

ALEKSANDR BLOK

ON DEATH

TRANSLATED BY PETER FRANCE

More and more often I wander through the city.
More and more often I meet death - and smile
a philosophical smile. But what of that?
It's how I am. I like to know
that death will come for me in his good time.

I was walking on the road beside the race-track.
A golden light dreamed on the piles of gravel,
beyond a thick-set hedge the hippodrome
gleamed greenly in the sun. The stalks of corn
and dandelions, swollen by the spring,
dreamed in its warm caresses. In the distance
the flat roof of the stand was bearing down
on drones and flappers. Little coloured flags
were scattered over the scene. And on the railings
sat people who had stopped to gawp.

I walked along and listened to the horses
galloping over the soft earth - the rapid
beat of the hooves. Then... a shout: "He's fallen!
He's fallen!", the watchers on the railings shouting.
I jumped up on a little stump and all at once
I saw it all - jockeys in their bright shirts
flashing toward the distant finishing post,
and close to them a horse without a rider
racing along, the stirrups flying wildly.
And just behind the tender, curling foliage
of birch trees, close beside me, lay a jockey,
all yellow in the green of the spring corn;
he lay there on his back, turning his face
to the sky's deep caressing blue
as if he'd been lying there a hundred years
at ease, his arms stretched wide, his legs bent up.
People were already running to where he lay.
Far off, sedately, with a flash of spokes,
a carriage moved. The people rushed to him
and lifted him.

And I could see a leg
helplessly yellow hanging there
in its tight breeches. On his shoulders
somehow his head was lolling down. The carriage
drove up to where he was. On the cushions
all tenderly and carefully they laid
the chicken-yellow jockey, and a man
scrambled up to the running board and froze there,
giving support to head and legs,
and the staid coachman turned the horses' heads.
And once again the spokes were slowly turning,
the box, the axles and the wings all shining...

To have so good, so free a death...
All his life he had raced, with just one thought,
to be first past the post. And as they galloped,
his panting horse had lost its footing, he
had tried in vain to keep the saddle steady,
the useless stirrups gave beneath his feet,
and he went flying, jolted from its back...
His head struck backwards on the friendly earth
so full of spring, so much his native place,
and in that moment thoughts flashed through his brain,
only the thoughts he needed. They flashed through
and died. And then his eyes died too.
And dreamily his corpse stared heavenward.

So good, so free a death...

One day I was wandering on the river bank.
Workers were wheeling barrows from the barges
with logs and bricks and coal. The river
was bluer still against the foaming whiteness.
The shirts were flung wide open on the brown
of sunburnt bodies, and the men's clear eyes,
bright with the soul of free and open Russia,
shone sternly from their blackened faces.
And round about them bare-foot kids were playing,

mixing and stirring piles of yellow sand,
and making off with bricks or blocks of wood
or logs and planks. Then they would hide, and you
could see the light reflected off their dirty heels,
and mothers - sagging breasts concealed beneath
their grubby dresses - waited for them, cursing,
and boxed their ears and took away from them
the logs, the bricks, the planks. And dragged it off
into the distance, bent beneath the load.
And back the children came, a merry gang,
and once again they started on their games,
one stealing bricks, another logs...

And suddenly I heard a splash, a shout:
"He's fallen! He's fallen!" they shouted from the barge.
A workman, letting go his barrow handle,
was pointing with his hand towards the water,
a crowd of bright shirts rushing to the place
where in the grass, among the cobble stones
right on the river bank, a bottle lay.
One man carried a boat-hook.

Between the piles
fixed in the water close by the embankment
a man was rocking gently in the river,
wearing just a shirt and ragged gaiters.
Somebody grabbed him, another lent a hand.
Together they dragged him up and laid him there,
a long-limbed body stretched out on the bank,
with river water pouring off him.
Clashing his sword against the stones, a policeman
bent down and laid his ear against the man's
damp chest, and listened carefully, no doubt
to catch the heart-beat. People gathered round,
and every new arrival thought to ask
the same inevitable stupid questions:
when had he fallen, how long was he floating
there in the river, how much had he drunk?

Then everybody quietly moved off
and I went on my way, but listened
while one impassioned worker, who'd been drinking,
authoritatively held forth to his mates,
informing them that liquor is a killer.

I'll keep on walking, while the sun stays out,
and while my head is thick with the fierce heat
and my thoughts flounder helplessly. O heart!
it's you must be my guide, and with a smile
consider death. You also will grow tired,
too tired to bear the kind of merry life
that I am leading. People are not able
to bear the kind of love and hate
that fill my heart.

What I want, constantly,
is to look deep into the eyes of people
and to drink wine, and to kiss women's lips
and fill the evenings with the rage of passion,
when days are stifling and you cannot dream.
And to sing songs! And listen to the wind!