

It looks like I'm one of the fortunate few
 With leisure enough to ask myself
 If all the invisible beings watching my life
 Hail from Moscow. And I'll have time this evening
 To ask my friend her honest opinion
 And to weigh her answer.
 And then it's time to ask if the life she's living
 Pleases the beings she imagines watching
 And whether they watch from duty or sympathy.

Life would be easier, I'll say, if our audience
 Were a single person, like Dante's Beatrice.
 Just the thought of her silently looking on
 From across a stream was enough to brighten a path
 Otherwise forlorn. But how can Dante be sure,
 My friend will ask me, that he knows her wishes?
 What if they don't all show in her face, or only show
 As if veiled by mist, and he sees them darkly?

Carl Dennis, *Practical Gods* (2001)

**Reprinted with permission of the poet, Carl Dennis.
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TVMen: Tolstoy*

I. CHAMBRE

A curiously tender man and yet
 even after their marriage he
 called his desire to kiss her
 "the appearance of Satan."

*Her in right profile against the light, all the music in the room streams
 toward the blue frosty window.*

Desire, the trees are rags. Desire, streaks of it
 scalding the fog. This is not what I meant (Lev thinks wildly) –
 words from a bad play, embraces that knock the lamp,
you are so young! And this fog.

*His bedroom on a March morning as cool as pearls, close-up on rustling,
 coats or shawls.*

II. VIE

Lev had no death wish.
He was on a grand voyage through the colors of men and women,
crime, madness and courage.
Never mind! many a drunk coachman advised him.
So what!
That's how it is! Life! Well all right!
No need for better!
You'll live you'll see!

*Lev continues to pour out sacks onto the zinc table, to run his fingers
through grain after grain, handful after handful. No night ever has
enough.*

The horse named Délire, that was not enough.

III. CORPS

In sex (he told her) the mind evaporates and suddenly
the body is there,
just the body with its reaches.
He was more or less repulsive to himself,
the little satin parts especially.

*Her alone at a midnight table in the zala, leaning over the manuscript with
her shortsighted eyes, shadow of her bent arm huge on the wall.*

IV. GUERRE

Take notes with your eyes, he advises. War is clear and intricate.
Lev watched a shell fall
near a boy and girl
playing horse in the street.

Boy and girl hold their arms about one another and fall down together.

Gambling wildly that night at the officers' club, Lev loses
his ancestral home
whose central section,
with balconies and staircases,
has to be rebuilt on the property of its new owner
a few towns away.
Back from the war, Lev announces Emancipation to his serfs
who craftily
reject the plan.

The two remaining sections of his house,
now connected by empty space and a string of bushes,
have a raw feel.

*Riding back at evening to his very quiet house he smells spring in the lime
trees, he is alone.*

V. FAIM

When famine struck Lev moved like a lion
from village to village, passing out bread,
sleeping in a bare hut. Over two years he
set up 248 soup kitchens. Asked
this vast country,
Are we our brother's keeper?

(The government considered confining him to a fortress
which he would have loved.)

Now he was ploughing and the world was watching.
Tolstoy Ploughing (by Repin) shows him
hunched over the brown earth, seeing no flesh.

His calves as sleek as otters.

VI. ÉTUDES

When he got round to rebuilding the middle of his house
Lev made a school.
The state schools outraged him.
In place of rote memory and flogging Lev declared
the free child.

DO AS YOU LIKE reads a sign over the door.

Sometimes all forty small scholars spent the night
in his study.
No books, he just talked. A lot about war.
"Hardly anyone could help shuddering
at his descriptions," a student recalls.
At noon they went out to throw snowballs.
"Who can knock me down?" cried Lev springing over the snow.
Later he referred to this time as "the clear glade."
In some ways he was never so happy.
Sitting on the porch with his students in the evening
Lev told of his desire
to divide up his land

and live like a peasant.
 "Like you," he said.

Small scholars sit silent, regarding the lively colors of his night.

VII. LIBERTÉ

Lev could lift 180 lbs. with one hand.
 In a mowing mood he would go out to the fields
 and borrow a scythe from whoever looked most tired.
 Yet a peasant can mow for 6 days on end
 eating rye bread and sleeping
 on cold ground (he mused).
 "They know how to die,"
 he often said as if it were a freedom.
 Freedom for landowners came from another direction.
 The railroad: 16,700 versts of track by 1876.
 Destroys the woods, pulls people from labor,
 and raises the price of grain! these were Lev's
 objections. Yet
 from a sad local event
 came the exposed skull bone
 of Anna Karenina.

Night plasters leaves against the station door.

VIII. NUIT DIVINE

Live a true life?
 His *Diary for Myself Alone* records misgivings.
 "After an enormous dinner with champagne
 (the Tanyas all dressed in white) our cart
 pushed its way toward the forest for a picnic,
 through crowds of peasants coming back
 exhausted from work."
 Alone at night Lev could feel the divine fire pouring out his eyes.
 But the day with its doors, accusations, tomatoes,
 with its rosemilk breasts of girls,
 rain, cold, mad people and heartburn –
 wore him to the nub.
 "Whist in the evening and a feeling of shame."

Him writing then laying down his pen, hot smell of onions pervading the room.

At the end of the first notebook of *Diary for Myself Alone*
 a sheet of paper is pasted in. Her hand:

"I copy this sad diary of my husband.
 So much here is - may God forgive me -
 unjust cruel untruthful dragged up invented.
 Let good people read how he was when he courted me.
 'I am in love as never before ... I shall shoot myself' etc.
 Then he was My Lev."

*Back of her head, in the lamplight the old scarred wooden table looks red
 as a cockscomb.*

IX. FAMILLE

When the dark people began appearing
 he spoke to everyone. Door ajar.
 Then it eased his heart to go down to the river
 and chop wood with the peasants.
 How the family depressed him.
 "With their joys - music furniture shopping!"
 On bad days he threw a few things
 into a knapsack and left for America.

*Looking for mushrooms, he mumbles coming back through the zala a few
 hours later.*

X. VOUS AUTRE

With the diaries he forced into her
 a jealousy that licked her insides
 for 47 years.
 They both wrote every night.
 "Immortal wheat for the New Life!" begins his entry for June 2, 1897.
 And next door,
 with her little red reading glasses perched on her nose,
 "If I could kill him then make another man exactly like him,
 I would do it joyfully!"

Her leaving a doorway, light leaving a doorway.

XI. MORT

There is a dog howling in Russia's soul.
 "Imagine him in his coffin, he lies like a smooth stone
 at the bottom of a stream,"
 said Gorky when Lev died.
 Spring snow fell shyly from a light red sky.
 Four thousand peasants turned up carrying a banner
 YOUR GOODNESS WILL NOT DIE OUT AMONG US DEAR LEV.

An old man whom no one knew spoke briefly.
The coffin was lowered.
Policemen knelt.
There are lamps we cannot light here
(we can light them later).
What have we prayed for if not for this?
Slowly silently the crowd moved away.

Voronka River goes on caressing its banks.

X11. FIN

“Indeed the pit bears iron.”
After his death she dreams of roses and bones.
To have put roses under his feet! her grief
was beyond telling - to put something
there where he would fall, or a bit
of arnica for his bruises -
God's meal is a buried meal.

Fields alone, fields standing, all night they are there. Men of old have sung.

Anne Carson, *Men in the Off Hours* (2000)

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