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Symphony No. 2

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Symphony No. 2

for George Mihailov

Dr. Babuts notes: "'Symphony No. 2' is an attempt to adapt musical ideas and structures to the needs of poetry. On a practical level, the musical tempi are used to suggest a possible reading speed for each movement or section. Since the poem is not intended as a political statement, the author has deliberately omitted all references to the country of origin. The instructions, given here by an older man to the three would-be refugees, should be construed more as a foretaste of a climb than as a blueprint for crossing the border. After all, on this particular occasion the attempt to cross fails."

I Allegro

To be specific, then, imagine your attempt to cross
As a poker theme in which you must beat
Illusion, thirst, and the mask of darkness,
The last one working both for you and against you.
You must balance your leaps between alpine peaks,
Compass in hand, bet that as the crow flies
Is also the shortest line for human feet.
You'll be introduced to the three R's of fear,
Already encoded in your unknown heart.
You're three and the game begins changing trains,
Facing ID checks, policemen and civilians,
Who stare at your luggage on the rack
And turn your thoughts into stones.
Show them the straight flush of acting normal;
Sustain your bluff with border zone permits;
And above all don't panic. Belief's the ace.

II Andante

You whisper like thieves in the night.
When a dog barks, you become intimate with fear.
Still, the mystic, greenish flicker of the compass
Reassures you. Luck is on your side.
(Teases you from time to time,
As when a stone, which rolls under your foot,
Bounds and rebounds over your companion behind you
And mingles with his tubercular cry.)
You stop to drink, to catch your breath,
To sense the night is in a state of flux.
In the uncertain hour before daybreak,
Two eyes will shine in the jugs of darkness,
Like spiritual monsters in a dream.
Stone them away and watch dawn spring
Miraculously from the spot of stones.

III Allegretto scherzando

Sheep bells drift into the morning sun:
Teling, tolang, tolaang, tling, tling . . .
Your water will spill. Divide the wet bread.
The milk idea will send you in a circle of thirst.
More than once you'll look for a shepherd's hut and find
A play of light among branches and yellow leaves.
But when the garish sun wipes his fake smile,
Pull yourselves together and move again,
Without shoes to best the noiseless sheep,
Clambering on your hands and knees.

Let your thoughts race, goat sinewed, echo and illusion,
 In a scherzo of the last stunted tree.
 This is the thick of the game.
 Unsmiling now the cliffs hunch their bald heads together.
 Kanin deals himself an ace of endurance,
 A sheer drop that will be good till midnight.
 As you stumble, exhausted, on a patch of grass at the top,
 Horned heads of rams struggle in your blood,
 And the smoke of dream fills your lungs.
 Your winning streak comes to an end
 With a dry tongue. Your bet is called,
 You have to show your hand, you're measured,
 Your will and heart, and your topography.
 But the management, intent on having the show go on,
 Sends long legged stars to dance on the stage.
 They'll be close enough for you to see their shaded eyes,
 The river eyes that carry wisdom.
 Their voice is like that of sirens who know your past,
 Who tease your mind beyond beeswax protection.
 Do not follow, nor try to number them
 As they walk across the border in plain sight
 And into the northern abyss descending,
 Light beyond the shadow of a darkness.

IV Allegro con brio

You've now entered the second stage of thirst:
 You'll lick wet grass to equal the sensation of water.
 Perhaps you've reached the border, but without water,
 The descent of the northwestern slope
 Becomes a blurred image in a darker pit.
 And so you come up with an alternative
 To retrace your steps to the nearest stream,
 And be back at the hotel before dawn,
 Before they notice your disappearing act.
 The return is a rout feeding on itself.
 It's every man for himself, *sauve qui peut*.
 Gravity explodes. Cymbals and kettledrums
 Gobble up your mezzoforte leaps.
 The orchestra strains towards a final bang.
 Saplings and branches dance crazily
 In and out of your field of vision.
 You're three moving points fleeing the coordinates of thirst.
 You shiver among bleeding stones,
 And appeal to the sun to save the dawn,
 To give you a chance for a bar of rest.
 In due course, under the fading tropes of darkness,
 The first light like an oboe solo
 Guides you to a babbling spring in the clearing.
 Two of you steal back into the quiet town;
 The third comes later like one from a ghostland.
 It is noon of the third day and the game is over.

—*Nicolae Babuts*