GOGOL: FIVE PORTRAITS

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1. *Walking Alone*

Like coming in off the world
where rain is falling

into the stove put out to rust—
seed-cakes in the pockets

of your coat. Now you're out walking
on successive afternoons,

gathering notes for one or two letters.
Mark them vulnerable. Ease your body

into the shallows of the pond
by entering head first

allowing the mirror surface
to part the yellow hair of your forelock.

Arch your back and return to the surface.

2. *A Letter to his Father*

Allow for success. I have a story
prepared for the fire and I mean
to give you this: a long walk

beside the hedgerow. Snow falls
and the light slanting through trees
diminishes along with the lamp oil.

The afternoon is failing
and this is a way to get at
almost anything one could find useful

when writing letters:
I had no emotions at all,
and treated the things around me

as so many objects planted there
for my pleasure and comfort.
I had no particular affection

for anyone, except you,
and even that feeling was
dictated solely by nature.

I have tried to get across to you
though you are almost dead to me now.
My father was last seen shaving with a knife

and talking about sidelong glances: a trip
over the frozen canal for a lump of bread.
He would write these things down.

A sidelong glance provides the kind of vantage point
from which the whole body can be seen in profile . . .

I also have a request of you mama:
never praise me in the presence of anyone.
Also, you have my portrait.

Hide it in a back room,
sew it up in a canvas
and don't show it to anyone.

3. *A Love Letter*

A strange thing. As soon as I drink tea,
someone invisible tugs at my arm telling me

to write to you. Why would this be?
If only this desire appeared during coffee,

then at least it would be understandable.
In my memory you cannot escape

from coffee: you poured it yourself
and put sugar in it for me; but during tea

you performed no service. Why is this?
I get mixed up and become like that respectable citizen

and nobleman who all his life kept asking himself
the question: why am I Khrisanfy and not Ivan

and not Maxim, and not Onufry, and not even Kondrat
and not Prokofy. Surely you know why

you are more vivid in my thoughts after tea.
Surely once having drunk it you imagined

you were pouring it out on my head
and poured out your cup on the floor.

Or wanting to hurl the saucer at my head
you hit the upper lip and front tooth

of your doctor, who had just finished
telling you how the whole town marvels

at the patience of your Grisha; or perhaps your Liza
taking a cup of hot tea and getting ready to drink,

shouted at the top of her voice: "Oh, mama,
imagine it—Gogol is sitting here in the cup!"

You rushed from your place: "Where is Gogol?"
Liza undertook to catch him with a spoon.

"Oh, it isn't Gogol, it's a fly!" And you saw
that it was a fly and said: "Oh why

is the fly which so bored me already so far away?"
In a word something must have happened

or I wouldn't have felt such a strong desire
to write you after tea . . .

4. *In Delirium*

I've entered through the hearth grate
this snow-grey, lamp-lit horse—

two eyes and a mouthful of teeth,
all of them crooked like a fence

and then the others stand motionless,
frozen, the edge of the wood: clouds,
horses, hundreds now, facing the lake.

Today I went to the field
where the horses were almost hidden
by the drifts. I saw them cross

the patched ice
and some with their coats torn
appeared to be sleeping

so I touched them.
I thought of how I made them go
from here to here like the hut

in the story I'll write:
"Who are you and what are you
hanging about at people's doors for?"

A light wind whipping up,
I stood by the window
in the lamplight and thought

what I did not say—that horses
get into me every night, stitched
and painted in their blue saddles.

Now they ride up one or more hills
to stop here in the light
cast off by my breath.

I'll tell you this so you'll know
the mane from the lamplight, so you'll know
that the light is really shining at the window . . .

5. *The Last Trip Home*

A child of five sits watching the darkness
creep over the windowpane. A cat enters
and breaks the stillness. Nicolai huddles
on the sofa and watches the animal
move toward him as it cries:

Never shall I forget its motion,
its stretching, its soft paws
with their claws ticking and ticking
on the floorboards, and its green eyes
sparkling with an evil light.
I was afraid. I climbed up the back
of the sofa and clung to the wall.
"Kitty, kitty," I murmured
to give myself courage;
and then I leaped down,
grabbed the unresisting cat,
ran into the garden,
and threw the animal into the pond.
Again and again, while the cat swam
and tried to return to the surface,
I pushed it under with a stick . . .

The mantle clock is chiming
with its tiny golden angels
rising slightly
at the half hour.

In the late afternoon
a brown cat sleeps soundly
on a window ledge.

Nicolai, ask your question.
Your sisters will listen.
Did you confuse the pond with the window?