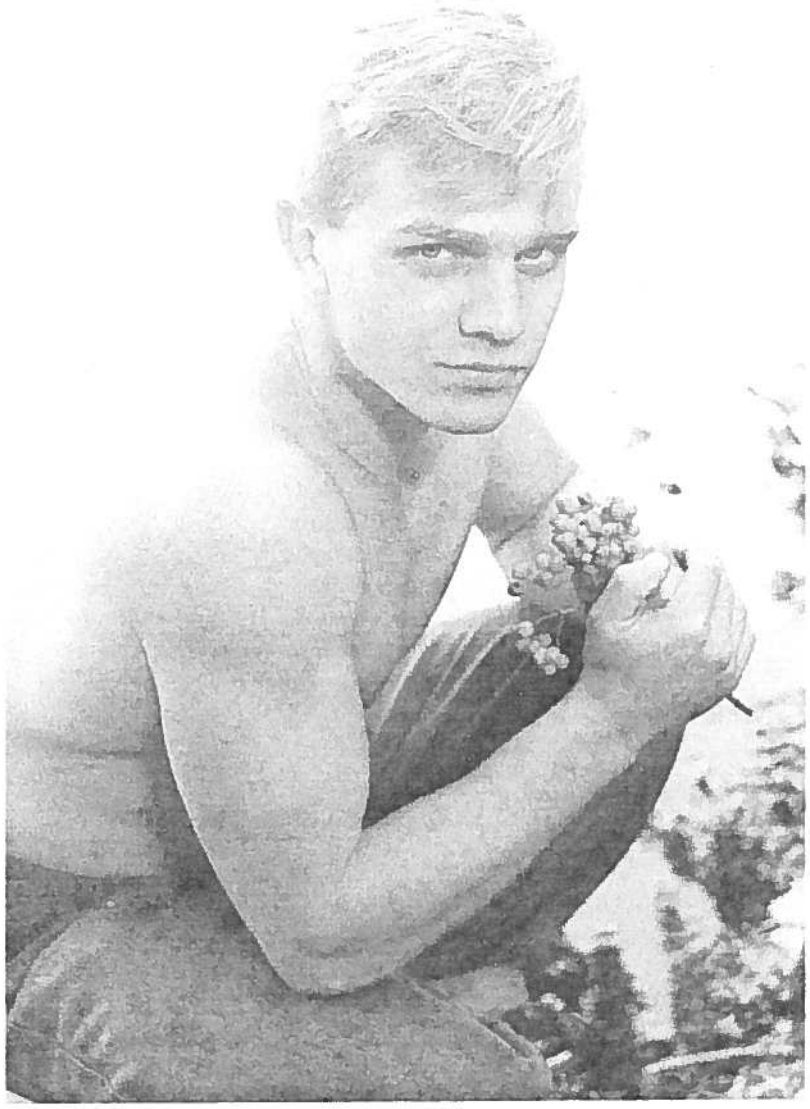

Photo by Vitaly Lazarenko, Moscow, 1995.

OUT OF THE BLUE

Russia's Hidden Gay Literature
An Anthology

Edited by Kevin Moss

Introduction by Simon Karlinsky

Gay Sunshine Press
San Francisco

Mikhail Kuzmin (1872–1936) as a young man.

AUNT SONYA'S SOFA

[Kushetka teti Soni, 1907]

Translated by Michael Green

MIKHAIL KUZMIN (1872–1936) is the first major figure in gay literature in Russia. He was a symbolist poet, prose writer, and playwright. Openly gay, he wrote the first celebrations of gay themes in Russian literature, and the first Russian coming-out novel, *Wings* (1907). Presented here are two of his stories, two cycles of poems (a total of 22 poems in all), and selections from his poetry cycle "Alexandrian Songs." These are followed by two essays on Kuzmin's life and writings.

I dedicate this true story to my sister

IT'S SO LONG that I've been standing in the storeroom, surrounded by all kinds of junk, that I have only the dimmest recollections of my young days, when the Turk with a pipe and the shepherdess with a little dog scratching itself for fleas, hind leg raised, all of them embroidered on my spine, gleamed in bright hues—yellow, pink and sky-blue—as yet unfaded and undimmed by dust; and so what occupies my thoughts now more than anything else are the events to which I was witness before once more being consigned to oblivion, this time, I fear, for ever. They had me covered in a wine-colored silken material, stood me in the passageway and threw over my arm a shawl with a pattern of bright roses, as if some beauty from the days of my youth, disturbed at a tender tryst, had left it behind in her flight. I should add that this shawl was always carefully draped in exactly the same way, and if the General, or his sister, Aunt Pavla, happened to disturb it, Kostya, who had arranged this part of the house to his own taste, would restore the folds of the soft, gaily-colored stuff to their former exquisite casualness. Aunt Pavla protested against my disinterment from the storeroom, saying that poor Sophie had died on me, that someone or other's wedding had been upset because of me, that I brought the family misfortune; however, not only was I defended by Kostya, his student friends and the other young people, but even the General himself said:

"That's all prejudice, Pavla Petrovna! If that old monstrosity ever had any magic power in it, sixty years in the storeroom should have taken care of that; besides, it's standing in the passageway—no one's likely to die or propose on it there!"

Although I wasn't very flattered to be called a "monstrosity," and the General proved to be less than a prophet, I did at any rate establish myself as part of the passageway with the greenish wallpaper, where I stood faced by a china cabinet, over which hung an old round mirror, dimly reflecting my occasional visitors. There lived in General Gambakov's house, in addition to his sister Pavla and his son Kostya, his daughter Nastya, a student at the institute for young ladies.

* * *

The next room had a westerly outlook, and so admitted into my passageway the long rays of the evening sun; they would strike the rose-patterned shawl, making it glint and shimmer more enchantingly than ever. At this moment, these rays were falling across the face and dress of Nastya, who was sitting on me; she seemed so fragile that I almost thought it strange that the ruddy light did not pass through her body, which hardly seemed a sufficient obstacle to it, and fall on her companion. She was talking to her brother about the Christmas theatricals, as part of which they were planning to put on an act from "Esther"; it seemed, however, that the girl's thoughts were far from the subject of the conversation. Kostya remarked:

"I think we could use Seryozha too—his accent is pretty good."

"Are you suggesting that Sergey Pavlovich should play a young Israelite girl—one of my handmaidens?"

"Why that? I can't bear *travesti* roles—not that he wouldn't look good in a woman's costume."

"Well, what other part is there for him to play?"

I knew at once that they were talking about Sergey Pavlovich Pavilikin, young Gambakov's friend. To me he had always seemed an insignificant boy, in spite of his striking good looks. His close-cropped dark hair emphasized the fullness of his round, strangely bloodless face; he had a pleasing mouth and large, pale-gray eyes. His height enabled him to carry off an inclination to plumpness, but he was certainly very heavy, always collapsing onto me and scattering me with ash from the *papirosy* with very long mouthpieces which he smoked one after another; and nothing could have been more empty-headed than his conversation. He came to the house almost every day, notwithstanding the displeasure of Pavla Petrovna, who could not abide him.

After a silence the young lady began hesitantly:

"Do you know Pavilikin well, Kostya?"

"What a question! He's my best friend!"

"Is he? . . . But you haven't been friends all that long, have you?"

"Ever since I began attending university this year. But what difference does that make?"

"None, of course. I just asked because I wanted to know. . . ."

"Why do you find our friendship so interesting?"

"I would like to know whether one can trust him. . . . I'd like to . . ."

Kostya's laughter interrupted her.

"It depends what with! In monetary affairs I wouldn't advise it! . . . All the same, he's a good friend, and no skinflint when he's in funds—but you know he's poor. . . ."

Nastya said after a pause:

"No, I didn't mean that at all—I meant in the matters of feeling, affection."

"What nonsense! What on earth do they put into your heads at those institutes? How should I know?! . . . Have you fallen for Seryozha or something?"

The young lady continued without answering:

"I want you to do something for me. Will you?"

"Is it to do with Sergey Pavlovich?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, all right—though you'd better not forget that he's not much of a one for wasting time on young ladies."

"No, Kostya, you have to promise me! . . ."

"I've said I'll do it, haven't I? Well?"

"I'll tell you this evening," announced Nastya solemnly, looking into her brother's uneasily shifting eyes, eyes which, like hers, were hazel flecked with gold.

"Whenever you like—now, this evening," said the young man unconcernedly, as he got up and readjusted the rose-patterned shawl which the girl had released as she too rose.

But no ray of the evening sun gleamed on the tender roses because Nastya had gone into the next room and taken up a position at the window, as impenetrable to the ruddy light as before; she stood there gazing at the snow-covered street until the electric lights were lit.

* * *

Today I simply haven't had a moment's quiet—such comings and goings all day, and all through my passageway! And what's the point of all these amateur theatricals—that's what I'd like to know. A swarm of young misses and young men—lord knows who they all are—bustling about, yelling, running, calling for some peasants or other to saw through something or other, dragging about furniture, cushions, lengths of cloth; it's a mercy they didn't start taking things from the passage—why, they might even have carried off my shawl! At last things quieted down and a piano began to play somewhere far off. The General and Pavla Petrovna emerged cautiously and sat down beside each other; the old maid was saying:

"If she falls in love with him, it will be a family misfortune. Just think

of it—a mere boy, and worse than that—with no name, no fortune, absolutely nothing to offer! . . ."

"It seems to me you're very much exaggerating all this—I haven't noticed anything. . . ."

"When did men ever notice such things? But I, for one, will fight against it to the bitter end."

"I shouldn't think things will ever reach the point where you have to be for or against."

"And he has absolutely no morals at all: do you know what they say about him? I'm convinced that he's corrupting Kostya too. Nastya's a child, she doesn't understand anything," fulminated the old lady.

"Well, my dear, and whom don't they talk about? You should hear the gossip about Kostya! And it wouldn't surprise me if some of these fairy tales didn't have a grain of truth in them. Only age can protect you from gossip—as the two of us ought to know! . . ."

Pavla Petrovna blushed crimson and said curtly:

"You do as you wish; at least I've warned you. And *I* shall certainly be on my guard—Nastya is my blood too, you know!"

At this moment Nastya herself entered, already dressed in her costume for the play—pale blue with yellow stripes, with a yellow turban.

"Papa," she began breathlessly, turning to the General, "why aren't you watching the rehearsals?"—and without waiting for a reply she rushed on, "What about lending our emperor your ring? It has such a huge emerald!"

"You mean this one?" asked the old man in surprise, showing an antique ring of rare workmanship, set with a dark emerald the size of a large gooseberry.

"Yes, that one!" answered the young lady, not at all disconcerted.

"Nastya, you don't know what you're asking!" her aunt intervened. "A family heirloom which Maksim never parts with, and you want him to let you take it to that madhouse of yours where you'll lose it in no time? You know your father never takes it off his finger!"

"Well, it's only once or twice, and even if someone does drop it, it's sure to be somewhere in the room. . . ."

"No, Maksim, I absolutely forbid you to take it off!"

"You see, Aunt Pavla won't let me!" said the old General with an embarrassed laugh.

Nastya stalked out crossly without the ring, and Pavla Petrovna set about comforting her brother, who was upset to see his daughter disappointed.

And again there was hubbub, rushing about, changing of clothes, leavetaking.

Mr. Pavilikin remained in the house a long time. When he and Kostya came into my passageway it was nearly four o'clock in the morning. Coming to a standstill, they kissed each other good-bye. Sergey Pavlovich said

in an embarrassed voice:

"You don't know how happy I am, Kostya! But I feel so uncomfortable that this should have happened today of all days, after you had let me have that money! Lord knows what awful things you might think. . . ."

Kostya, pale, his eyes shining with happiness, his hair rumpled, again kissed his friend, and said:

"I won't think anything at all, you idiot! It's simply coincidence, chance—something that could happen to anyone."

"Yes, but I feel awkward, so awkward. . . ."

"Don't say another word about it, please—you can let me have it back in the spring. . . ."

"It was just that I needed those six hundred roubles desperately. . . ."

Kostya made no rejoinder. After a little while he said:

"Good-bye, then. Don't forget you're going to "Manon" with me tomorrow."

"Yes, of course! . . ."

"And not with Petya Klimov?"

"O, *tempi passati*! Good-bye!"

"Close the door gently, and tread softly when you go past Aunt Pavla's bedroom: she didn't see you come back, and you know she doesn't much care for you. Good-bye!"

The young men embraced once more; as I said before, it was nearly four o'clock in the morning.

* * *

Without taking off her rose-trimmed fur hat after the ride, Nastya sat down on the edge of the chair, while her escort kept racing up and down the room, his cheeks faintly pink from the frost. The girl was chattering gaily away, but underneath the bird-like twitter there lurked a certain unease.

"Wasn't that a glorious ride! Frost and sunshine—that's so nice! I adore the embankment! . . ."

"Yes."

"I love to go horseriding—in the summer I disappear for days on end. You've never visited our place at Svyataya Krucha, have you?"

"No. I prefer to ride in a car."

"You do have bad taste. . . . You know, don't you, that Svyataya Krucha, Alekseyevskoye and Lgovka are all my personal property—I'm a very good match. And then Auntie Pavla Petrovna is going to leave me everything. You see—I'm advising you to think things over."

"The likes of us mustn't be getting ideas above our station!"

"Where do you pick up these gems of shop-assistants' wisdom?"

Seryozha shrugged and continued his steady pacing back and forth. The

young lady made one or two more attempts to start up her twittering, but each time more halfheartedly, like a broken toy, until she at last fell silent; when she spoke again, it was in a sad, gentle voice. Without taking off her hat, she sank back in the chair; as she spoke in the darkened room, she seemed to be addressing a plaint to herself:

"How long it's been since we put on our play! Do you remember? Your entrance. . . . What a lot has changed since then! You've changed too—I have, everyone has. . . . I didn't really know you then. You've no idea how much better I understand you than Kostya does! You don't believe it? Why do you pretend to be so slow on the uptake? Would it give you pleasure if I came out and said what is considered humiliating for a woman to say first? You're tormenting me, Sergey Pavlovich!"

"How dreadfully you exaggerate everything, Nastasya Maksimovna—my dimness of wit, my pride, and even, perhaps, your feelings for me. . . ."

She stood up and said almost soundlessly:

"Do I? Perhaps. . . ."

"Are you going?"—he was suddenly alert.

"Yes, I have to change for dinner. You're not dining with us?"

"No, I'm invited somewhere."

"With Kostya?"

"No. Why do you ask that?"

She was standing by the table with the magazines, reluctant to leave the room.

"Are you going to him now?"

"No, I'm leaving straight away."

"Are you? Good-bye, then! And I love you—there!" she added suddenly, turning away. No word came from him in the darkness which hid his face from her, and she threw in laughingly (or that was the effect she intended), "Well, are you satisfied now?"

"Surely you don't think that's the word I would choose?" he said, bending over her hand.

"Good-bye. Go now,"—the words came from her as she left the room.

Seryozha turned on the light and began walking in the direction of Kostya's room, whistling cheerfully.

* * *

The General was pacing about holding a newspaper; he seemed very upset about something. Pavla Petrovna was following him about the room in a rustle of black silk.

"You mustn't let it upset you, Maksim! It happens so often these days that you almost get used to it. Of course, it's dreadful, but what can we do about it? It's no good kicking against the pricks, as they say."

"It's no good, Pavla, I just can't reconcile myself to the thought of it:

all that was left was his cap and a mess of blood and brains on the wall. Poor Lev Ivanovich!"

"Don't think about it, brother! Tomorrow we'll have a funeral mass said for him at Udely. Put it out of your mind, think of your own well-being—you have a son and daughter of your own to worry about."

The General, red in the face, sank down onto me, letting fall his newspaper; the old lady, nimbly picking it up and placing it out of her brother's reach, made haste to change the subject:

"Well, did you find the ring?"

The General again displayed signs of uneasiness:

"No, no, I haven't. That's another thing I'm terribly worried about."

"When do you last remember having it?"

"I showed it to Sergey Pavlovich this morning on this very sofa; he seemed most interested. . . . Then I dozed off—when I woke up it had gone, I remember that. . . ."

"Did you take it off?"

"Yes. . . ."

"That was ill-advised of you. Quite apart from its cash value, as a family heirloom it's priceless."

"I'm sure it means some misfortune is in store for us."

"Let's hope that Lev Ivanovich's death is misfortune enough for the time being."

The General heaved a deep sigh. Pavla Petrovna pressed on relentlessly:

"Did Pavilikin take it with him, I wonder. That's just the sort of thing I'd expect of him."

"Why should he have? He had such a good look at it—and he asked how much a dealer would give for it and all that."

"Well, perhaps he just took it."

"Stole it—is that what you're trying to say?"

Pavla Petrovna had no chance to reply: the conversation was interrupted by Nastya, who came rushing excitedly into the room.

"Papa!" she cried, "Sergey Pavlovich has proposed to me; I hope you're not opposed to the idea?"

"Not now, not now!"—the General waved her away.

"And why not? Why put it off? You know him pretty well by now," said Nastya, reddening.

Pavla Petrovna rose to her feet:

"I have a voice in this matter too, and I am opposed to the match under any circumstances; at the very least I demand that we postpone this discussion until Maksim's ring is found."

"What has papa's ring to do with my fiancé?" asked the girl haughtily.

"We think Sergey Pavlovich has the ring."

"You think he has committed a theft?"

"You could put it like that."

Nastya turned to the General without answering her aunt, and said:

"And do you believe this fairy tale?"

Her father said nothing, redder in the face than ever.

The girl again turned to Pavla:

"Why are you standing between us? You hate Seryozha—Sergey Pavlovich—and you invent all sorts of nonsense! And you're trying to set father against Kostya too. What is it you want from us?"

"Nastya, don't you dare, I forbid you! . . ." said her father, gasping for breath.

Nastya paid him no attention.

"What are you getting in such a rage about? Why can't you wait until the matter is cleared up? Can't you see that it's a matter of principle?"

"I can see that where my fiancé is concerned no one should dare even to suspect such a thing!" shouted Nastya. The General sat in silence, turning redder and redder.

"You're afraid—that's the truth isn't it?"

"There can only be one truth, and I know what it is. And I advise you not to oppose our marriage—or it'll be the worse for you!"

"You think so?"

"I know!"

Pavla gave her a searching look.

"Is there any reason for this hurry?"

"What a nasty mind you have! Kostya!"—Nastya threw herself toward her brother, who had just entered, "Kostya darling, you be the judge! Sergey Pavlovich has proposed to me, and father—Aunt Pavla has him completely under her thumb—won't give his consent until we clear up this business about his ring."

"What the devil is all this?! Do you mean to tell me you're accusing Pavilikin of theft?"

"Yes!" hissed the old lady. "Of course you'll stand up for him, you'll even redeem the ring. There are a few things I could tell about you too! I can hear the doors squeaking from my room when your friend leaves and what you say to each other. Be grateful for my silence!"

Never in all my life have I heard such an uproar, such a scandal, such a torrent of abuse. Kostya banged with his fist and shouted; Pavla appealed for respect to be shown to years; Nastya screamed hysterically. . . . But all at once everyone fell silent: all the voices, the noise and the shouting, were pierced by the strange animal-like sound emitted by the General, who, silent to this moment, had suddenly risen to his feet. Then he sank back heavily, his face between red and blue, and began to wheeze. Pavla threw herself toward him:

"What's the matter? Maksim, Maksim?"

The General only wheezed and rolled the whites of his eyes, now completely blue in the face.

"Water! Water! He's dying—it's a stroke!" whispered the aunt, but Nastya pushed her aside with the words:

"Let me see to him—I'll undo his collar!" and sank down on her knees before me.

* * *

Even the passageway was not free of the pervasive smell of incense from the old General's funeral mass; the sound of chanting too could be faintly heard. More than once I had the feeling that they were singing a farewell to me. Ah, how close I was to the truth!

The young men came in, deep in conversation; Pavilikin was saying:

"And then today I received the following note from Pavla Petrovna"—and taking a letter from his pocket, he read it aloud:

"Dear Sir, for reasons which I trust there is no need to go into here, I find your visits at this time, a time so painful to our family, to be undesirable, and I hope that you will not refuse to comport yourself in accordance with our general wish. The future will show whether former relations can be resumed, but in the meantime, I can assure you that Anastasia Maksimovna, my niece, is fully in agreement with me on this matter. Yours, etc."

He looked inquiringly at Kostya, who remarked:

"You know, from her point of view my aunt is right, and I really don't know what my sister will have to say to you."

"But, I mean to say, all because of such a little thing! . . ."

"Is that what you call papa's death?"

"But it wasn't my fault!"

"Of course it wasn't. . . . You know, not long ago I read a story in the 'Thousand and One Nights': a man is throwing date stones—a perfectly harmless occupation—and happens to hit a Genii's son in the eye, thus bringing down on his head a whole series of misfortunes. Who can predict the results of our most trivial actions?"

"But the two of us will still see each other, won't we?"

"Oh certainly! I shan't be living with the family any more, and I'm always delighted to see you. What's between us is a bit more permanent than a schoolgirl crush."

"And doesn't have to be afraid of date stones?"

"Precisely. . . ."

Seryozha put his arm round young Gambakov, and they went out of the room together. I was never to see Pavilikin again, as I was to see little of any of the people I had grown familiar with during my final period of grace.

* * *

Early next morning some peasants came tramping in; "This one here?" they asked Pavla Petrovna, and set about lifting me. The oldest of them lingered, trying to find out if there was anything else to be sold, but on being assured that there wasn't, he went out after the others.

When they turned me on my side to get me through the doorway, something struck the floor (the carpets having already been taken up in anticipation of summer). One of my bearers picked up the fallen object and handed it to the old lady, saying:

"Now there's a fine ring for you, ma'am. Someone must have dropped it on this here couch, and it must have gone and rolled down inside the covers."

"Good. I'm very much obliged to you!" said Aunt Pavla, turning pale; hastily dropping into her reticule a ring with an emerald like a large gooseberry, she left the room.

June, 1907

Mikhail Kuzmin (1872–1936)

VIRGINAL VICTOR: A BYZANTINE TALE

[Devstvennyi Viktor, 1914]

Translated by Michael Green

To Arthur Lourier

THE HOLY CHURCH commands us to take pity on orphans. In the imperial city of Byzantium a vast orphanage had been established; for both private individuals and public institutions it was held to be a great desert in the eyes of the Almighty to nourish and rear infants deprived of their parents. If nothing can restore to a child its mother's tenderness, at least there is always the possibility of providing it with food, shelter and instruction in Christian conduct.

Although Victor, son of Timothy, had lost his parents, he had no need to have recourse either to private or state charity, since he had inherited a commodious house, one of the city's finest libraries, three dozen house slaves, splendid stables and a sizeable country estate in the north. The sister of his deceased mother, the widow Pulcheria, took up residence in his household, not in the capacity of a guardian, as the youth had already reached his nineteenth year, but merely so that the management of the household should be under a woman's eye. She established her quarters in the upper part of the house, next to the private chapel, from which the gulf and the shore of Asia Minor could be seen in the distance. In her rooms there was always semi-darkness and the whisper of holy discourse. Priests in soft slippers slid noiselessly by, stopping at the drawn door-curtains to murmur a prayer, the servants were elderly women, yesterday's incense hung in the air, and through the window, instead of sea and boats, one saw painted branches, beasts and birds. Sometimes hermits would come, hulking fellows dressed in goatskins, as simple-hearted and dirty as shepherds.

Victor often listened to their tales. Pulcheria, as befitted a Christian matron, did not expose her sparse, graying hair, swathing it with a fillet sewn with the modest amethysts and emeralds of widowhood: by family tradition the widow belonged to the "Green" faction. Her face was immobile from the thick layer of ceruse, rouge and stibium, her puffy yellowish fingers were unable to bend from their multitude of rings, the folds of her robe, smoothed out by her slaves, seemed carved of stone, her neck and waist were festooned with crosses, incense pouches, rosaries, miniatures of saints, fragments of holy relics and amulets; in one hand she held a scarlet kerchief fringed with gold lace, in the other a sprig of lavender, which from time to time she would raise to her whitened nostrils to rid herself of the

goat smell of some hermit. Now and then her eyebrows would quiver, and then the maid attending her would drive a somnolent fly from her mistress's face or hands with a fan. Beside her stood her household priest, explaining to her in an undertone the words of the anchorite, who mingled barbarian expressions with Greek ones, waved his arms about, sighed and stammered.

Afterwards Victor would dream of sand and trees, birds and deer similar to those patterned on his robe, for it was on cloth that he most frequently saw these things. Of course, in the nearby countryside birds flew, poppies and burdocks flourished, but the youth did not go any further from Byzantium than the Monastery of Olympus, whither each year in all kinds of weather he would make a pilgrimage in memory of the five holy martyrs of the thirteenth of December. Their house had a small garden, but the pious gardener had given all the bushes and trees the form of Christian emblems: the barberry bushes were clipped in the shape of hearts and anchors, the limes resembled fish with their tails pointed upward (as is well known, their very name is made up of the first letters of the following words: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour), while close by the apple tree, the boughs of which had been lopped in the form of a cross, were placed two poles, painted in red lead, representing a spear and a stave.

The most Christian city of Byzantium wafted its fragrance to the Creator, not like a lily of the field, but like a precious oil, poured into a vessel wrought by cunning goldsmiths, stooped in their dark cells, their short-sighted eyes accustomed to envisioning sky, flowers and birds in an improved, a more brilliant, a more fantastical guise than nature, that guileless simpleton, presents them to us.

The widow Pulcheria had long been yearning for monastic life, but she was reluctant to leave her nephew until he had given the house a new young mistress. But here her intentions met with an unexpected obstacle, and the good woman had to recognize that even virtue itself can present certain inconveniences. There was no shortage of brides. Although Victor had no official post and no rank, his wealth and beauty made him a desirable husband and son-in-law for all. But the youth himself felt no inclination to marry and to all appearances his heart was free; consequently he responded evasively to all attempts at matchmaking. Enquiries made among servants and friends revealed no love affair to tie the young man, so that the lady Pulcheria didn't know what to think. At last she decided to have a frank talk with him.

When Victor entered the woman's quarters, the widow was holding in her arms a white long-haired cat, a gift from the Archbishop of Antioch, which she was combing with a small gilt comb. Having spoken of the allegedly deteriorating state of her health, of household matters, of the recent storm, Pulcheria said:

"Well, nephew, have you thought about which of the maidens I have proposed to you you would prefer as your wife, so that I may begin discussions with her parents?"

"I have, lady Pulcheria."

"Well, and on whom has your choice fallen?"

"I have decided to wait awhile yet."

"But why wait? You're a grown man, I'm growing weaker with every month, it's time to think of the future."

"My heart feels no inclination toward any of them."

The widow angrily removed the resisting cat from her knees and exclaimed:

"What nonsense! Surely, nephew, you don't imagine that life is a pastoral novel or the 'Ethiopian Tales'? What's this 'inclination of the heart' you're talking about? If a girl is worthy and of noble birth, and you can rely on me to see to that, it follows that the blessing of Heaven and the Church will be on your house."

But to all his aunt's arguments, Victor kept repeating only one thing—that he didn't want to marry. Pulcheria listened to his reply, knitting her brows, as far as the ceruse permitted her to, and at last announced enigmatically:

"Remember that there is no secret that will not be revealed in time."

"I have nothing to hide, I assure you."

"So much the better," replied his aunt, and with that put an end to the conversation. Afterwards, when her nephew had left, she heaved a sigh and sent for the household confessor.

On the Tuesday of the fourth week in Lent, the priest received a country gift: a clay pitcher of honey and two dozen red-cheeked apples in a golden dish. The widow wrote briefly that she begged him not to disdain her modest gift and to accede to her request. By Friday, in all likelihood, the mission had already been accomplished, since the confessor appeared in the lady Pulcheria's quarters, and as soon as the customary greetings had been exchanged and the servant sent away, said:

"He is pure in the sight of God."

A faint mocking smile parted the lady's painted lips.

"Can that be? Victor—a virgin?"

"Your nephew is a stranger to carnal sin."

"And my suppositions have proved groundless?"

"The Lord be praised, my lady, you were mistaken."

Seeing that Pulcheria expressed no particular joy, but sat frowning and motionless, the confessor went on soothingly:

"You should thank heaven for such a mercy, for without grace from above, it is hard to keep one's purity, as the young master has kept his."

Seeing that Pulcheria maintained her gloomy silence, after a pause the priest began cautiously:

"Of course, my lady, this calls for further investigation. What has not

been subjected to temptation cannot be considered virtue, anger may find no external expression, but nonetheless a man who has anger in his heart remains privy to that sin."

To this the lady listened attentively.

"Perhaps your nephew is too timid, has little knowledge of the world, his passions sleep that they may with greater fury gain possession of him when it will already be too late. We might put his resolve to the test."

"What can we do?"

"Neither you nor I, my lady, is likely to be experienced in these matters, but I too have a nephew, whom I have kept at a distance because of his unworthy behavior, but it would seem that the ways of fate are inscrutable. Even a muddy path sometimes leads to salvation. He has a wide acquaintance in the circles needful to us, and I am confident that he and his lady friends will willingly take upon themselves the task of putting the young master to the test."

It was clear that the priest's plans were to Pulcheria's liking; she turned the conversation to the empress, whom she had seen at a service, remarked that in her next conversation she would not fail to mention him as a loyal and devoted man, asked whether the apples she had sent had been tasty, and at last lowered her blue-painted, hen-like lids, as if to convey that the audience was at an end. Only in parting did she add, again becoming somewhat animated:

"As long as my nephew doesn't get into the gaming habit! Another thing—I don't wish in the least that Victor should remain in this company forever."

"Set your heart at rest, my lady, set your heart at rest. It will be no more than a trial, and then we'll marry the noble youth."

The good priest had some trouble finding his scapegrace nephew, but in the end he was extracted from some nocturnal eating house. It took some time to comprehend what was demanded of him, but having grasped it, he willingly agreed to help the widow and take her nephew in hand. Among those ladies who might put Victor's virginity to the test, Pancratius (as the priest's nephew was called) moved, so to speak in the middle circles, knowing by name but having no access to those women who had already attained riches and fame, and who imitated noble matrons in their dress and manner of painting their faces, mimicking strenuous piety and occasionally turning their hand to erotic verses in the form of acrostics, which often became confused with *eirmosa* and *kontakia*. Knowing the inconstancy of fate, and meeting a great many people—courtiers, grooms, bishops and conspirators—these women dreamed of being raised up to the throne, for in this world, and particularly in the imperial city, all things are possible. Dull, ambitious and malevolent thoughts crept across the standing pools of their eyes, as they sat in state, like idols in the circus, gazing enviously at the seats reserved for matrons of noble blood. When they were borne away in their litters, the dark-skinned, flat-breasted flowersellers would gaze after them no less enviously.

With these ladies Pancratius was not acquainted, and besides they were of no interest to Pulcheria's virginal nephew, closely resembling those who were proposed to him as brides. But the acquaintances of the priest's kinsman were not street harlots either, lying in wait for stray sailors—they were gay, carefree creatures, mocking, sentimental and heartless. But apparently Pancratius too met with no particular success, for when he appeared before his uncle a month later he had an embarrassed and somewhat astonished air.

"What news?" asked the priest, not turning from the desk at which he was composing a sermon for the following day.

"Nothing good, uncle. The Lord Victor is in the same condition as he was on the day you acquainted us."

A learned starling called out "Peace be unto you," but the master of the house flapped his sleeve at him and inquired anxiously:

"The Lord Victor, you say, remains chaste?"

"Yes—an odd young man!"

"Perhaps you're wanting to ask more money from me so that you can carry on with your merry life on the pretext that the virtue of the respected Pulcheria's nephew has not yet been sufficiently tested?"

"You can be sure that I wouldn't refuse, but unfortunately I have to confess defeat."

Uncle gazed at nephew, not knowing whether to marvel at his moderation or Victor's resolve. In the silence the starling again called out "Peace be unto you," but no one took the slightest notice of him. That very evening the lady Pulcheria received a report of the state of affairs.

It is hard to say whether the youth himself guessed that the widow's questions, the confessor's admonitions, the sudden appearance of a new friend, so apparently attached to him and so eager to accompany him to various houses—that all these things were closely connected, and had something to do with his spiritual qualities. He did not consider his condition out of the ordinary, and lived quietly, dividing his time between library and church. Of course, the most natural thing for him would have been to contemplate the seclusion of a monastery, which, after all, differed but little from his present way of life—but perhaps for this very reason such dreams did not particularly attract him. What future prospect might have attracted him was difficult to imagine, and he revealed it to no one, not even to his favorite slave, Andrew the Hungarian, who accompanied him everywhere, and when his master read, sat drowsing nearby or with his eyes fixed unwaveringly upon him. He had recently been brought from the north and bound in service to Victor, who soon grew fond of him. He knew only about a dozen words of Greek, and so it was not possible to have long conversations with him. It was not, then, for his conversation that his

young master became attached to him; perhaps it was for his quietness and piety, perhaps for his strange, wild air or for his devoted tenderness and meekness.

Andrew would always accompany his master to church, to all services, praying decorously and devoutly, looking neither right nor left, or raising his eyes to the choirs curtained at the sides, where the female parishioners were. From above, nevertheless, more than one feminine gaze was directed on master and servant, and impressions, marvellings, conjectures were passed to the opposite wall in whispers, as if in some kind of game.

One day, as Victor and the Hungarian were returning from Mass, they found their way barred by a large crowd which surrounded a tall man in a loose robe and a nightcap; the man laughed, capered about and spat, slapping his ribs and mouthing incoherently to the tune of a street song. Catching sight of the approaching youths, he paused in his capers for a moment and, leaning on his long staff, seemed to be waiting, then he began to whirl even faster. He stopped once more, wrinkled his nose and frowned. Everyone waited to hear what he would say.

"Faugh, faugh! What a stench of devils!"

They all began looking about them, wondering whether the exclamation might refer to them, but the holy fool went on:

"You think it smells of musk? Hellish brimstone, that's what! See that demon dancing—he's blowing his pipe, the foul fiend, he's pulling faces, grinning, trying to trip me up."

Suddenly the man of God buried his face in his hands and began moaning like a woman; "Oh! Oh! Oh! Woe is me, would that my eyes could not see!

Mizra, Mizra, full of guile
What made you journey to the Nile?"

A smiling woman's face, heavily painted and surmounted by towering ginger coiffure, looked down from an upper window. The holy fool withdrew his hands from his cheeks and yelled to the whole street:

"And you laugh, you filthy whore! I shall fight—and I shall not yield!"

And without further ado he leaped in the air, pulling up his robe, and, naked as he was, assumed an indecent pose. The green window-shutters were slammed shut, and uncontrolled laughter came from behind them, while the old man, having adjusted his clothes, suddenly began to speak in a preceptorial manner:

"Do not imagine, brothers, that this Herodias, this Jezebel, is worse than any of you. And besides, you witnessed how easily she was subdued. I tell you that those two over there" (here he pointed his stick at Victor and Andrew) "are a hundred times worse than she. There's as many devils on them as fleas on a dog."

Everyone turned toward the youths, and, flushing, Victor went up to the fool and asked humbly:

"Reveal to us, O father—by what devils are we possessed?"

The fool clicked his tongue and answered:

"What I say to you is: 'Not on your life!' Find out for yourselves!"

And again he began babbling something incomprehensible.

Victor never spoke to Andrew of this incident, but the fool's words often came to his mind, particularly during hours of insomnia to which he was subject. Meanwhile the Hungarian fell sick and as his health failed, so his piety grew stronger. Rarely leaving his narrow bed under the stairs, he was forever whispering prayers, his eyes fixed on the sombre icon in the corner. Victor spent all his time in his servant's cramped quarters, holding his dry and burning hand in his and listening to his rambling speech, which sometimes turned to outright delirium. One day he was sitting there, the sick man had dozed off, and Victor, as he gazed at the dusky, sweating brow and the dark eyes, which, for all their sunkenness, seemed to start from his head, suddenly recalled the day the fool stopped them. What had he meant, and to which of the two of them had his words been directed? As if sensing his master's gaze, Andrew opened his eyes, and, feeling his hand in the hand of the other, began softly:

"My hour has come. My soul's anguish is twofold. It is parting with the body and it is taking its leave of you; to me, sweet Victor, you were not a master but a brother and friend."

The sick man wanted to say something else, but clearly it was beyond his strength. He only signed to Victor to bend over him, twined his arms about his neck and pressed his lips to his master's lips. Suddenly his mouth grew cold, and his arms weighed more heavily. Carefully Victor unclasped Andrew's fingers, and the Hungarian fell back lifeless on the pillows.

Only after his servant's death did Victor understand how dear he had been to him. It would have been easier, so it seemed, if his right hand had been cut off, or he had been thrown into a dungeon for life. Only now did he realize how tenderly he had loved the dead man, without whom even his beloved books came to seem dull and devoid of interest. Church services alone attracted him more than before; besides, circumstances themselves compelled him to intensify his piety, for, apart from the customary memorial services, he would pray alone every night for the repose of his friend's soul, never ceasing to wonder what the fool's words of long ago had meant and what it was that Andrew had wanted to say to him before his death. He could not forget the lips grown suddenly cold, and that kiss, the only kiss of his life, apart from the casual salutations of greeting and farewell. This had also been a kiss of farewell, but forever; a kiss of eternal separation.

One day Victor prayed for a long time before the icon-shelf in his room, as emotion, tears and heavy thoughts had kept him awake, even in bed. Turning his face to the wall, where the tiger on the carpet glowed red in the

light of the icon lamp, he whispered over and over again:

"Lord! O Lord! Grant my soul peace, assuage my sorrow; if my brother Andrew cannot be brought back, then reveal to me what has befallen his soul, its wanderings and its place of rest, that I may know whether to shed more tears or rejoice."

Victor said all this with his gaze fixed on the tiger, and he felt a desire to look at the Saviour, the Mother of God and Victor the Martyr, who stood in the row on the middle shelf. Quickly he turned over on the bed and saw . . .

By the lintel of the door stood his brother Andrew, quite naked except for a cloth about his loins. At first Victor did not recognize him in this guise, having never seen his slave stripped of his clothes. Then he knew him; gave a joyful cry of "Andrew!" and even reached out his arms; then all at once he began to make the sign of the cross over his visitor, muttering, "May the Lord rise again." Andrew did not vanish, but smiled calmly and pointed to the cross that hung about his neck.

"Have no fear, Victor, my brother, and do not turn away in horror! I am no ghost and no demon, but your beloved brother. You summoned me, you wished to learn of the sorrowful path beyond the grave, and so I have come to you. I am no ghost, you can take me by the hand if you wish."

He reached out his hand. Its shadow loomed vast on the wall and touched Victor's feet. He tucked them under the blanket, which he drew up to his throat, and said:

"I believe you and I thank you. Tell me brother, of the dark path beyond the grave."

Again his visitor smiled, and began his tale; it seemed to Victor that Andrew did not open his mouth and that his words did not echo in the room, but rather as if someone inserted them into his, Victor's ears.

"Bitter is the final hour! When noseless death appears with her spears, saws, forks, sabres, swords and deadly scythe—you don't know where to hide yourself, you rush hither and thither, you groan, you implore, but she has no ears and no eyes—she is inexorable. She sunders bone from bone, she cuts through all your sinews and tendons, and pierces your very heart. The angel of death waits gloomily while the noseless one goes about her business. On either side stand angels and demons with thick books, waiting. More bitter than vinegar with mustard is the last hour. And bitterest of all is the last breath. And with the last breath the soul leaps from the body, and the Angel of Death gathers it up. How it cowers, how it clings, how it weeps, the poor little naked soul! The Angel of Death turns its head about and says: "Look at your body, your envelope, your comrade. You will enter it again at the last resurrection." And the body lies white, motionless, voiceless, like a log. Friends and kinsmen stand over it and weep, but there is no restoring to it the precious breath of life! The soul buries its face in its hands and cries out: "I don't want to enter it!" But the Angel of Death answers: "You will when the time comes!" and carries it further. Fair youths and dark demons follow them. And now they mount a long bridge, two weeks it takes to cross it. On the far bank you can glimpse the green of meadows, fields and groves, and little white flowers. They move about, and every now and then they fly up in a swarm like dandelion down. These are angels and the souls of the righteous in radiant paradise. The bridge passes above dense fog. If you look hard, you can make out what look like fiery mineshafts with a great many divisions and subdivisions. Only the coarse terrestrial mind fails to see the difference between, let us say, lying and untruthfulness, calumny and slander, hardness of heart and mercilessness, pride and arrogance. But the subtle minds of heaven know all the differences and distinctions and assign everything its proper place. You will not be sent where you ought not to be, be assured of that. The bridge is the place of ordeals. It's a bit like our tollgates or excise houses, where taxes are collected. Angels sit at high tables; in their hands they hold the most precise scales and measures, and everything is written in a book; your slightest thought, desires that you yourself have forgotten, stand there as if alive, each one docketed. The soul is filled with terror and trembles, recalling all its sins and remembering nothing good; but the angels have everything written down, not a jot escapes them. The demons unroll their scrolls, the angels open their books; they weigh, they measure and either let the soul proceed or cast it from the bridge; and the youths weep, while the demons bare their teeth, kick up a racket and cheer like a mob at the races. In this way I passed through the ordeals of untruthfulness, slander, envy, lying, wrath, anger, arrogance, intemperate speech, lewd speech, idleness, sloth, vanity and came at last to the twentieth ordeal."

Here Andrew fell silent.

"Well, and what is the twentieth ordeal?" asked Victor, apparently not noticing that his visitor was no longer standing by the lintel, but was sitting on the bed, all rosy with the light of the icon lamp, looking down at him with starting eyes.

"What is the twentieth ordeal?"

"Do not question me, sweet brother, do not question me. I am with you now. The fire of hell has not extinguished the blood and the heart within me. I am cold . . ."

Victor had forgotten his fear, he was ready to cover his visitor with anything at hand, to warm him with his own breath, his own body, if only he would tell him about the twentieth ordeal. Whereas before Andrew's lips had grown cold in a kiss, now they burned, searing Victor, as if infusing him with the flame that had not been extinguished in the fire of hell. Terrible and sweet it was, and this sweetness, this terror, would have made him forgetful of Andrew's final ordeal, had the latter not said to him in parting:

"And now, brother, you too know the yearning of the twentieth ordeal —take care lest it destroy you."

Often it happens that words of warning, constantly called to mind, push us toward the very thing they would guard us against. And so now Victor thought only of his dead friend's visitation and the tale he had told; he would have given anything only to bring him back. It seemed to him that everything life had to offer him grew dim before what had been revealed to him. Not knowing how to express his longing, he prayed that he might once again hear the tale of the twentieth ordeal. But all was in vain, and he wandered flushed, vacant-eyed, distraught, exalted, not knowing what to do with himself. At last he revealed these strange prayers of his to his confessor, who having heard him out, was silent for a long time, and said at last:

"It is from meekness, lord Victor, that you resort to such prayers—you are too pure. But often meekness turns into boundless pride, and of this you should beware. I advise you always to keep to the prayers that are to be found in the prayerbook. They were assembled by the holy fathers—and, rest assured, they knew better than you or I what is needful to man."

That very day the priest hastened to the widow Pulcheria and said:

"Your nephew must be married at all costs. Use force, appeal to the emperor and let him issue the command, but marriage is essential for the lord Victor. His virginity is not from God."

Pulcheria agreed and, glancing down the list of eligible brides, said:

"I'll send matchmakers to Leucadia, the daughter of Demetrius, the chief scribe"—then she gave a sigh and became thoughtful.

"Why do you sigh, my lady? It will be for your nephew's good."

"I know. As a woman I sigh for poor Leucadia, that's all."

Mikhail Kuzmin (1872–1936)

TWO POETRY CYCLES:

A SUMMER AFFAIR

[Liubov' etogo leta]

and

A STORY INTERRUPTED

[Prervannaia povest]

Translated by Michael Green

"A Summer Affair" was written in 1906 and published in the symbolist journal, *Vesy* (The Scales) in 1907 and later in Kuzmin's first collection of poetry, *Nets* (1908). "A Story Interrupted" was written in 1906 and first published in the literary almanac, *White Nights* (1907), and then also reprinted in *Nets*.

I

A SUMMER AFFAIR

*For P. K. Maslov**

1

Where shall I find a style to catch a stroll,†
Chablis on ice, a crisply toasted roll,
The agate succulence of cherries ripe?
The sunset's far, the ocean's splashing cool
Can offer solace to a sunburnt nape.

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*"For P. K. Maslov." Pavel Maslov was a young army officer who was close to Kuzmin in 1906. In a letter to Walter Nouvel dated July 20, 1906 Kuzmin wrote: ". . . I love him more than before, more than I thought I did, more than I ever loved anyone."

†"Where shall I find a style to catch a stroll." This "*art poétique*," this "manifesto" poem came as a revelation to Kuzmin's contemporaries. In the context of Russian Symbolism, with its metaphysical airs, this poem is both a challenge and a triumphant demonstration of its stated "program." This apotheosis of the small, the concrete and the downright frivolous (not to forget its rediscovery of the eighteenth century of Marivaux and Mozart) is a deliberate flouting of literary orthodoxy. In this poem alone—an "important" one in the development of Russian verse—I have attempted to adhere as closely as possible to the meter and rhyme scheme of the original.