



# REAPER OF LEAVES

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# REAPER OF LEAVES

*For Mark Lipovetsky, with gratitude for  
lessons in loving Soviet literature*

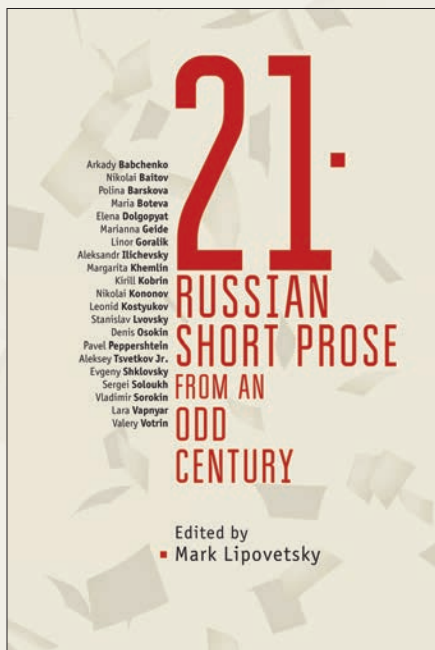
**Where will the starlings make their  
nests, the ones without a nesting box?**

I want to see all the way through him,  
as though he were a frozen January  
frog or a newborn eel, and reacquaint  
us with him, though we'll hardly  
welcome the renewed acquaintance.  
I mean to peer inside that machinery  
of word-production, the machinery  
which goes by the name "Bianci,"

and glimpse what has never been  
seen before. Influenced, perhaps,  
by his belief that hidden, invisible  
life is always more enthralling, more  
impressive, more elaborate than  
what submits to the indifferent eye or  
hasty conclusion, I find it comforting  
to think that nature is not what we  
imagine—nature not in the lofty sense  
of the great and lofty poet but in the  
plain sense of the poet who never  
developed, the clumsy poet.

It turns out that while we're  
floundering in snow and finding ice





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everywhere, underneath, far under, spring not only has quickened but is gathering-growing in earnest. Down in the burrows, in darkness and stench, a new harvest's offspring are crawling, water is pooling, dead plants begin to stir and roots spread to clutch at a new spring.

But where do we look for him, this observer of nature? And how will we recognize him when we meet him? The man who is my subject today did everything he could to cover his tracks, to draw predators and hunters away from his lair—both those who surrounded him back then and those who came later. The first predators and hunters were the kind who by means of flattery, cajoling, torture and forceful personal example pressured and seduced suppliers of words to assimilate, to change their nature for the sake of the things of this world—publishing and publicity, material comfort and a peaceful corner. Although the corners these lower-echelon wordsmiths got were fairly dank, the ceiling dripping into a saucer, drops splashing onto the cat's nose—he fastidiously shaking them off his whiskers, twitching his ears.

Whereas today's predators and hunters—from afar—are we, his readers, vigilant dividers of the wheat from the chaff (the hawk's pursuit, from up high) trying to consign to oblivion, to thoroughly douse in Lethe's sterile, uncreative solution, to judge and separate out the second-rate, the third-rate, the writers hopelessly trying to light a fire under the word. But the task of those writers was simply to stay alive and, if they succeeded, to preserve some small part of their real selves. Whatever that mirage meant to them—"realness"—this real part was

hidden in a desk drawer, pickled in alcohol or—and this was the most effective approach—openly displayed at the hunting grounds to deflect the interest of hounds and predators by its very availability, as though this real part were "carriage":

*One of our forest correspondents reports from the Tver region: yesterday while digging he turned up, along with the dirt, some kind of beast. Its front paws have claws, on its back are some kind of knobs instead of wings, its body is covered with dark-yellow hairs like thick, short fur. It looks like both a wasp and a mole—insect or beast, what is it? The editorial view: It is a remarkable insect that looks like a beast called a mole-cricket. Whoever wants to find a mole-cricket should pour water on the ground and cover the area with pieces of bark. At night mole-crickets will seek out the damp spot, the dirt under the bark. That's where we'll find him.*

Let's take a peek at the dirt under the bark—and see what there is to see.

### Dueling Storytellers

Vitaly Valentinovich Bianci lived for work and drink, and toward the end of his life his voice reached its zenith, became almost a squeak, a mosquito falsetto, while he himself grew heavy and legless, but still he could not stop himself and kept tapping out his tracks on the typewriter with one finger. Contemporaries recall his Bunyanesque strength along with Bunyanesque slowness, the fading aristocratic charm of his gradually swelling face, looking like he'd been attacked by midges. Of these contemporaries, the one most inclined to observation wrote,

Bianci grabbed me by the legs, turned me upside down and held me like that, laughing, not letting me go. Such an insult! It took me a long time to get over it. I wasn't physically weak but this I couldn't handle. Humiliating! The worst thing was his strength seemed rough and way beyond mine. A useless feeling that wasn't quite envy and wasn't quite jealousy consumed me. Eventually it passed. Bianci was simple and decent. But the devil had done his work . . .

But the devil had done his work.

The ethnographer of *belles lettres* repeats the phrase several times; it seems she likes it, it helps her diagnose the decline of her subject—a strong and benign creature warped by his own interpretation of affairs. Enter Evgeny Lvovich Shvarts, a dwarflike man with a head the shape of an egg, hands shaking from Parkinson's (sometimes he would leave the telegraph office with nothing accomplished, his hands shook so much that tracing a caterpillar of letters with the capricious rusty nib turned out to be impossible, with the line of people behind him simmering, irritable-resentful). A dwarf who utterly lacked the gift of forgiving and forgetting, of looking the other way, probably the most perceptive and fastidious member of a generation covered in spiritual sores. (And that's a sanitary way of putting it. When I try to imagine that generation's spiritual condition taking visible-palpable form—oh, what it would look like! . . .) Shvarts was venomous (from a monstrous capacity to feel wounded) and recklessly brave—he was one of those rare “valued persons” who refused in the fall of 1941 to be airlifted from Dystrophy City (the name is one of Bianci's later witticisms). By the time winter arrived, they had

to drag him out of there, psychotic, demented from hunger.

Photographs of him, and especially photographs of him in the company of women, stand out sharply in the general current of the time—the angular, mocking, delicate faces glow like seashells lit from within. Evgeny Shvarts was painfully large-spirited: in the “inventory” of his notebooks, he does not name the friends who made denunciations, scandalmongered, went into hysterics, blackened reputations. When you look at the minutes of official meetings where his friends acted the fool, attacking him as a talentless saboteur, and compare them to Shvarts's memoirs about these same people, you stop short in amazement—did he actually forgive them? Or did he cut off all feeling for them?

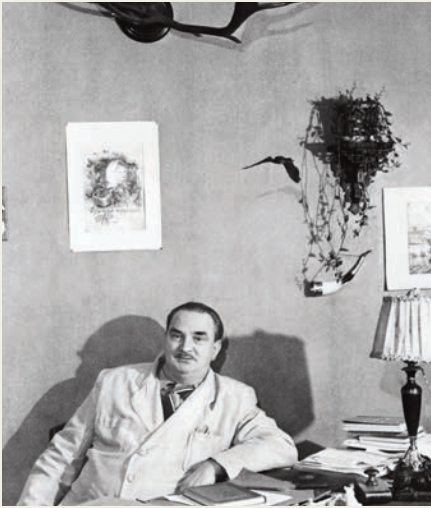
Like all the jokesters who in those golden years made careers rhyming, crowing, meowing and bleating for *The Siskin* and *The Hedgehog*, Shvarts was a libertine; he took his own and his companions' sins allegorically. Hence his choice of genre—after all, we're talking about fairy tales and fabulists. Hence also the refrain: the devil had done his work. Shvarts was interested—and following him, so are we—by the allegory of the human soul's duel with the devil of the times, the pitiful stratagems used by those who inhabited those times as they tried both to placate and to hide from the devil. Bianci, soon after his second stroke, said to Shvarts, “If you want to know what it's like when it hits you, just put on those glasses.” On the table was a pair of black glasses, the lenses made the world look dim. Black light enveloped the fabulist Bianci toward the end. The fabulist Shvarts witnessed and grimly confirmed this.



Heavy artillery at the Gates of Leningrad.

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## How to Translate White

Bianci's grandfather, an opera singer, had the last name Weiss. This gentleman, at his impresario's request, translated himself from German into Italian to go on tour in Italy—the sound, the tune, changed, but the color remained. The sound was now weightless, lofting upward like a bubble—a bubble floating over a white, white field with just the tracks of small, tired paws along the edge: Take a guess, children, who can it be?

A young boy, darting up and down, passes dioramas of mounted animals—under the silver hoof of an agitated, dead-eyed deer with flared nostrils (if they really shoot it up, does it make the taxidermist's job harder?) sprouts a dead mushroom. For some reason these little glass mushrooms are pinned all around the animals' legs—so we won't have any doubts, just recognize these forms of non-life with a guilty tenderness. Above the deer's head they nailed a woodpecker stuffed with shavings. Observe how the bird's eye knows no fear—it is open to the world and keenly focused.

The mounted animals were hideous, the aging Bianci recalls near the end of his story. "How can we bring them back to life?" old man Bianci asks in his child's voice. What you need are some good, strong words. "What you need is poetry": that unwieldy, cardboard word he carried around all his life, to no avail.

Before he discovered ornithology, the young boy was driven on another sort of hunt—soccer. He played for the storied clubs Petrovsky, Neva, Unitas. He was the winner, incidentally, of the Saint Petersburg season trophy for 1913. The season trophy—in April the wind from the Neva fills with the scent of dun-colored, crumbling ice.

Rostral beauties raise to the wind their buoyant, erect nipples.

Tall for his age, wearing gaiters, with a sweaty forehead and gritty, salty hair, the adolescent Bianci pursues the ball: his breathing grows sharp, with the occasional pleasurable ache.

His father, a famous ornithologist, the very one after whom the young boy trotted along the large-windowed, empty halls of the museum, did not approve of soccer—he wanted to see in his son a replica of himself, naturally. His son obediently enrolled in the natural sciences section of the Department of Physics and Mathematics at Petrograd University, but he never finished, since things finished of their own accord.

## Cold-blooded?

Almost a graduate, almost a poet, almost a scholar. "People touched by fire are sensitive, fragile." Those touched by fire, Shvarts observed, not wanting to observe anything, and those abandoned on the ice.

Now what should/shall I do? Stop dead? Go quiet?

Encased in ice, shall I pretend to be ice? Take the form of the coming winter? Freeze over, like a frozen dream: in the white-pink night the river Fontanka flows like tomato juice from a broken jar into a puddle, when actually it's your hands covered in blood. And I, who up to this moment have accompanied you at a delicately maintained distance and with respect-ful aloofness, bow down to lick those idiotic bloody smashed huge fingers. Fighting off drunken surprise, you sternly say, "That doesn't give you the right to act familiar."

Yes—I think I'll pretend to be ice.

Bianci himself, by the way, writes

magical (that is, good and strong and useful) words about turning to ice. He spits on the end of his stubby pencil and writes not poetry but the diary of a naturalist. The onset of autumn's chill he depicts either as torture or as the act of love, there's no distinguishing:

*The winds—reapers of leaves—tear the last rags from the forest. Having accomplished its first task—undressing the forest—autumn sets about its second task: making the water colder and colder. Fish crowd into deep crannies to winter where the water won't turn to ice. Cold blood freezes even on dry land. Insects, mice, spiders, centipedes hide themselves away. Snakes crawl into dry holes, wind around each other and go still. Frogs push into the mud, lizards hide under the last bark left on the tree stumps and enter a trance. Outside there are seven kinds of weather: it tosses, blows, shatters, blinds, howls, pours and sweeps down from the sky.*

To become a motionless snake curling up against other motionless snakes, to hibernate—that is my task today. The leaf-reaping season is one you can survive, can overcome, only by metamorphosis: by changing your nature so you become part of the background, be it snow, dirt or night.

### **A Tunnel and a Certain Someone**

How can you make out white against white? Bianci hoped he could see it, while hoping others couldn't see him. Now for perhaps his most terrifying story.

#### **Mr. Fox and Mousie**

*Mousie-mouse, why is your nose so black?  
I was digging in the dirt.  
Why were you digging in the dirt?*

*I made myself a burrow.  
Why did you make yourself a burrow?  
To hide, Mr. Fox, from you!  
Mousie-mouse, I'll keep watch at your door!  
Oh, I've a soft bed in my burrow.  
You'll have to eat—then out you'll sneak!  
Oh, I've a big cupboard in my burrow.  
Mousie-mouse, I'll dig up your burrow!  
Oh, I'll run down a little tunnel—  
And off he goes!*

It's likely Bianci was arrested by organs of the Soviet secret police more often than most of his literary colleagues—a total of five (5) times. Five (5) times in a row he repeated the drill: the awful wait for the inevitable, the awful relief when the awful event itself begins, the humiliation, the hopelessness, the hope, the despair, the weeks and months of paralysis, the miracle.

A local historian who got access to the archives reports:

While digging around in the files of the former archive of the regional committee of the Soviet Communist Party, I came across an interesting document completely by accident—a summary of charges written up on February 23, 1925, by the Altai office of the State Political Directorate to bring to trial a group of Socialist Revolutionaries living in Barnaul and Biisk. (All of them had arrived “from Russia,” as they said back then.) It included several references to Vitaly Bianci. They are: “In November 1918, there arrived in Biisk one Belianin-Bianci Vitaly Valentinovich, an SR and writer for the SR newspaper *The People*, who was active in the Committee on Education and who around that time, fearing Kolchak's reprisals, changed his real name

*The winds—reapers of leaves—tear the last rags from the forest. Having accomplished its first task—undressing the forest—autumn sets about its second task: making the water colder and colder. Fish crowd into deep crannies to winter where the water won't turn to ice. Cold blood freezes even on dry land. Insects, mice, spiders, centipedes hide themselves away.*

*Opposite page, from top: Vitaly Bianci in his office; Evgeny Shvarts.*



from Bianci to Belianin. The said Belianin-Bianci, upon arriving in Biisk with his wife, Zinaida Alexandrovna Zakharovich, stayed at the apartment of local SR and member of the Constituent Assembly, Liubimov Nikolai Mikhailovich. It was through him that Belianin-Bianci began to make contact with the local SR organization . . . He entered the employ of the Biisk Agricultural Board as a clerk of the second class . . .”

In 1921 the Cheka in Biisk arrested him twice. In addition, he was imprisoned as a hostage for three weeks.

In September 1922 V. Bianci received word of pending arrest and, on the pretext of a business trip, left for Petrograd with his family.

At the end of 1925 Bianci was again arrested and sentenced to three years’ exile in Uralsk for belonging to a nonexistent underground organization. In 1928 (thanks to constant petitioning by, among

others, Gorky, who approached Cheka chief Genrikh Yagoda) he received permission to move to Novgorod, and then to Leningrad. In November 1932 came another arrest. After three and a half weeks he was released “for lack of evidence.” In March 1935 Bianci, as “the son of a non-hereditary nobleman, a former SR, an active participant in armed resistance to Soviet power,” was again arrested and sentenced to exile for five years in the Aktiubinsk region. It was only thanks to E. P. Peshkova’s intervention that his sentence was commuted and Bianci was freed.

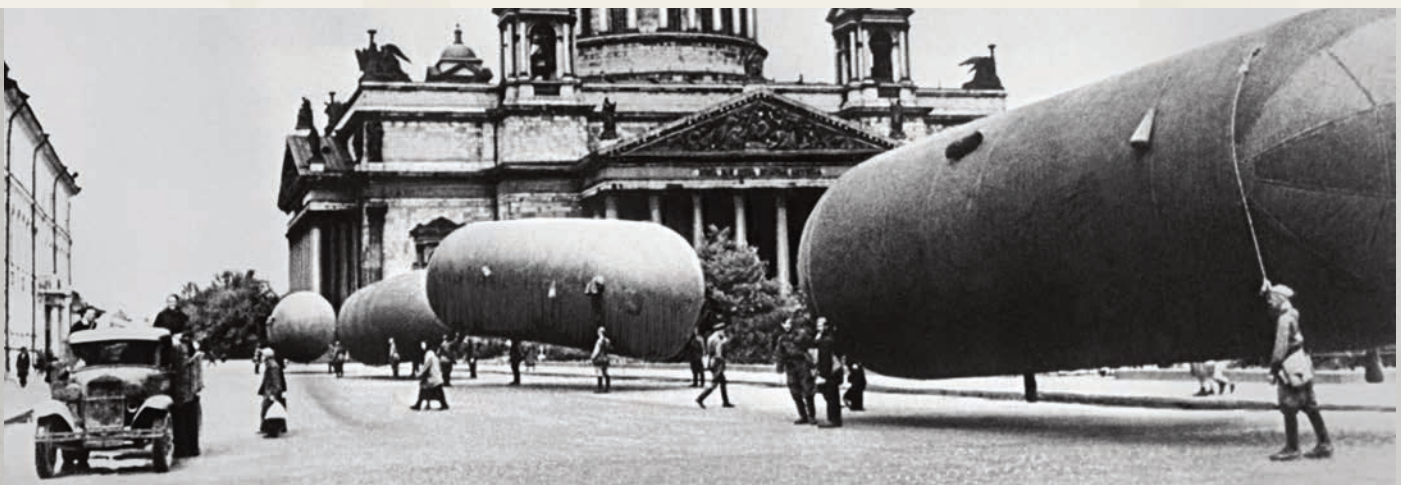
The bulk of his fairy tales are about the hunt and the chase, about deadly danger and struggle.

But what’s most striking is his tone: not a trace of sentimentality, no sympathy for the preyed-upon or the fallen. Each death, each act of cruelty, belongs to the natural order.

*If you kill a bird with a metal ring on its leg, remove the ring and send it to a tagging center. If you catch a bird with a ring, write down the letters and numbers stamped on the ring. If not you but a hunter or birdcatcher you know kills or captures such a bird, tell him what he needs to do. No pity for anyone; the hunter is always justified in his desire to master and seize and sacrifice a life—and to turn it into a mounted specimen. Every victim gets his chance to escape, says Bianci, and it’s a sorry fool who doesn’t see it and grab it.*

### “A Gust of Wind”

At first all of these words and shadows of birds and fish, and the giant with the voice of a munchkin, were indistinct forms inside me, and when they first took hold, they looked like this (autumn had just begun, and in the Amherst dusk you could hear all around the moaning of owls arrived *en masse* from God knows where):



Barrage balloons, used to defend against low-level aircraft attack, St. Isaac’s Square, Leningrad.

*The massive-awesome Bacchus Bianci  
Thrusts fat fingers into suspicious cracks in the  
Frozen earth, and from there (from where)  
He harvests miracle-solace-refuse-sense;  
Topsy sober timid bombastic, he knows each  
Root-tangle, and he writes, he almost pounces.  
The stilling forest thrusts the wind's damp shag  
Down his throat—the black box of  
Night sky on the verge of winter.*

*Ready for first frost are you now yourself?  
Ready for first frost are you now an owl?  
Ready for first frost are you now a widow?*

Here the author dozes off, and the owls, too.  
The author dreams of the other author's poem:

*The wind roared up the riverbank,  
Drove waves upon the shore—  
Its furious whistle gave a scare  
To a red-throated loon.*

*It knocked the magpie from the grove,  
Whirled and dropped into the waves—  
There it took a giant gulp  
And choked, and down it dove.*

**Why Vitaly Bianci  
went to Leningrad  
during the  
blockade, how he  
ended up there—  
the explanations  
we have don't  
make sense.  
Either he went to  
bring food to his  
Leningrad friends,  
or he was trying to  
get food from his  
Leningrad friends.**

The thing he did best was  
tracking birds.

#### Notes of an Ornithologist

Why Vitaly Bianci went to Leningrad during the blockade, how he ended up there—the explanations we have don't make sense. Either he went to bring food to his Leningrad friends, or he was trying to get food from his Leningrad friends (both versions astonish), or he went just to have a look, or to make an appearance, or to punish himself. When he returned, he lay down and did not get up.

That is what his diary entries show:

*April 6: Stayed in bed.*

*April 7: Stayed in bed.*

*April 8: Stayed in bed.*

Nevertheless, everything he had heard/seen he well described and well (meaning, up to the day of his death) concealed. I am prepared to



Above, from left to right: Burying victims of Leningrad's siege, Volkovo Cemetery; siege of Leningrad, January 1943.





state that among those who visited during the blockade, the naturalist-dilettante Bianci turned out to be the most well-qualified, perceptive and methodical: what was impossible to look at, he examined and categorized. Nevertheless, his notebooks—fully published now—have not, of course, found their reader.

They've winged past us like yet another repulsive salvo from 1941—one today's readers try to duck as frantically as their unfortunate predecessors tried to duck bombs on Leningrad's streets, so visible and familiar to the German pilot.

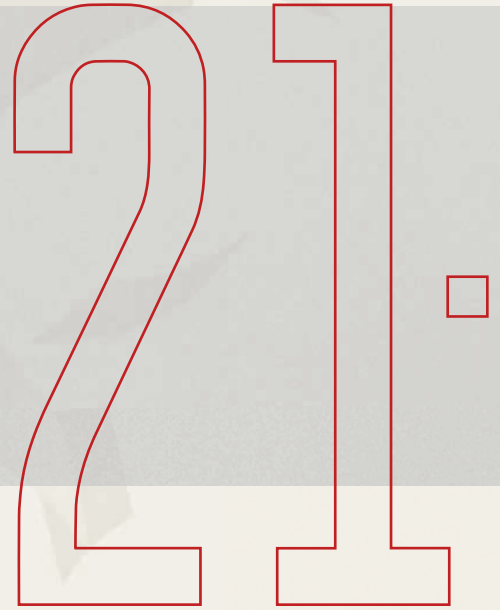
Bianci—an unsuccessful/unrealized scholar, but a scholar nonetheless—organized his impressions under phenomenological rubrics: blockade style, blockade humor, blockade consciousness, blockade smile, blockade language, blockade cityscape, blockade femininity, blockade Jews. This is to say that in two weeks he understood what we have yet to formulate for ourselves: that the blockade was a unique civilization with the characteristic features of all human societies.

*This is how they smile here.  
This is how they barter here.  
This how they fear, and no longer fear.*

This is how they joke here, and it is this subject—which is curious and handy for our script—which brings them together: Bianci quotes Shvarts as one of the best blockade humorists. Since we know that Shvarts left the city in December, we may conclude that his jokes lingered in the city into spring—they didn't melt (in general, nothing in that city melted).

Yes, here they meet—two utterly different fabulists of the Leningrad scene, two magic wizards and didacts. The one had a bear and a dragon, the other had fireflies, titmice, shrews—all metaphors for blockade life. The writers themselves were transformed by the era into clowning tall-tale-tellers forced to camouflage their brutal and piquant observations about human nature.

Shvarts the blockade comic eventually produced the most important book we have on the phenomenon of "Leningrad literature of the mid-Soviet period"—his "phone



**It turns out the blockade was the main event of Shvarts's life in Leningrad. He kept being swept toward the blockade winter that followed the Terror.**

*Above: Leningrad residents clearing snow and blocks of ice from Nevsky Prospekt (1942).*

*Opposite page: View of Nevsky Prospekt when Leningrad was under Nazi siege.*



book” (variously, his “inventory”), a *Kunstkamera* of spiritual deformities and disasters. Among the era’s victims is a cardiologist listed under the letter “D,” a man with hideously burned hands. His patient Shvarts, seeing those two pink, tender, shining hands, reflects: “During an experiment an oxygen tank exploded, the door was jammed, and he forced open the burning panels with his bare hands. They were so badly burned that he almost lost them. He was considered one of the best cardiologists in the city. He was beaten to death for reasons far removed from science, but whether there were parts of his soul as deformed as the skin on his hands—I could not discern.” That’s precisely what he wanted to do—to discern, to see inside.

It turns out the blockade was the main event of Shvarts’s life in Leningrad—though the whole time he meant, he prepared, to speak about the Terror, his main conscious task. He kept being swept toward the blockade winter that followed the Terror—he could not control himself, couldn’t help speaking about it. For him that winter illuminated and explained everything

and everyone, whereas the recent purges had made everything confused and unclear. Almost every topic, every figure, every character in his “phone book” reminds him of that winter, drags him back there. He remembers roofs, bombs, bomb shelters, the faces and conversations of his neighbors in the dark and, most of all, his failed intention to write about it, right then and there, in the wake of words just spoken—his failed play, in which he tried to render his strongest impression, the endless blockade night: “We descended to the bottom of the cage-like staircase and stood in a corner like a coven of witches, while the planes and their mechanical-animal whine would not relent, they circled and circled and with every pass dropped bombs. Then anti-aircraft fire—and when it hits its mark, there’s a dry pop, and the smooth tin bird flaps its tin wings.” Only in this avian metaphor will their visions of the blockade coincide: Bianci calls his blockade notes “City Abandoned by Birds.” For him that’s a euphemism, dialect for a curse, his “no” to hope.

Shvarts’s notebook was a lamentation for his play that never quite appeared.

But through the notebook’s scattered, roughly stitched-together human plots the blockade emerges as the true home for the soul of the Leningrad intellectual who lived through the ’30s. In other words, it was hell, the only vale where the coward-soul, slave-soul, traitor-soul, the soul in constant pain, never and nowhere not in pain, might abide—those Leningrad writer-survivors who, in front of the witnessing Shvarts, go out of their minds (then later, reluctantly, taking their time, come back into their minds), faint noiselessly as leaves on exiting the torture chamber of Party hearings, and continually hone their skill at slander. Shvarts buried, escorted off and lost one by one all his titans, his cherished enemies (nothing matches the white heat of his elegiac and erotic hatred-passion for Oleinikov). All he saw around him now were Voevodins, Rysses and Azarovs and other small fry wiped out by the century: these characters were relieved to find themselves in the blockade—in what he called, narrowing his eyes, a *benign* calamity, the kind that kills you without implicating you.





Can we say that for Bianci, too, the blockade was a benign calamity?

Apparently there is a phenomenon called “precipitous birth”—the infant bursts into the world through a mother who has had no time to get accustomed to that degree of pain.

The precipitous blockade of someone who visits the city suddenly and briefly is the precipitous birth of knowledge. He sees everything—not accustomed to the situation, not fused with it, he does not experience the slow, daily disappearance of meaning and God. On the wings of an airplane (which he immediately compared to a bird, Bianci was incapable of doing otherwise), he is transported to a place of blank, universal desolation—until then, he had only heard of it from the pitiful, apologetic letters of his dying Leningrad friends.

Shvarts’s interest in the blockade was people, preferably the extras (the big stars for the most part nimbly made tracks to the east during the warm months of the year): children, old ladies, custodians, luckless local officials and spies, almost none of whom would live until spring.

But Bianci, hounded from childhood by the word “poetry,” is interested in metaphors, namely, hybrid monsters: birds and fish fused with planes, fireflies joined with phosphorous metal in the night sky. How do fragments of blockade existence camouflage themselves, what forms do they assume? Here the blockade becomes a natural phenomenon; here emerges a kind of *Naturphilosophie* of the blockade world. From the very start everything looks unnatural; the plane’s wings, unlike those of Bianci’s bluethroats and starlings, are rigid—and the plane isn’t even a bird but a fish, an *aerial fish*. Monstrous specimen!

All this he tries to discern in the blockade city—and can’t find the direct words for (for which reason, most likely, he subsequently falls ill), so he reconstitutes it metaphorically. The dead city revives, acts like it’s animate—like a museum diorama: *The city spreads out around us farther and farther. Slowly, as in a slow-motion film, slowly people wander. Not people: monkeys with noses. Especially the women: boney faces, caverns for cheeks—unbelievably sharp, elongated noses . . .*

As it was with that childhood diorama, it’s impossible to make out what’s dead and what’s alive, what is a monkey with a nose and what a deformed blockade soul caricatured by dystrophy.

On returning from the dead city, he wrote down a terrible little poem; as often happened with him in moments of agitation, the words spilled out:

*Unbearable: the cold like a wolf,  
A growing list of deprivations,  
A hammer going in my temples:  
There people are dying, dying in vain!*

### **Wagtails. The Language of Birds.**

On returning from the dead city, he slept as long as he could, scribbled something in his secret diary and again took to walking deep into the forest and just standing there—his eyes sometimes open, sometimes shut, listening hard, sniffing, studying. The world Bianci inhabited is alien; his words are obscure and hence alluring, and they unsettle us even as they speak to us:

*Bluethroats and brightly colored  
stonechats are appearing in the wet  
bushes, and golden wagtails in the  
swamps. Pink-chested fiscals (shrikes) are  
here, with fluffy collars of ruff feathers, and*



Illustration by Alexei Radakov  
for *War of Petrushka and  
Stepka-Rastrepka* by Evgeny  
Shvarts (1925).

*the landrail, the corncrake, the blue-green roller have returned from distant parts.*

So tell me—what are all these creatures? What do we picture as we follow the phrase “the pink-breasted shrikes,” what sort of impossible, absurd marvel? It is perfectly obvious—perfect and obvious—that the author invented them all. Displayed before us is some other planet born from the imagination of a man who could not come up with a persuasive reason to inhabit his own.

Wagtails? What do you mean, wagtails? No, you’re wrong, Bianci insists, that’s us living on our planet, in our swamp—alien, blind, speechless, bereft.

We (meaning I) are not familiar with the bluethroat (bird of the thrush family, sparrow *genus*. Depending on classificatory approach, may, along with all varieties of nightingale, be ascribed to the family of flycatchers. In size somewhat smaller than the domestic sparrow. Body length about 15 cm. Weight of male is 15–23 grams, female 13–21 grams. Spine light brown or gray-brown, tail feathers reddish. Throat and crop blue with reddish spot in the center; the spot may also be white or bordered with white. The blue color below is edged first with black, then with red half-circles across the breast. Tail red with black sheen, middle pair of tail feathers light brown. Throat whitish, bordered by a brown half-circle. Bill black, legs black-brown.)

Whatever the throat and crop look like, when you descend into this prose, you descend into an invented, crafted world. The further you proceed into that crow-blue and green-azure language, the less you hear the waves striking University Embankment, and the farther all the hysteria-hypocrisy

of the city—with its *literati* stinging one other and raising glasses of poison, and its ultra-literary sidewalks—fades into the distance. Bianci remains, only Bianci, stepping into the slush of the frozen swamp, listening with his whole being—here you have the voices of birds, you have the voices of fish. That very same fairytale dunce who, scrambling to hide from the tsar, ran into a grove and suddenly understood the language of the forest. “I hope to create an explanatory dictionary of the language of local worlds.” A language not of this world! In periodic self-imposed exile in the village of Mikheev in the Moshensky region, where he landed-hid during that first winter of the war, he does not stop collecting the magical words that protect him: a hidden, invisible language, a collection of real words—his article of faith.

### A Happy Ending

*Our forest correspondents cracked the ice at the bottom of a local pond and dug up the silt. In the silt there were a number of frogs who had gathered there in heaps for the winter. When they pulled them out, they looked like pure glass. Their bodies had grown extremely brittle. Their tiny legs would snap from the slightest, faintest touch, and when they did they made a light ringing sound. Our forest correspondents took several of the frogs home with them. They carefully warmed up the frozen juvenile frogs in their heated rooms. The frogs came to life bit by bit and began hopping across the floor.*

And off they go! ■

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