Maxym did not even think of assaulting those big fellows; he found himself a nice whip – a flexible willow rod – and walked slowly along, urging on an imaginary flock of snow geese and snapping the grayish earth with his whip. Slavko and Ilko grew fed up with lying in the trench, so they took off with wild shouts into the depths of the forest. There they came across the Little Blue Pond. The little ice-bound pond was lined with red oak leaves. The boys dashed onto the Little Blue Pond and started skimming across it – and all three lost their balance at once and fell on their backs, for the ice proved very slippery. I also stepped onto the ice: the bottom of the pond, covered with brown moss and greenish leaves, showed distinctly through; the ice reached right to the floor of the pond and preserved all its colors, all its curving forms. Spellbound, I walked across the Little Blue Pond, looking down through the ice with all its mysteries. In the middle of the pond I noticed an apple—a little red planet that had dropped into the pond from an unknown sky.

We found some hooked branches and started playing hockey, using them as sticks. Maxym and I played against Ilko and Slavko. Ilko has red hair, the color of fallen oak leaves, and his eyes, the color of dark-green suede, are sly and merry. Red and green is an attractive combination. Ilko is artful and a bit of a windbag who loves to argue whatever the issue. So right off he started complaining about Maxym – who, incidentally, is only half his size – saying that Maxym was breaking the rules of the game and tripping him up all the time. But no sooner would I turn my back on him than he would hook Maxym with the hockey stick and send him sprawling on the ice. Tired of this, I stopped the game and announced to the players of the "All Stars" team that hockey, just like soccer, is a man's game during which you are liable to collide with someone and fall, and that it's not a game for complainers or squealers; from that moment on, I said, I wouldn't have any complaints; on the contrary, those who complained would be immediately punished with a fillip. Lionya, the captain of our team, had once introduced such a rule. The game was resumed in complete silence. After five minutes, however, Ilko couldn't help himself and started mumbling something about Maxym; of course, he made out he wasn't referring to anyone in particular – just talking to himself – but I punished him right away with a fillip on his sweaty head, and passions cooled down somehow. We dashed across the ice hitting the puck, we skimmed and fell, got up on our feet and took off again, and under our feet, right in the middle of the Little Blue Pond, the red apple showed through. I kneeled down and my put face against the cold glittering surface of the ice. The apple, the leaves and grass stalks existed in another world so infinitely far removed from our noisy sport: this world was nearby, but you could not touch it.

I recalled then the last of Lionya's poems:

*We live but twice  
Once in a brilliantly white world  
Therefore we whimper and we moan as to the other we progress  
Then it's a world that's black and red  
The black earth bursts through our skulls  
And grass thrusts forth through our bodies  
We live but twice. God grant that we know love  
That people not be glad when for the black world we depart*

I thought that if a photograph were taken of all those connected with the "All Stars" soccer team, it would come out so large that there wouldn't be enough photographic paper to print it on. There'd be lots of different people besides us, the little soccer team, in the picture: the car racer Golembiowski, Anna Rado, Madame Jeanguyot, Yefrem Yanitsky, the dark-complexioned Marucha, the Polish and French airline pilots, the nurses who felt so sorry for Lionya, and the little corporal of 1944, and many other people. We are standing holding hands; and nothing can break this eternal chain – neither death nor hatred. And we are not just a little soccer team anymore – we represent mankind.

...The next day snow began to fall, terminating the Snowless Winter; the Little Blue Pond disappeared forever, and so did the red apple, and the snowstorm covered the trenches and the field on which Maxym had walked with his whip—the snow geese did come after all, but it was already the last day of the winter holidays, and we, those who were left of the "All Stars" team, boarded a suburban electric train and left for Kyiv.

**Translated by Anatole Bilenko**