

## THREE SONGS OF THE CELESTA (From "CELESTA", a collection of poems in prose)

ANTANAS ŠKĖMA

### CELESTA

Tan tin tin tan — the celesta hammers away. Here I turn off the light, and darkness drinks me in. I lie like one immured but still permitted to breathe. I lie like one to be crucified whom nobody will nail to the cross. I lie and wait.

I absorb sounds. My soul was a dry sponge, the metallic sounds of the celesta fill its crevices and canals. The soul swells and bloats, and I am immortal again.

That is why I request a Madonna.

She is six. Her hands are meager and dirty, she was rummaging in a garbage can and she found a wilting carnation. Her hair is a thorn-bush. She is framed in a landscape: a three story house with peeled off plaster, a "Halo" advertisement in the window (wash your hair with the miraculous fluid), a skyscraper's Gothic in the horizon.

In her eyes: dry tears; the soul has sucked up the salty liquid spongelike, only the rainbow glimmer of light remained. Her little shoes are beat, she lost her tin button, her leather belt drags after her on the cement. And there is only one fairy tale of which my Madonna knows the beginning:

...Once upon a time there lived Billy Brown. His nose was large, his knife sharp, his red boots adorned with star-shaped spurs. The most notorious badman of North Dakota, he was stopped cold a hundred years ago...

You there, you dutiful angels, descend upon the cement! My Madonna needs elegant escorts. Let the thorn-bush blossom with wilting carnations, let the Mayor himself wash Madonna's hands; Billy Brown, the most notorious badman in North Dakota will hand him the silver vessel.

She wears a blue sweater. My Madonna is six. She shall give birth to a Son, sadder than herself.

Tan tin tin tan — the celesta hammers away.

### THE FIREMEN ARE COMING

Little bells, color of gold. Red varnish trickles like spilt jam on an oilcloth. Metal ladder — folded wings of a grasshopper before jumping a field poppy. The firemen are coming, the golden bells are tinkling. Coming to North Seventh, past the Italian's store, past the artificial bricks of the church, past my house. On North Seventh, on the fourth floor a woman stands in an open window and clutches a television set to her. It is heavy, the woman rocks to and fro. A net will be spread below, the staircase to the fourth floor has already collapsed.

A plane is winging toward California, oranges from California on the table, their skin peels hard like the hide of a lean cow.

The fire — brigade has gone to North Seventh.

There is a forgotten summer-house in Lithuania. A spruce forest surrounds it. Naive and stiff as painting of Rousseau. No hares, no does are there, an old cat licks her frayed coat, blue mice rustle on the broken floor, they are blue because shadows stretch like flying spears. Mother's embroidery lies on the staircase. Two girls are plucking flowers, their little legs are bent, the flowers are toreador-straight. White fungus grow in the rooms. The smell of white fungus recalls the dark ones in Harlem. A broken inkpot scattered in the corridor, its ink long since washed away by rain. It is my inkpot, once I smashed it on the floor because I could not solve my arithmetical problem: The merchant bought woolen cloth for... This 13 my summer-house, I have no mother anymore, white fungus resemble tombstones crowded in a stonecutter's backyard. This is my presence in the past.

The firemen will extinguish the fire in North Seventh, the television set will not break, the woman will move to Bronx.

## CANTICLE

Sharp Gothic is hung on the horns of the moon. A dashing cowboy had nimbly tied the noose, and the foundations of the Gothic are like roots of a tree uprooted by the storm. Christ stands before me. He prays and asks. But I cannot fly and I shall not cut the bloated string. Therefore I beg Him to sit down, and he does take a seat, the rope tight around his neck, Christ resembling one hanged and dressed up for a festival. I shake his hand, it is of wood. I caress his features, they are of wood, a mask from Tasmania, from Bali, from Peru, a wooden Smutkelis from Lithuania, a golden icon from Byzantium.

My canticle had to be.

In the Times Square subway station a bum sits on a bench and patches his pants. A hungry Jewess gave me a glance, would she perhaps lie down together. I do not know how to lie crazylike, I shall never learn. The commuters group themselves like assorted patients, like monastic orders, like Jews condemned for cremation. Astoria, 7 Ave, Grand Central, Lexington Avenue Express. One has to hold on enamel railings, one must drink black coffee in electric light, there are many Santa Clauses around. Christ slowly turns around Himself like a mechanical toy. He prays and asks. The bum goes nowhere, he sits and patches his pants.

My canticle had to be.

Croon you disc crooners of creaking throats, cry you relatives of a crashed plane, croak you advertisers of the prostituted Freud for twenty cents, I shall tear my garments like Job in the desert, like the suffocating child who slipped into a "Norge" refrigerator while playing and got caught. I will take you all to the tavern on the corner, all the drinkers shall rise, all the whores shall have the right to feel scrow, and the juke box shall play, and play, and play, and play —

My canticle which had to be.

I walk up Broadway. To a movie-house which screams and brags about the film "Quo Vadis." I walk to the North Pole, to Dalai-Lama's bedroom in Lhasa, to my father's summer-house, toward the black sky. Silver splashes in fragments of glass in jewelry and novelty stores, a truck has smashed in the side of a yellow taxi. The "Bond" statues are separated by an artificial waterfall. They do not admit me to the film "Quo Vadis." The seats are reserved, the tickets sold out.

My canticle is being born because it had to be.

My shoulders ache and pain throbs in my temples. I stick out my tongue, drops from the crown of thorns fall on it, I wet my lips with my tongue, blood tastes better than honey, thus painted Salvadore Dali. Hammer blows, like bomb explosions amidst the ruins of Berlin, and slender nails suck themselves into my

flesh. I behold the soldiers' hands, they are real and veined. The sky is of greenish blue, the dust of my cross rises to meet it. I am within the tree, and I am above the earth, I am an old totem and a modern sculpture, a twisted cable of flesh, by me and through me one can pass to paradise, I am the sword of Koran and the scales of Osiris. I am a signpost that shall never move. Golgotha — the fall of a flaming plane to an abyss, the cry of a four year old upon his mother's corpse, steps of a pregnant girl, the agony of a man between interrogations in a solitary cell, the silence of a paralytic in his bed. A song of love that ended vibrates through Broadway, there are many beggars on Broadway, sailors press girls' hands, my cross rises higher than the tallest skyscraper — it is an advertisement of aromatic soap. Someone already chants my canticle which had to be.

He stands before me and observes my face. He is alone. I perceive myself in the apples of his eyes. I see the crown of thorns, the blood, the yearning for death. His tarpaulin pants are nicely patched, ants crawl on His wooden features, fat and confident, they gnaw, and gnaw, and gnaw, and gnaw. The two of us would gladly sit down on high stools in the bum's tavern, the beer is cheaper there and the glasses are heavy. But we two cannot even touch each other, all we have

is a canticle, and it is eternal like death.

O chant my canticle, it is musically penned.

Sharp Gothic is hung on the horns of the moon. A dashing cowboy has nimbly tied the noose. Christ from a moist niche stands before me. A mask from Tasmania, from Bali, from Peru, a wooden Smutkelis from Lithuania, a golden iccn from Byzantium. He prays and asks.

Christ slowly turns around Himself like a mechanical toy.

I stick out my tongue, drops from the crown of thorns fall on it, I wet my lips with my tongue, blood tastes better than honey, thus painted Salvadore Dali.

Hammer blows like bomb explosions midst the ruins of Berlin.

They don't admit me to the film "Quo Vadis," the seats are reserved, the tickets sold out.

Millions of Golgothas around us, and we two are in Golgotha. His tarpaulin pants are nicely patched, ants crawl on his wooden features.

What if we sit down on high stools in the bum's tavern, where beer is cheaper and the glasses are heavy?.

But we two cannot even touch each other. All we have is the canticle, and it is eternal like death.

Such is my canticle which had to be.

***Translated by J.Z.***