

Tiger Milk (Part 4--the last act.)

by David Ackley

Act III

Scene 1

STALIN'S library. Stalin is seated in shadow behind his desk. OLD WOMAN seated in a corner, as usual invisible to Stalin. Against the bookcase, a man hooded to below the waist in the black mantle for a parrot's cage, Stalin's latest Biographer.

STALIN — Vic. Bring in the poet.

VIC hustles in MANDELSTAM, shackled hand and foot, his head hanging.

For Christ's sake, take off the irons. He'll think we're barbarians. Get him a chair.

VIC pushes MANDELSTAM into the chair removes the chains and exits. MANDELSTAM rubs his wrists and raises his head to slowly look around; seeing the BIOGRAPHER he starts.

Ah, yes, you see him, my latest. Which is he? Eight? Nine? I lose track. They're all the same, these biographers. None of them ever work out. I wonder if I expect too much. No? Perhaps too tolerant? I'll give this one another day. He'll be fine. He's fine, aren't you, Parrot? He's probably asleep. That's how they sleep under that mantle, did you know that? It comforts them, not to be distracted by the busy world. But you knew that, you're an intelligentsia, you know such things, even if you never had a parrot. I myself never had a parrot, not even a cat.

So, they treat you well? Plenty of food? Comfortable quarters? Perhaps a little Spartan compared to what you're used to.

MANDELSTAM — (*Weakly*) Everything's fine. I have no complaints.

STALIN — Your friend, Pasternak, writes to me you know. He says its not good for you to be in prison...I was in the tsar's prison myself,

I have to agree, its not so good for you...So I call Pasternak. That's right, I myself rang him up so I could learn more about you.

MANDELSTAM — It was decent of him to write you on my behalf.

STALIN — Not many do. Usually it goes the other way, denouncing someone—typically mother-in-law. Or asking favors for self. So to your poet-buddy I say , “Pasternak, this guy Mandelstam, he's a genius?” That's just how I put it because I want to know how he ranks you among poets. You know what he says: “That's not the point.” “Okay,” I say, “What's the point, Pasternak? You tell me.” For that he says he has to come to the Kremlin and discuss with me. (*Laughs.*) As if I can say to Soviet people, hold everything while I talk to some guy about poetry. Ha, ha, ha.

So I hang him up . He gives me answer even if he doesn't know it. He suspects you're his better among you poets. He can't say so: a man can't praise his better, only his inferior.

MANDELSTAM — What happened at my trial? I must have blacked-out. I don't remember how it ended. Was I found guilty? Or innocent? (Musing.) Such an interesting state, innocence—always being lost and found, like a child's mitten.

STALIN — What trial? You've been sitting in the same cell since you were taken to the Lubianka.

MANDELSTAM — You staged a sort of show trial. Or a rehearsal for one. Alexei Tolstoi was called to testify. And Bliumkin. And that quack who refused to believe I was a poet. I don't know. Perhaps not. I've had these dreams.

STALIN — Just like your friend, Pasternak. Thinking all Stalin has to do is entertain poets. Maybe you should have listened to this psychologist.

MANDELSTAM — So you were there. You were the Presiding Justice.

STALIN — Me? I stay away from courtrooms. I don't want to find myself on trial.

MANDELSTAM — Never mind. Could you take the hood off that man over there? I can smell his terror. It's beginning to infect me.

STALIN — I tell you, he's sleeping. He's comfortable here, almost a member of the family. He's been with me for...what? Eighteen hours now? I'll show you. Hey, you, Parrot. Still asleep, are you?

BIOGRAPHER — Yes, excellency.

STALIN — See? But confidentially, these hacks they send over from the Writers' Union, they rarely pan out—a mob of scribblers, like your friend Alexei Tolstoi. They chant of Lenin, Stalin, the Bolshevik revolution, the heroic worker, the triumphant dictatorship of the proletariat. They all use the same phrases, tacking them together like a peasant building a henhouse from scraps of lumber. In the state bookstores, their works pile higher and higher, until carted off and burned to make room for the next lot. They take the story of our revolution, the geatest event of modern times, the remaking of history, and turn it into a cure for insomnia. This story needs a literature and writers equal to its greatness. (*Gesturing to the walls of books.*) A Shakespeare, a Thucydides, a Machiavelli, a Lev Tolstoi—too bad he's not alive to see it. We need a man of talent

...

MANDELSTAM — I no longer write poetry.

STALIN — What an ego! What makes you think I was talking about you? An abandoned failure, not even worthy of the Writers' Union. The great Gorki thought so little of your work he wouldn't give a pair of pants....However, I myself have a tolerant nature, Mandelstam, as do the party and state I humbly serve. We allow for self-betterment, the chance to change. Great works will be called forth from those who have the inner strength. From each according to his abilities is all we ask.

MANDELSTAM — I no longer write.

OLD WOMAN — It was unlike Mandelstam to shave the truth, although in the strictest sense what he said was true. In recent years his poems had been composed without his putting pen to paper, by a process of saying them to himself with repetition and variations until he was satisfied with the lines and had spoken and memorized the completed poem. Akhmatova and I joked that he was working on a new poem when we saw his lips silently moving.

STALIN — Well, if you no longer write, at least we won't be slandered by things like this.

Takes up a sheet of paper from his desk and begins to read from it.

Our lives are groundless
Ten steps off, we can't be heard.
Our words on lease
from the Kremlin landlord,
the butcher and peasant slayer,
Who cuts our meat with his
Blood sausage fingers,
Whose words are icefalls
From his frozen lips...

Ecetera, so on.

(Tosses the paper aside.)

That is your stinking slander, isn't it? Your childish insults? Or perhaps now you will deny it, or say you didn't mean it, now you have a taste of the consequences.

MANDELSTAM — Of course I'd say any of those things and more if it meant my life. Or even to avoid renewing what I've already suffered. But there isn't any need for that, or for lying about it. I didn't write that poem.

STALIN — You deny you wrote this? But you were heard reading it as your own. There are witnesses who confessed criminal listening. You think you could gull Stalin, inventor of corkscrew lie? Make up some excuse, but don't claim innocence like a five year old. Stand up and take your punishment. ...All right. If you deny you wrote this, tell me who did. Who will you denounce to take your place? What friend will you betray?

MANDELSTAM — You, Stalin. That is your work.

STALIN —

For a moment speechless.

ME? You're crazy as shithouse rat! You accuse Stalin of trash that slanders his own name, shows him as monster, insults his laws, his

colleagues. If I had gun handy, I'd shoot you like this. (*Claps his hands.*) This is your poem! You can't deny that, fool...We have evidence, witnesses who have confessed and denounced you with their last words. Accept it yourself. Take responsibility for your crime.

MANDELSTAM — I insist it is yours. You performed it with your deeds, your doctrines, your laws, your deported, exiled, expunged. You wrote it, Stalin. I merely recorded it.

STALIN —

Silently staring for long seconds at MANDELSTAM, who is curiously certain and serene under the scrutiny, not the serenity of a prospective martyr but one certain of his truth.

What then?... Suppose I say the poem is false, full of lies, that Stalin himself is nothing like this portrayal? Wait. Don't answer...Let me see if I follow your dialectic...You will say, then Stalin does not deny the poem, but the essence of his power. To deny it is to confess weakness, to be a hypocrite, to falsely claim he does not wish to be feared. Denying the poem, he would disown his authority, as awful as one of those old gods whose look turns men to stone. And why should I deny what they take as I wish, in fear?...Very clever. The party could use sophist like you, Mandelstam, if you ever think of career change...Hmmm.Well ...so Stalin writes his own poem with his deeds and you are merely recorder. I'll think about that. You are either the only honest man in Russia, or its second cleverest liar. But it has ring of truth. A leader can always use someone who can see to the heart of the matter.

MANDELSTAM — You might want to think about that yourself. Truth is hard to manage, full of inconvenience.

STALIN — Tell me about it. Your habit of blurting it out might be a problem, too. But we'll see. I enjoyed our conversation, but I don't think there'll be another, Poet...Vic, Vanka.

VIC and VANKA enter.

See Comrade Mandelstam to his destination.

One to each arm they escort MANDELSTAM out.

STALIN —

Turning to the black-hooded figure trembling against the bookshelves.

What did you think of that, Parrot? Quite the bullshitter, that poet, wouldn't you say? He couldn't imagine his ridiculous argument convinced me...But why would such a man, this frail little Jew, write so recklessly, knowing it could mean his death? And if such a weakling dares, what about the strong ones hiding in the shadows, waiting their chance. Who thinks these things, that's what I need to know. I feel them out there somewhere, looking back at me. But where from?

Rises ominously from his chair and stalks to the corner where OLD WOMAN sits, groping toward her blindly.)

WHO ARE YOU?

Unreachable, unknowable, imperturbable, she studies him as he gropes just short of reaching her.

OLD WOMAN — Memory.

VIC — (*Off.*) Everything all right, boss?

STALIN —

Returning to the bookshelves.

Fine, idiot...everything is fine.Guh! (*Shudders,*) Hard to believe that some skinny little nobody with a poem could have this effect, like worms chewing softly on your rotting flesh. All this power and no protection...

Moves to the bookshelves and runs his finger over the spines of books until he sees the one he wants, takes it down and opens it.

Yes, this is the one. Some other sick little poet bastard, abusing his superiors.

Reading aloud:

Two vast and trunkless legs of stone

Stand in the desert, Near them on the sand

Half-sunk, a shattered visage lies...

blah, blah ... stamped on these lifeless things...so on.

Slaps the book shut abruptly and puts it back on the shelf.

Well, so? Poetry makes nothing happen. Close the cover and put it back on the shelf and it disappears, along with its writer. Like you, Parrot.

STALIN pats BIOGRAPHER on the head, who flinches from the touch, and returns to sit at his desk, where he takes papers alternately from two piles, signs them and places them on a third, occasionally reading, nodding.

OLD WOMAN —

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my works ye mighty and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch away.

The present is a breath, the future an eternity. Who would recall the forgotten king if not for the poem of immortal Keats?

Act III

Scene 2

The grated window at the Lubianka. NADIA at the head of the line, AKHMATOVA just behind. A piece of paper is shoved through the grate which at first NADIA can't touch. She takes it and reads then in disbelief shows it to AKHMATOVA. They embrace and NADIA hurries off clutching the paper. AKHMATOVA steps to the window, speaks, listens briefly and turns away, her face blank of emotion.

Act III

Scene 3

A passenger compartment, NADIA seated beside VIC, facing VANKA reading a book, MANDELSTAM handcuffed and dazed.

OLD WOMAN — It all came about so rapidly, Nadia was stunned, with no idea where they were travelling or to what end. Were they heading for some Siberian labor camp? Deportation? Or to be shot and thrown from the train as it crossed some icy river? Anything was possible.

NADIA reaches across for MANDELSTAM'S hand but VIC takes hers and pulls it back. MANDELSTAM snaps awake, and looks up, his eyes darting in fear, not seeming to recognize her.

Act III

Scene 4

A hospital room, MANDELSTAM in the bed. Seated on one side of the bed, VIC and VANKA, on the other, NADIA. MANDELSTAM'S eyes open briefly, then clamp shut, a child trying to make the bogeyman vanish.

OLD WOMAN — Mandelstam was convinced his release from prison was only a ruse in an elaborate assassination plot, and he had to be committed to a hospital when the train reached Cherdny. There he threw himself from a second floor window, breaking his arm, and needed to be restrained for his own safety. Had he wanted death; or freedom? At the time they seemed, and not only to him in his madness, one and the same. Voices continued to allude to the plot on his life.

VIC — How's the poetry writer? Feeling any better today? Maybe fresh air would do some good. We could take him up on roof for flying lesson.

MANDELSTAM — (*Eyes closed tight.*) What? WHAT?

NADIA — (*To the original question.*) A little better. He was able to take some broth this morning.

VANKA — That's good. Hospital food it's not for everybody.

VIC — We should bring him something tasty from café: Arsenic kvass, Cyanide pelmeni. Something like that.

MANDELSTAM — Garr!

NADIA — He seems a little anxious. Maybe you could come back and visit later once he's had a little nap. I'll fix the pillow over his face so he doesn't wake up in the present life.

MANDELSTAM — Aaahh! Aaah!

VIC — Nah. We're all through here. Tell him we said bye-bye. No hard feelings. Just business. Now we got special assignment. Nice warm place for winter vacation. Mexi-Cow in US of A.

VANKA — Nice gift from Boss to old pal, Leon Trotsky: Brand new ice axe special delivery to brain pan.

MANDELSTAM — No!

VIC and VANKA exit. NADIA stands to re-arrange MANDELSTAM'S pillow. He pulls the blanket over his face to hide.

Act III

Scene 5

Another bare room with only a bed and table, and in this one, two hard-backed chairs.

OLD WOMAN — When Mandelstam began to regain his senses and lose his fear of being murdered, they were allowed to choose a place for an exile of uncertain duration. Such uncertainty was a relative blessing, since everyone lived under an instantly revocable stay of execution and certainty was given only to him who felt the pistol barrel at his neck. They chose Voronezh for their exile. There his health gradually came back and the aural hallucinations, the threats on his life from passersby and total strangers, declined and finally ceased altogether. But it was as if his experience, whatever it was, in the Lubianka and the lingering madness had shocked the poetry from his soul. He never mentioned his work and showed no inclination to resume it. Even so, their lives were not free of country bumpkin spies, with the crudely assumed familiarity that passed for social graces with these louts.

KROPOTKIN — (*Entering without knocking.*) So this is famous Comrade Poet Mandelstam and little wife? Good. I come to join you for discussion of poetry literature from which I understand you are important expert and writer of. Is it true you write poetries and this sort of literature? Mind if I sit? Good. Maybe I could drink glass of tea if you have.

NADIA — Would you prefer pine or cedar?

MANDELSTAM — And you are...?

KROPOTKIN — Simple worker in Voronezh glass factory. Kropotkin, Mitka Mitkovich. Father Mitka, also worker in glass factory.

MANDELSTAM — Strange. You strongly resemble a chap in uniform I saw checking identity papers at the station. Perhaps you have a twin, Kropotkin the other.

KROPOTKIN — No, only brother is much older, Ivan, also of...

MANDELSTAM — Glass factory, of course.

KROPOTKIN — You must have bad eyesight to make this confusion.

MANDELSTAM — On the contrary, I see right to the heart of things and with great clarity. For example, I can easily spot the motive when some illiterate who's never read a poem in his life wishes to engage in 'literary discussion.'

KROPOTKIN — If you could talk a little slower...It's hard to follow Moscow way of speaking.

MANDELSTAM — Saint Petersburg, actually.

KROPOTKIN — Where?

Takes out a stub of pencil and a small, crumpled notebook.

MANDELSTAM — Leningrad...I keep forgetting.

KROPOTKIN — So, listen, Mandelstam. I'm hearing you wrote something critical of beloved leader, General Secretary Stalin. For honest workman like myself this is hard thing to understand, why someone would say bad stuff with rhyming and so on about this great revolution hero. So we would like to know why you write this and also names of others who write such things.

MANDELSTAM — We?

KROPOTKIN — Fellow glass factory workers.

MANDELSTAM — The truth is I haven't written a poem in a long time and would certainly never commit to paper one to displease or criticize our esteemed general secretary. I've never been drawn to political poetry, for which I've been frequently chastised by the more dedicated revolutionaries. Aesthete, I was called, practitioner of art for art's sake, decadent...But such pearls drop wasted into your trough, eh, honest Kropotkin?

KROPOTKIN — If I'm understanding , you say you did not write such a poem, even if headquarters tells us...Never mind that...Okay, you deny it , I have to believe you. But in discussing poet literature

in general, what is the theory of such a work attacking great man and universal leader? What is social use of such a thing? I ask in general sense. Considering someone could get sent to prison such as we hear about you...why would a man do such a foolish thing?

MANDELSTAM — It does seem ill-advised, and speaking with a certain experience, not the best way to gain favor with the subject of the poem—if there was such a poem. Of course, I speak only hypothetically. However, since you seem not the worst of your type that I've encountered, I'll tell you a story that may throw some light on the matter. A very old story, one that's been told for generations in my family. For labeling purposes, we call it 'Tiger Milk.'

MANDELSTAM begins to pace back and forth in front of KROPOTKIN, pausing occasionally to look upward as if trying to remember what comes next.

Long ago, even before the time of Tsars, there lived a peasant-ancestor of mine, Osip, who owned two plots of land. One was on the bank of the River Alma and had soil so rich it would grow melons plump as babies, yams sweet as the smile of a drunken harlot, tomatoes red as the pierced heart of the martyr.

The other plot, which he had acquired in dowry from his wife's miserly father, was on a rocky hillside high above the far bank of the river, meager land fit only for weeds, burdock and stinging nettles and the stones with which the dusty soil was so generously sown. To make matters worse, it had lately become the haunt of an immense white tiger, whose lair was lined with the bones of unwary travelers. So Osip determined to abandon the barren plot and redouble his efforts on the richer one where life was safer and the rewards predictable.

But no sooner had Osip abandoned his barren acreage, when the crops in the richer began to wither and die and the new seeds fail to sprout. The soil hardened and cracked and the sparse crops it now gave forth could hardly be eaten: bitter, slimy yams, cabbages stinking like dirty socks when they cooked so that Osip's long-suffering wife had to step outside just to take a breath.

Desperate, Osip visits the oldest peasant in the village, one so wise in his stewardship he's grown rich enough to pay others to work for him.

KROPOTKIN — This one sounds like Kulak!

MANDELSTAM — Sorry, I seem to have lost the thread...where was I?

KROPOTKIN — Osip goes to see old peasant.

MANDELSTAM —(*Grinning.*) Nothing like an attentive audience... Anyway, the old man tells him, " You must work all your land, the poor along with the bountiful. The earth disdains you for neglecting your patrimony."

Osip objects : " But the stony soil, the weeds and nettles."

"Still," says the old peasant.

"It never rains and I have to carry every drop of water up the steep hill from the river."

"Even so," says the old peasant.

"And the terrible tiger who stalks the land."

" You must," says the old peasant, handing Osip a small cloth bag which holds a small seed, hard and rough as a stone. "When the ground is tilled, plant this."

And so, sweating with fear, Osip wades the river and makes his way to his fallow plot. He begins to pull the vicious weeds, tearing his hands on thorns. He scratches with a mattock the scabrous soil. He carries water from the river in a heavy jar, up and up, spilling most of it on the way. This he repeats for weeks, weeding, hoeing , planting, all under the terrible eye of the tiger, which he feels is only toying with him like a cat with a mouse before it pulls off the little legs and swallows them, one after the other.

For its part, the tiger is both curious and suspicious of the foolish man, working at the very mouth of its lair, littered with the skulls and teeth of other transgressors. It bides its time: the man keeps returning and can be eaten at whim. In the meantime, since the tiger is somewhat bored, he finds entertainment in the man's pointless activity.

One day, from the seed the old man has given Osip, an odd plant sprouts. It grows inches in a single day, and when, to torment the man, the tiger tears it out of the ground that night, it springs from the root still taller the next day, with full-blown dark leaves like green swords, and white berries that give off a pale liquid with a bitter smell. Though the tiger attacks the plant each night, clawing at it and spraying it with his rank must, each assault only makes the plant stronger and taller.

At length the tiger withdraws again to watch and wait, and on the appointed day of harvest, Osip pulls the plant evenly from the ground as the old man has instructed and carries it down to the river with the tiger padding close behind, its fiery breath on his neck, its spittle wetting his shoulders so that Osip trembles as with a sudden chill, suspecting that each step will be his last. But when he steps into the river, the tiger turns and with two great bounds disappears.

Osip takes the plant to the old peasant who says, "Tiger Milk, it is called. When the beast comes in the night with its teeth and claws and its rank must, the plant draws it all in and grows the stronger. It is deadly for men to eat, but make of it a tea to water your ground and the earth will yield up your crops as richly as ever."

And so it was.

KROPOTKIN -

His expression dreamy and pleasantly sated.

This story is familiar. I think maybe Babka told it to me.

MANDELSTAM —(*Amused.*)

That's how I heard it too. Perhaps we are related by blood.

KROPOTKIN — But I thought this was supposed to be story of poets, not of some rich peasants, hoarding food from the state. In this day and age these kulaks would be standing in front of firing squad. Where is the point in this story?

MANDELSTAM — Everywhere in particular and nowhere in general like God in his universe. But you've resumed being a boring chap who clearly can't hear what's put to him. Spies must be assigned to a backwater like Voronezh for a good reason.

KROPOTKIN — You can say what you want and I won't be insulted, Comrade Mandelstam. I value your friendship and am honored to have this discussion of poetic literature with you. Tell me, what is your opinion of Comrade Alexei Pushkin's poetry?

MANDELSTAM — Pushkin? Pushkin? Every time they send some idiot to spy on you, he has to bring up Pushkin. You'd think the Cheka didn't know there was any other Russian poet, that Lomonosov, Lermontov, Baratynski and Beli had ever been born! Get the hell out, you illiterate cretin! Tell your masters to at least have the courtesy to send an educated snoop!

KROPOTKIN —

Makes a hasty exit.

MANDELSTAM —

Shouting out the door.

And it's ALEXANDER Pushkin, Kropot-cretin!

NADIA — You always told me your ancestors were rabbis and teachers. Now I hear about this peasant. What else should I know?

MANDELSTAM- In those days there was nothing but peasants. The rabbis and teachers showed up when they found the peasants would feed them.

NADIA — And those tomatoes?

MANDELSTAM — Smuggled into the story from my visit to Italy.

NADIA — Strange you've never told this story before.

MANDELSTAM — It just arrived, more or less fully armed. Oddly, it seems applicable.

NADIA — To the suicidal risk of writing poetry that offends our leader?

MANDELSTAM — In a way. Sometimes a high wall has to be breached to free what's locked behind it.

NADIA — Even so, it's not such a good idea to insult these small-town agents. Each is as jealous of his domain as any despot. That sort of thing could be the death of you.

MANDELSTAM — No doubt. But in the grave, my lips will still be moving.

NADIA — That has a nice ring, is that from one of your poems? I can't quite place it.

MANDELSTAM — In the grave my lips will still be moving? No. At least, not yet. Perhaps it will find a home in time...Shall we take a stroll? It's quite a lovely night with the Voronezh moon.

They step outside into the bright moonlight, link arms and stroll off.

Curtain

