

THE WORD

VLADIMIR NABOKOV

Swept out of the valley night by an inspired oneiric wind, I stood at the edge of a road, under a clear pure-gold sky, in an extraordinary mountainous land. Without looking, I sensed the lustre, the angles, and the facets of immense mosaic cliffs, dazzling precipices, and the mirrorlike glint of multitudinous lakes lying somewhere below, behind me. My soul was seized by a sense of heavenly iridescence, freedom, and loftiness: I knew that I was in Paradise. Yet, within this earthly soul, a single earthly thought rose like a piercing flame—and how jealously, how grimly I guarded it from the aura of gigantic beauty that surrounded me. This thought, this naked flame of suffering, was the thought of my earthly homeland. Barefoot and penniless, at the edge of a mountain road, I awaited the kind, luminous denizens of Heaven, while a wind, like the foretaste of a miracle, played in my hair, filled the gorges with a crystal hum, and ruffled the fabled silks of the trees that blossomed amid the cliffs lining the road. Tall grasses lapped at the tree trunks like tongues of fire; large flowers broke smoothly from the glittering branches and, like airborne goblets brimming with sunlight, glided through the air, puffing out their translucent convex petals. Their sweet, damp aroma reminded me of all the finest things I had experienced in my life.

Suddenly, the road on which I stood, breathless from the shimmer, was filled with a tempest of wings. Swarming out of the blinding depths came the angels I awaited, their folded wings pointing sharply upward. Their tread was ethereal; they were like colored clouds in motion, and their transparent visages were motionless except for the rapturous tremor of their radiant lashes. Among them, turquoise birds flew with peals of happy girlish laughter, and lithe orange animals loped, fantastically speckled with black. The creatures coiled through the air, silently thrusting out their satin

paws to catch the airborne flowers as they circled and soared, pressing past me with flashing eyes.

Wings, wings, wings! How can I describe their convolutions and their tints? They were all-powerful and soft—tawny, purple, deep blue, velvety black, with fiery dust on the rounded tips of their bowed feathers. Like precipitous clouds they stood, imperiously poised above the angels' luminous shoulders; now and then an angel, in a kind of marvellous transport, as if unable to restrain his bliss, suddenly, for a single instant, unfurled his winged beauty, and it was like a burst of sunlight, like the sparkling of millions of eyes.

They passed in throngs, glancing heavenward. Their eyes were like jubilant chasms, and in those eyes I saw the syncope of flight. They came with gliding step, showered with flowers. The flowers spilled their humid sheen in flight; the sleek, bright beasts played, whirling and climbing; the birds chimed with bliss, soaring and dipping. I, a blinded, quaking beggar, stood at the edge of the road, and within my beggar's soul the selfsame thought kept prattling: Cry out to them, tell them—oh, tell them that on the most splendid of God's stars there is a land—my land—that is dying in agonizing darkness. I had the sense that, if I could grasp with my hand but one quivering shimmer, I would bring to my country such joy that human souls would instantly be illumined, and would circle beneath the plash and crackle of resurrected springtime, to the golden thunder of reawakened temples.

Reaching out with trembling hands, striving to bar the angels' path, I began clutching at the hems of their bright chasubles, at the undulating, torrid fringes of their curved wings, which slipped through my fingers like downy flowers. I moaned, I dashed about, I deliriously beseeched their indulgence, but the angels trod ever forward, oblivious of me, their chiselled faces turned upward. They streamed in hosts to a heavenly feast, into an unendurably

resplendent glade, where roiled and breathed a divinity about which I dared not think. I saw fiery cobwebs, splashes, designs on gigantic crimson, russet, violet wings, and, above me, a downy rustling passed in waves. The rainbow-crowned turquoise birds pecked, the flowers floated off from shiny boughs. “Wait, hear me out!” I cried, trying to embrace an angel’s vaporous legs, but the feet, impalpable, unstoppable, slipped through my extended hands, and the borders of the broad wings only scorched my lips as they swept past. In the distance, a golden clearing between lush, vivid cliffs was filling with the surging storm; the angels were receding; the birds ceased their high-pitched agitated laughter; the flowers no longer flew from the trees; I grew feeble, I fell mute. . . .

Then a miracle occurred. One of the last angels lingered, turned, and quietly approached me. I caught sight of his cavernous, staring, diamond eyes under the imposing arches of his brows. On the ribs of his outspread wings glistened what seemed like frost. The wings themselves were gray, an ineffable tint of gray, and each feather ended in a silvery sickle. His visage, the faintly smiling outline of his lips, and his straight clear forehead reminded me of features I had seen on earth. The curves, the gleaming, the charm of all the faces I had ever loved—the features of people who had long since departed from me—seemed to merge into one wondrous countenance. All the familiar sounds that came separately into contact with my hearing now seemed to blend into a single, perfect melody.

He came up to me. He smiled. I could not look at him. But, glancing at his legs, I noticed a network of azure veins on his feet and one pale birthmark. From these veins, from that little spot, I understood that he had not yet totally abandoned earth, that he might understand my prayer.

Then, bending my head, pressing my singed palms, smeared with bright clay, to my half-blinded eyes, I began recounting my

sorrows. I wanted to explain how wondrous my land was, and how horrid its black syncope, but I did not find the words I needed. Hurrying, repeating myself, I babbled about trifles, about some burned-down house where once the sunny sheen of parquet had been reflected in an inclined mirror. I prattled of old books and old lindens, of knickknacks, of my first poems in a cobalt schoolboy notebook, of some gray boulder, overgrown with wild raspberries, in the middle of a field filled with scabiosa and daisies—but the most important thing I simply could not express. I grew confused, I stopped short, I began anew, and again, in my helpless, rapid speech, I spoke of rooms in a cool and resonant country house, of lindens, of my first love, of bumblebees sleeping on the scabiosa. It seemed to me that any minute—any minute!—I would get to what was most important, I would explain the whole sorrow of my homeland. But for some reason I could remember only minute, quite mundane things that were unable to speak or weep those corpulent, burning, terrible tears, about which I wanted to but could not tell. . . .

I fell silent, raised my head. The angel smiled a quiet, attentive smile, gazed fixedly at me with his elongated diamond eyes. I felt he understood me.

“Forgive me,” I exclaimed, meekly kissing the birthmark on his light-hued foot. “Forgive that I am capable of speaking only about the ephemeral, the trivial. You understand, though, my kindhearted, my gray angel. Answer me, help me, tell me, what can save my land?”

Embracing my shoulders for an instant with his dovelike wings, the angel pronounced a single word, and in his voice I recognized all those beloved, those silenced voices. The word he spoke was so marvellous that, with a sigh, I closed my eyes and bowed my head still lower. The fragrance and the melody of the word spread through my veins, rose like a sun within my brain; the countless

cavities within my consciousness caught up and repeated its lustrous edenic song. I was filled with it. Like a taut knot, it beat within my temple, its dampness trembled upon my lashes, its sweet chill fanned through my hair, and it poured heavenly warmth over my heart.

I shouted it, I revelled in its every syllable, I violently cast up my eyes, which were filled with the radiant rainbows of joyous tears.

Oh, Lord—the winter dawn glows greenish in the window, and I remember not what word it was that I shouted.

(Translated, from the Russian, by Dmitri Nabokov)