

They're cutting the catalpa tree (*Catalpa speciosa*) in Essen, Germany

by Mia Avramut

A Russian team of two or three, humming Visotsky, whirring shouts of "rozovyy"1 , and "samalyot"2, and "careful it has thorns of peridot", with "pravda zhizni"3 and "tebja"4, they swallow fog, they spit tabak5.

I didn't see, but I recall:

They cut the tall specious tree storms snapped the night in two or three.

At times they pause most piously to count each ring of truth, drive nails into the stiff cathartic spine, divine if this unseasoned cigar topiary agrees with its own everlasting terms of use. Between parched lips, the slender seedpods split to spill their onus of unformed teeth. One more turn, just one more, into unyielding outer bark... and sacrosanct, the blight of fanged saw breaks free. Above the cut, broad leaves of dazed pubescent sunny green point at each

other's second til no more. Untouched but bruised, a hundred censers tassel out to bless the grass with purple gold. Trapped in the living chalice, clay just sighed. And like a doubting Thomas, the sphinx moth ponders one last feast, one more tooth mark on the sinew of wasting trinities.

There's but one word: krov' za krov'6.

So ancient looms this abbey that it never asked for coins, never invented change of hearts, or ism wine, or turns of luck. So brazen is its company of phosphorescent soutanes! that it calls for empty veins. How would they know in each torn branch I hid a blade, and

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in each sane twig laid a grudge?

I didn't hear, but I recall:

They do not care, they do not see if it was gale, if it's disease. The tree drips

sweat, the pores spit sap. A stunted stumped hum recreates the same tridented chaos, down to splinters, as when in razor solitude and shame someone who loves you dies.

I am a woman born of bark, hunted down at my early bright, desired in the

afternoon. But I have moved through doubtless temple gardens, heard the unheard,

read the arcane. This winged skull — wabi sabi, bad luck, and sanctorum — portrayed canopic memories of illicit weddings without issue, along the holy river, in bazaars and lazarets, and at the foot of hills where tamaris and sycamores grow. Until a furious spring remorse and thaw washed me out here, under the eleventh-hour tree. My bony feet resemble dry leaves and pod fruit, it's why I always smile. Their toes exposed, terminal buds, know no march stigma anymore.

"Hallo, and morning, Silvia" axemen bells roar. Who might she be? She's of the everwoods, no doubt, and I am not. I speak a nonexistent language, like the bitter seed that through her sharpest pain gave voice to the catalpa tree, and swiftly vanished wrapped in her spent wings. Those were the days of Baba Yaga's youth, and mine.

"Get up and dance, you've limber limbs! until you bleed, cask," they laugh and snub out.

"My friends and fellow priests," I long to say, "I've seen the world. It's changing. I took notes."

I don't respond, but stare a muzhik's brief and lonesome "here, me." The

bloodless heartwood lies still on its dark side, knees by chest, in a thought's permafrost.

Let us attend. Over the oblong crown I'll drop this payment, this
embroidered
shawl of lies, silver coin - weighted in four knots for corners. I have
arrived, all grown up now, and wise, I done arrived.
Blood on my heels.

* * * Catalpa: from American Indian language of the Carolinas,
literally "'head wing"

- 1) Rozovyj: rose-colored (Rus.)
- 2) Samalyot: airplane (Rus.)
- 3) Pravda zhizni: truth life (Rus.)
- 4) Tebja: you (Rus.)
- 5) Tabak: tobacco (Rus.)
- 6) Krov: blood; lifeblood; sap; claret
za: for (Rus.)

