

Tiger Milk (Part 3)

by David Ackley

Act II

Scene 1

MANDELSTAM'S cell in Lubianka prison, furnished with a narrow steel bed, a blanket, a single light bulb overhead, a bucket.

MANDELSTAM on the bed, one arm shielding his eyes from the light. Sounds alert him, he takes his arm away and stares at the light, listening. Muffled thuds, thumps, groans, a piercing shriek.

VOICES OFF — Up, you filthy shitbird, stand up like man. No? Then crawl, it's all the same to Vic.

More sounds of blows. Howls.

VOICE OFF — Vanka, give me drag of smoke...

MANDELSTAM gets up, goes to the cell door, listens.

Here shitbird, you want smoke, yes? Open mouth, okay?

Scream. Laughter.

Oops. Wrong end.

More laughter.

Good one, Vic.

MANDELSTAM recoils from the door and begins to pace in the few feet the cell permits, quickly as if the movement would still the sounds, which continue. He wraps his arms around his head. The sounds continue. He lies down facing the wall, his arms still wrapping his head. The sounds continue. One leg kicks convulsively. More sounds.

Act II

Scene 2

The exterior wall of Lubianka Prison with a grated window in a narrow door. Petitioners, all women, but for a single small boy in front of NADIA and AKHMATOVA at the head of the line.

OLD WOMAN — Wondering whether Mandelstam's poem had already cost him his life, or something inconceivably worse, Nadia went every day to the grate at the Lubianka with Akhmatova, who still sought word of the long-gone Nikolai Gumilev. There a stone-faced woman behind the grate offered rich variations of the negative to all inquiries:

“Nothing today...no word...no information...not a thing...would do little good...impermissible...not allowed... appeal declined...no such person...No chance...no way...not today, this week, this month, this century...impossible. You may come back, but the answer will not change. No.”

Every day dozens of wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, fiancées' waited hours for no word of a husband, brother, son, father or lover. Each to be turned away and replaced by the next in line. Why did they return? Because not to was to admit the finality of the stone-faced woman's laconic refusals, to give over hope.

One day, a small boy, alone, occupied a place in line. When he reached the window, he was unable to say what he'd been told to and after stammering incoherently he burst into sobs and stood weeping helplessly. The stone-faced woman only looked at him from behind the grate and waited—whether him or another all the same to her. But before long those behind him became impatient and began to protest.

“ Say your piece and move on,” one said. And another, “We're waiting too, can't you see.” “You've had your turn, move away and go back to Mama.” “ Tell her there's no word.” “Anyone can cry, but what good does it do.” The voices were a metallic clatter. “Ba-ba-ba,” someone said, and there was hard laughter.

The boy stepped aside, still weeping, but stayed there, until Nadia had her turn, and heard the inevitable.

NADIA takes the boy's hand and leads him away with her.

Act II
Scene 3

An improvised courtroom with a judge's bench—the “bar”—and a witness seat—facing the audience. Spectators sit on benches or stand casually to the side. OLD WOMAN seated off to the left.

VOICE OFF — UP, PIGS for the honorable General Secretary, presiding in the rehearsal for the show trial of the counter-revolutionary, parasite, terrorist-poet, Osip Mandelstam.

STALIN enters, takes the judge's chair, followed by VYSHINSKY who stands before the bar.

STALIN — Now what?

VYSHINSKY — The spectators will be seated.

STALIN — Right. Of course. You there, order them to sit. This is not the task of the presiding justice.

VOICE OFF — DOWN, PIGS!

Spectators sit again.

STALIN — Anything else?

VYSHINSKY — (*Removes pince-nez, rubs his nose.*) Perhaps we should move on.

STALIN — So we're here to...(*Looks expectantly at VYSHINSKY.*)

VYSHINSKY — General Secretary Stalin is displeased with the reception of previous show trials, which the lackey foreign press, invited to attend the unmasking of terrorists and counter-revolutionaries, labels “Hoax,” “Sham,” “Laughable,” “Travesty,” Etcetera, etcetera.

STALIN — (*Beckons VYSHINSKY to the bar for a question.*)

VYSHINSKY — (*To STALIN audibly.*) Bull shit.

STALIN — Ha!

VYSHINSKY — In order to erase these stains on the purity of Soviet Justice, future performances must be plausible and sincere. (*Voice rising, pounding his palm for emphasis.*) Not showing hangdog demeanor, covertly displaying open wounds or making false representations of coercion, but with the pride and vigor of repentant revolutionaries throwing themselves gladly into the all-forgiving arms of the state.

STALIN — Very moving. But don't get carried-away, This is a walk-through. Don't leave your performance in rehearsal. And don't use the term 'revolutionary' for these scum, this is a term of honor, not to be defiled with the names of traitors.

VYSHINSKY — Of course. Of course. My fervor for the cause got the best of me.

OLD WOMAN — (*Laughing.*) There's a good one...Vyshinsky, colder than a Lake Baikal sturgeon, talking of his fervor for the cause. (*To Stalin, a voice in his ear alone.*) You need to move things along. The spectators grow impatient. If you bore them you will go the way of the tsars, overthrown for someone more interesting. Remember, Trotsky called you 'The Grey Man.'

STALIN — Him! His name is forbidden... Who dares..? But never mind. We must move things along. The audience is losing patience. Bring in the defendant.

(*Mandelstam is led in and placed before the bar by VIC and VANKA, two muscular thugs in tight shirts and narrow neckties. They step to either side of the bar, flanking STALIN.*)

MANDELSTAM — What's all this?

STALIN — We must improve our judicial performances, laws and so on. Criticisms have been made that must be shown wrong. At your trial, you will not only play a leading role—after myself, of course—but with your writing skills you will assist with script, direction, so forth...In co-operating you will have the opportunity to show usefulness to state and people, and me, of course.

MANDELSTAM — And you are Stalin himself, or some actor in the role? Either way, a very faithful portrayal, to the life one might say.

STALIN- This goes without saying, but no actor could play the depth of my deviousness. I am me, the real thing, now in sole charge after execution of the Romanoff pretender and his line and the convenient stepping aside, due to death, of the great Lenin. Subject of course to approval of Chicken-necks in politburo. If you wish the bald and immortal Vlad, you may find him under glass in the Hall of Heroes, visiting hours Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

MANDELSTAM — I see now. This is another of my cellular dreams, composed of watery cabbage broth, lice, and the screams of the beaten.

MANDELSTAM slaps his own face vigorously, blinks a few times.

Ah well, let's get on with it. Morning will eventually arrive unless it is abolished by the state. In the meantime, a nightmare is at least a diversion.

STALIN — Read the charges.

VYSHINSKI — Alleged poet Mandelstam is charged with assault on State Officers, Malicious destruction of Official Documents, Terrorism by poetry, Subversive thoughts and statements, Counter-Revolution, Consorting with Proven Enemies of the State and Parasitism.

STALIN — What'll we do first? How about Parasitism, Osip?

MANDELSTAM — I'd be interested. What is that exactly?

STALIN — It's...Well. There are a number of versions. Let's say you were seen strolling along the Neva with a female poet....

MANDELSTAM — Marina Tsvetaeva, for example.

STALIN — Why not? And there was some business going on with the revolution...and...Never mind all this. Just shut up and listen. (*To VYSHINSKI.*)

Have we got a denunciation for Parasitism, whatever this is?

VYSHINSKI- There's a psychologist, Pavlov...

STALIN — Call psychologist Pavlov.

PAVLOV-

Enters and on the stand consults a black notebook.

VYSHINSKI — All right, Pavlov. What evidence do you have that Mandelstam is a parasite on the revolution and the state?

PAVLOV — Subject Mandelstam consults me on 5 November, complaining of headaches, nightmares, bizarre fantasies of persecution, eavesdroppers, spies everywhere etcetera. Subject claims to be well-known Russian poet with many works published before and after the revolution. Believes he is member of Poetic school called "Acmeists." Strong reaction-formation when I suggest

this group is one of his fantasies and that he has taken the term Acmeist from line of kitchen appliances in American Sears catalogue. When asked to recite one of his poems, he responds with gibberish barely recognizeable as Russian. I conclude that subject is not now nor never has been been poet but before revolution was petit-bourgeois clerk in ladies shoe store. Poet claim demonstrates delusions consistent with Paranoid Schizophrenia with Kleistakov syndrome. He should immediately be assigned to my care at the institute...

MANDELSTAM — I think I concur with this idiot. Delusions of being a poet might explain a lot.

STALIN — (*Holding up his hand for silence. To PAVLOV:*) You understand defendant is on trial for some activities as a poet. The state has already determined he is a poet so he can be punished for it. If we follow your testimony, we'd have no case.

PAVLOV — (*Snapping shut his notebook,*) Nevertheless, my diagnosis stands, this man is no more poet than you are.

STALIN — Take this fool away, and correct his thinking. Close enough that I can hear the result.

VIC and VANKA hustle PAVLOV out. Sounds of struggle, gasps, a loud thump.

STALIN — What's the next charge?

VYSHINSKI — The script calls for him to confess now. Is the prisoner, parasite, poet-terrorist and traitor Mandelstam, Osip prepared to confess to the crimes with which he is charged and any and all others of which he is now or ever has been guilty?

MANDELSTAM- I'm sorry. Could you repeat the question?

VIC and VANKA return, wiping their hands and resume their posts at STALIN'S side. He nods his satisfaction to them.

VYSHINSKI — Never mind the question. How do you plead?

MANDELSTAM — Guilty of some things, innocent of others, indifferent to all.

VYSHINSKI — You compound your guilt with these semantics. Plead!

MANDELSTAM — I plead for extrication from this poshlost.

STALIN — Call the next witness. The gallery is restless again. They're playing cards and eating pretzels in the back row.

A bottle clinks and rolls across the floor;

The Russian genius at work; smuggling in vodka. (*To VIC.*) Take a couple of those peasants outside and see if you can get them to piss blood. We need some discipline back there.

VIC exits followed shortly by thumping noises and a few screams.

VYSHINSKI — The state calls Jacob Bliumkin.

BLIUMKIN hulking larger, suggesting or entirely Minotaur, led in on ropes attached to his arms legs and a brass ring through his nose. Lunges bellowing toward MANDELSTAM, checked by STALIN'S fond greeting.

STALIN — Jacob my darling, my best boy. How have you been? (*Scratches BLIUMKIN'S forehead between the horns.*) And such nice work on the German Ambassador: one shot in the heart and he dropped like a sack of wheat. So much for diplomatic immunity.

MANDELSTAM — So this is the finished work, the metamorphosis complete. To think this leathery beast sprouted from a downy young poet. Revolution indeed.

VIC returns to his post, nodding to STALIN.

VYSHINSKI — Defendant Mandelstam is charged with interfering with State Officer Bliumkin in the execution...

MANDELSTAM — Quite: Execution, precisely...

VYSHINSKI — ... In the execution of state duties together with the destruction of Official Documents. Describe the occasion, Officer Bliumkin.

BLIUMKIN —

Rocks and tosses his horns, bellowing incomprehensibly. STALIN and VYSHINSKI nod in complete understanding. BLIUMKIN is led out by the ropes still attached to him.

VYSHINSKI — (*To STALIN.*) I wonder if his methods have become a little crude for the phase we're in. Just a thought.

STALIN — You never know when crude will come in handy.

VYSHINSKI —Your usual foresight, excellency... Let the record show the prisoner was denounced by State Officer Bliumkin for disruption of planned elimination of condemned enemies of the state.

MANDELSTAM — (*Yawning.*) In prison, even the entertainments are boring.

STALIN — He's nodding off. Wake him up and call the next witness.

VYSHINSKI — Call Alexei Tolstoi.

STALIN — Refresh me here, Vee, who's this guy again? Some relative of old Leo's ?

VYSHINSKI — Nephew of the great author. Turncoat aristocrat. Literary pretender and now Gorki's flunky at the Writers' Union.

ALEXEI TOLSTOI takes the witness stand.

STALIN — Quite fashionable attire, Comrade. Bespoke tailoring isn't it? London, perhaps ?

TOLSTOI — Thank you so much. A native craftsman, I assure you, who keeps a little shop on the Koltava for selected clientele. I can give you his...

VYSHINSKI — Enough babbling. Do not speak to the presiding judge unless instructed.

TOLSTOI —

Shrinking back in his seat.

Of course, of course, my profoundest apologies....

STALIN — Get on with it!

VYSHINSKI — Describe the occasion when the defendant assaulted you as you performed duties of a state official of the Writers' Union.

TOLSTOI — I...

STALIN —

Gesturing for silence,

He hasn't even started and already I'm bored. The foreign press won't put up with this. We have to liven things up. Have them act it out.

VYSHINSKI — You mean re-enact the incident in question?

STALIN - (*Glares.*) Have them act it out.

VYSHINSKI — Exactly.

VYSHINSKI positions MANDELSTAM and TOLSTOI facing each other before the bar.

STALIN — (*To TOLSTOI.*) Say something to Mandelstam. Provoke him.

TOLSTOI — Please. This is beneath me, something I would never...

MANDELSTAM — Note the hierarchical bias, life all up and down, all aboves and belows.

STALIN — Stop kibitzing, Mandelstam...That's what wrong with these show trials, all this talk and no action. No wonder the reviews were rotten. Note this down for changes in the script, Vee. Get Osip here to help with the revisions. All right, Tolstoi, give it to him. piss him off. Show us how you provoked Mandelstam. And when he does, you let him have it, Mandelstam.

MANDELSTAM — But this is pointless. No doubt he deserved it in the heat of the moment. But just to strike him now, for no real reason...and even then, whether he deserved it or not, I felt ashamed afterward, as if I'd stepped on a mutilated lizard.

STALIN —

Rises, furious, pointing at TOLSTOI.

HIT this little shit, now!

MANDELSTAM —

Weakly slaps TOLSTOI'S cheek.

TOLSTOI —

Raises his hand to his cheek and begins to sob. Runs out, wailing.

STALIN — No wonder we can't get anything from these writers. Fire that fool and have the Cheka pick him up. We'll see if his whimpering arouses their sympathy.

MANDELSTAM — Why prolong this farce? We both know I'm already condemned and for what reason. It only awaits you for the trigger to be pulled. Why not admit it?

STALIN — You're not here to interrogate but to be interrogated. You'll be tried for the crimes we say. We offer all the evidence we need. If there is no more offered it's because there is no more.

To the spectators:

Who wishes to contribute to the downfall of this traitor? Who will denounce this elitist enemy of the masses? Who has witnessed his obscene crimes of word and deed?

(*Quietly.*) Who does not know his welfare depends on his use in rooting out the class enemy? Failing to denounce is a crime as well, subject to all the harsh fatality of the law...Well?

COURTROOM SPECTATOR — (Slowly rises.) Akakeivich, Akakey. Copyist. Unemployed. No permanent address. I am denouncing Isop Mandelstaff for stealing new overcoat that I had made special...

VYSHINSKY — So noted. Sit.

COURTROOM SPECTATOR # 2 — (Rises.) Grigorevich, Grigor. Grocer's Assistant. Unemployed. No permanent address. I denounce Postal Worker Mandel Osipstam for failure to deliver mother's letter announcing death of father—Grigorevich, also Grigor—so could not attend funeral. But could not buy ticket because of no rubles and anyway no trains...

VYSHINSKY — Noted. Resume your seat...Sit.

Others rise, one then two and sometimes three at once.

Denunciations begin to be traded: I am denouncing your mother's foul golobka which dog wouldn't eat. I denounce Igor's smelly feet. I denounce you for a horse's ass. Laughter at apt formulations breaks out and spreads to become general with that tendency toward riotous anarchy implicit in any Russian crowd. Fingers point everywhere, a rhythmic cry of Denounce, Denounce, Denounce becomes a chorus. Some fall to the floor, shrieking with laughter. To no avail Stalin pounds his gavel. There is a brief lull, a catching of breath.

OLD WOMAN — (*In a level and penetrating voice, her words apparent only to Stalin.*) I denounce the butcher and peasant-slayer Osip Dugashvili, false Russian who travels under the name Josef Stalin, foreign agent of the Georgia Republic where he was born, murderer of Revolutionary Hero Lenin, traitor to the workers' cause, usurper who covets the crown of tsar and emperor of all the Russias.

STALIN — (*Shouting.*) Who says this? Who dares, dies...Come out, coward! Face me with these lies!

The bedlam has ended, heads turn seeking the source of what only he has heard, what has so provoked their impassive and bland master.

OLD WOMAN — Not just yet, little Osip...Perhaps one day...

Act II
Scene 4

MANDELSTAM lying on his bed in the cell, arm covering his eyes. He sits up, listening. VIC and VANKA enter dragging a body by the heels. Vic wears a suit jacket too small for him which happens to match the trousers of the body on the floor, which also wears one polished black shoe, the other foot naked and bloody. The body also wears a dress shirt of fine cloth, now untucked and torn, and a loose, skewed necktie. They hoist the the dead man upright, the head sagging. Mandelstam has stood and retreated to the rear of the cell and stands pressed against the far wall.

VIC — Hey, lookit, Osip, present for you from the boss.

VANKA — It's old pal, Alexei. Say hello Osip, Alexei....Oops. Forgot.

VANKA sticks out his tongue and makes a scissoring gesture with his fingers beneath, shaking his head dolefully.

VIC -

Takes a flask from the jacket pocket, They each drink in turn. He returns the flask to the pocket. He points to the bed.

You mind, Osip?

They sit, propping Alexei between them.

Good thing we fix his knees, he's getting stiff.

VANKA — Me too. Ha!

They drink again and as VANKA raises the flask, together:
Father Russia! Mother Vodka!

VIC — So Osip, we going off to get rid of Alexei, when bright boy Vanka thinks, What about Osip, in cell all alone, maybe he likes new cellmate, old pal, Alexei.

VANKA — Because I'm thinking you can make up after little pussy slapfight, be poet-writing buddies again, have some fun, jerk each other off between poetries. Alexei here, he's perfect cellmate. Good listener, don't say much, eat much. No farting, shitting, pissing to stink up place...What you say, Alexei?

He grabs ALEXEI'S hair and nods the head.

See? He's good with it. And from when he's still talking he tells me he's sad he calls you a fucking dirty yid pussy poet.

VIC — I'm thinking he's a little scared shitless of you, Osip. (*To Vanka.*) Osip he don't look like much, but he's some tough guy. He says stuff about the boss they rip out tonsils. And lookit—still alive.

VANKA — He aint talking now, Vic.

VIC — Smart move. You take Alexei here, what a talker...from before, I mean. Talk, talk, talk, you have to knock out to shut off.

Makes hammering motion.

Tok!

VANKA — And what a generous guy, what a big heart.

Grasps lapels of the jacket.

A little tight, but let it out it's perfect. Classy. And Alexei even gives me name of his tailor...And not just. He gets going, give you anything.

VIC — No shit! He wants give me his mother! I say what I want with with some old beatup bag bones? He says she's good cook, wash clothes, clean flat. I say no thanks, what about wife? He says okay, wife, fine.

VANKA — And for me the daughters, twins, cute too, you want to see.

He takes out a snapshot to show Mandelstam, who turns away.

Don't like the young stuff? Too bad for you. It's the best.

VIC —

Takes out cigarettes, offers one to Vanka. They light up. He remembers and offers one to Alexei.

Smoke, Alexei? No? Oh, I'm forgetting. You quit. Bad for lungs, he says...Speak of lungs, Osip, how's food. No specialty meats in here, hey? Too bad. I love that shit...brains, tongue, kidney, so on.

Takes out a switchblade, opens it and with his other hand takes hold of Alexei's ear, raising the blade to it.

You got to try this, Osip. It's the best.

MANDELSTAM —

Slides down the wall until he is seated on the floor lowering his face to cover it with his hands. The cell goes to dark. When the light returns in a moment, MANDELSTAM is lying on his bed, facing the wall. He sits up and turns to us, his eyes wide. He waits, listening, but all is quiet.

