

# THE MOTH

A Play in Five Acts by  
Pyotr Gladilin

Translated by John Freedman

***Important Note:***

*This is a rough copy of a translation-in-progress.*

John Freedman  
jfreed16@gmail.com  
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**Characters:**

Andrei Isayevich Kinchin - colonel, regiment CO  
Kolya Lebedushkin - Private first class  
Captain Bagayev - company commander  
Senior Lieutenant Yuvachyov - adjutant to the regiment  
CO  
Morozov - military MD, commander of the medical unit

*From the Author:*

*An army garrison stands on the edge of the wild steppe. The dead of winter is ready to set in and the northern steppe will soon become as white as milk. The wind howls like a wild animal, cutting into the cracks and setting up the roar of a thousand voices. Off in the distance we hear a tin sheet flapping in the wind and the sound of something beating on an anvil.*

*A small military orchestra consisting of three musicians plays on the town square - one drummer and two trumpet players. One of the musicians misses notes constantly. Nonetheless, these three people establish some sense of order in the environment. They subdue, to some extent, the sense of total chaos around them. It is not quite so terrifying to live in this world where there is at least even a little bit of order defined by the short pauses between musical sounds.*

**ACT ONE****Scene One**

*The CO's office.*

COLONEL

Look at that snow coming down. Good thing we got our men into winter gear in time. Winter starts here in October. Summer in July.

ADJUTANT

Colonel, sir!

COLONEL

The bathhouse doesn't even help. I haven't been able to warm up for two days. Bring me some hot tea!

ADJUTANT

We have an emergency sir.

COLONEL

I never used to complain. I never grumbled. And now I whimper to myself and enjoy the sensation of my own weakness. Speak up. What emergency? Speak up!

ADJUTANT

I don't even know where to start.

COLONEL

God forbid you should die in winter like Voskoboinikov. I remember how we lowered him down into that frozen grave. Then get out of here and think about what you want to say. Come back when you know.

ADJUTANT

Yes sir! *(He spins on his heels and leaves.)*

COLONEL

My God, it stinks in here. It's a north-westerly wind. They built that damn pig sty up there so they'd have some place to dump two tons of rotten food a day. Only they should have built it

fifteen miles [20 kilometers] from here, not on the other side of our fence. Oh, Voskoboinikov! I didn't like your cold death. No, sir. I'll go see my nephew on the Black Sea to die. It's the subtropics down there. The earth is warm. My bones don't like the cold. I slept badly again. A glass of vodka doesn't even help anymore.  
 ADJUTANT: (*Returns with a glass of tea.*) Colonel, sir.

COLONEL

Yes.

ADJUTANT

We never had an emergency like this.

COLONEL

Well, put a smile on my face.

ADJUTANT

In Company Five, uh, how do I say this -

COLONEL

Go think about it.

ADJUTANT

Let me pull my thoughts together.

COLONEL

A-bout face! March!

*The Adjutant turns and leaves.*

COLONEL

Leave the tea here. Forty years in the army. My life went by like a week's leave. Not that I regret it.

*Enter the Adjutant.*

ADJUTANT

Colonel, sir. May I?

COLONEL

Please do.

ADJUTANT

In Company Five Private First Class Lebedushkin has turned into a girl.

COLONEL

You want to repeat that?

ADJUTANT

In Company Five Private First Class Lebedushkin has turned into a girl.

COLONEL

In what sense? What the hell are you talking about?

ADJUTANT

That's what I'm telling you. It makes no sense. Yesterday he was a soldier like any other soldier. But today when they led him to the bathhouse he wasn't a soldier any more. He was a woman, sir; of the female persuasion! He was completely lacking in masculine virtues!

COLONEL

What did he have in their place?

ADJUTANT

Feminine virtues. Breasts and all the rest. To say nothing of all the other corresponding bodily proportions. And he speaks in a soprano.

COLONEL

Are you trying to tell me that one of our recruits has turned into a woman?

ADJUTANT

Yes sir!

COLONEL

Is she pretty?

ADJUTANT

Not bad at all, sir.

COLONEL

Is this hearsay or did you see for yourself?

ADJUTANT

Both, sir.

COLONEL

Is she young or old?

ADJUTANT

She's a young one, sir.

COLONEL

Are you speaking in metaphors? Has one of our brave, virile soldiers fallen under the influence of depression?

ADJUTANT

No sir! I mean it literally.

COLONEL

Get out of here, you moron! I've had it with your jokes!

ADJUTANT

I swear on a stack of bibles! On the pain of sin! I swear to our Lord Jesus Christ that in Company Five, Private Lebedushkin, who used to be shaved bald, has turned into a pretty girl of nineteen with a hairdo. Cross my heart and hope to die!

COLONEL

Where is she?

ADJUTANT

She's waiting in the hall.

COLONEL

Get her in here!

*The Adjutant leaves and returns with a girl.*

GIRL

Colonel, sir! Private Lebedushkin reporting on orders!

COLONEL

Is this the same famous Lebedushkin who tried to throw a live grenade out of a 25-foot trench and damn near killed everybody?

ADJUTANT

Yes sir.

COLONEL

Looks like him. Lebedushkin, is that you?

GIRL

Yes sir, colonel. It's me.

COLONEL

What's your company?

GIRL

Company Five, sir.

COLONEL

Get Bagayev in here!

ADJUTANT

He's waiting in the corridor, sir. (*Leaves and comes back with Captain Bagayev.*)

BAGAYEV

Captain Bagayev reporting as per your command, sir.

COLONEL

Is this your soldier?

BAGAYEV

Yes sir, colonel.

COLONEL

Go on. Talk! Save your ass.

BAGAYEV

This is what happened to our soldier, sir. Or, at least, all that is left of our soldier.

COLONEL

And that's all you have to say?

BAGAYEV

Yes sir.

COLONEL

You are pushing your luck in a very rickety cart, captain. When were you drafted?

GIRL

This spring.

COLONEL

Where?

GIRL

Moscow. The Sokol military district.

BAGAYEV

I transferred him from the recruitment center myself. He was a boy then.

COLONEL

And I was on the verge of getting a division. So much for general's stripes.

BAGAYEV

No regulations have been violated in the company entrusted to me. The recruit passed two medical inspections. I've got the paperwork.

COLONEL: Get me the head of the medical unit!

ADJUTANT

In the corridor, sir. He's waiting. One second.  
(Leaves and returns with Doctor Morozov.)

MOROZOV

Colonel, sir.

COLONEL

Are you sure this is our soldier? Maybe it's a sheep that wandered in from the farm?

MOROZOV

There is no doubt, sir.

COLONEL

Can you provide a scientific explanation for what has happened?

MOROZOV

Nature knows the flat-finned fish that changes its sex once every three minutes, although this phenomenon has never been observed among mammals or soldiers. I think a report to the Ministry of Defense in Moscow is in order.

COLONEL

Hold on there with your Moscow! My God, you get a pimple on your ass and it's off to Moscow.

ADJUTANT

That's what I say, sir!

COLONEL

Tell me. Did you have homosexual tendencies before joining the army?

GIRL

No, sir.

COLONEL

Do you have a girlfriend at home?

GIRL

I got a letter from her yesterday, sir. Her name's Masha.

COLONEL

Do you love her?

GIRL

I would prefer not to answer that, sir. That's a private matter.

COLONEL

Then this metamorphosis took place in a single day.

BAGAYEV

Yes, sir. He was at roll call last evening.

COLONEL

All right. Only, how do you like that? We receive a boy from his parents and return to them a creature of the opposite sex. I can imagine the scandal that will cause.

GIRL

I don't have a father. And mother won't be disappointed. She always wanted a girl. Colonel, sir, let me go home!

COLONEL

Tell me, Lebedushkin, what do you think of your transformation?

BAGAYEV

*(Offensively.)* Miss Lebedushkin.

COLONEL

Shut your trap, Bagayev.

GIRL

I would say I had no other choice.

COLONEL

You mean you did this on purpose?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Yesterday Captain Bagayev ordered me to put on wet underwear and stand on guard. There was a snowstorm, sir.

BAGAYEV

It's his own fault. He sleeps on guard no matter what we do. So we dampened his shorts a bit. Not much. Just enough to keep him awake.

COLONEL

What you are trying to say, Private Lebedushkin, is that if a soldier stands guard in wet shorts he automatically turns into a girl.

LEBEDUSHKIN

No, sir. The fact that these bloodsuckers were hazing me had nothing to do with my becoming a girl.

COLONEL

Then what did?

LEBEDUSHKIN

I am an artist. An actor. I can't live in barracks. I'm suffocating. I'm dying. I need a creative atmosphere.

BAGAYEV

Flunked out of theater school after one year and he thinks he's a genius.

LEBEDUSHKIN

I require freedom and isolation no less than any other person who has the slightest bit of self awareness. The problem is not that Captain Bagayev gives his silent support to my superiors who harass me and force me to scrub toilets with a toothbrush and who make me stand guard in wet shorts. Nor is it that my immediate superior who is standing right here with us is a sadist and a reject from the human race.

COLONEL

Then what is the problem?

LEBEDUSHKIN

The problem is that I cannot imagine life without creativity. I faked being a bed wetter. I faked being a schizophrenic. I swallowed needles and drank iodine to force my body temperature up. But I was still declared fit for military service.

MOROZOV

That is true. He spent three of the last six months under medical observation and was declared fit for service.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Even if I lose both hands and both feet they'll still declare me fit for service and will send me back to the barracks. So I had only one choice left - to become a girl. Now nobody will say, "Kolya, go serve the Motherland!" I want to go home. Colonel, sir, let me go home.

COLONEL

Are you trying to say that you became a woman on purpose?

LEBEDUSHKIN

In a sense, yes.

MOROZOV

I have seen plenty of fakers in my life, but this one beats them all!

BAGAYEV

What could I have done? I beat on this intellectual like a fish on ice!

LEBEDUSHKIN

I am suffocating. I am dying a slow death. I cannot live without the theater. Let me go home.

COLONEL

We're not letting you go anywhere, Kolya. I will take over your training myself. I'll make a man out of you, Lebedushkin! Your country will be proud of you!

ADJUTANT

You can't let him back in the barracks looking like that!

BAGAYEV

They'll rough the girl up.

COLONEL

He'll live in the club.

ADJUTANT

The club has been under reconstruction for five years.

COLONEL

Excellent. Get him a new uniform, a bed, a blanket, a chest for his personal effects and three meals a day. Does anybody else know what has happened?

ADJUTANT

Only those of us present.

COLONEL

Don't even think of breathing a word. You're losing your grip as an officer, Bagayev. You can't even handle an intellectual from Moscow. And I was thinking of putting you in for a promotion.

BAGAYEV

Am I a captain for life, then?

COLONEL

You'll wear captain's stars until they rot!

BAGAYEV

You watch it Kolya Lebedushkin. I'll have you dancing yet!

LEBEDUSHKIN

Every imperfect soul carries its own punishment within. I pity you!

COLONEL

This kid has something! Go run your company, captain. Everybody else, at ease. Yuvachyov, you stay here.

ADJUTANT

Yes, sir.

*All leave but for the  
Adjutant and Colonel.*

COLONEL

I hate north-westerly winds.

ADJUTANT

Why is that, sir?

COLONEL

Because the pig sty has a disgusting aroma. My brains are frying in it. Move the intellectual to the club. Feed him three times a day and set up his training schedule: hand-to-hand, rifle range, strategy, parachute preparation, the whole ball of wax. And I don't want a single soul to hear about it.

ADJUTANT

Yes, sir, colonel!

COLONEL

Get my car. Let's drive out to the airstrip and see how the repairs are coming on the runways. We could use some fresh air.

## **ACT TWO**

*The division club. Reconstruction has not quite been completed. The seat rows have been pushed in a heap in a corner. A metal frame bed and a side table stand on the stage. A girl in a dress lies on the soldier's bed and reads a book. Yuvachyov enters.*

ADJUTANT

Attention!

LEBEDUSHKIN

What are you shouting like a stuck pig for? You could become a stutterer like that.

ADJUTANT

Si-lence! Atten-tion! Get a move on!

LEBEDUSHKIN

My God, how I am sick of all of you! Just wait a minute. Let me mark my place in my book.

*The Colonel enters.*

ADJUTANT

Atten-tion!

LEBEDUSHKIN

Good day, colonel, sir!

COLONEL

What is this?

LEBEDUSHKIN

What do you mean, sir?

COLONEL

Where did you get this cute little dress, Lebedushkin?

LEBEDUSHKIN

I made it myself. I found nine feet of satin, washed it, dried it and made a dress out of it. It feels wonderful on me! I'm sick of army gear!

COLONEL

Kolya, Kolya, Kolya! You should be ashamed. You are a soldier in the Russian army.

LEBEDUSHKIN

My name is Natasha. If you don't mind, sir.

COLONEL

And since when is this?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Since yesterday evening. I took my grandmother's name - Natalya Arkadyevna. Her maiden name was Shevtsik. I am an eighteen year-old girl and I am not eligible to be drafted into the regular army. Please let me go home. I apologize, but I am tired of standing at attention. My back is killing me. (*Sits and pulls down the hem of her dress.*)

ADJUTANT

Attention!

LEBEDUSHKIN

I'm sorry, but if you don't mind, I'll just sit. I am very tired and I'm feeling dizzy.

ADJUTANT

Stand!

LEBEDUSHKIN

You won't believe this, colonel, but what I am about to tell you is the absolute truth! I'm having my period! And my back is killing me!

COLONEL

Doctor Morozov was right. The world has never seen a faker like this! What will happen next? My soldier is undergoing menstruation! A draftee is having his period!

ADJUTANT

When I was in the institute, I ran cross-country with a broken arm! Now, get up!

LEBEDUSHKIN

I also used to think it was no big deal. The hell it's no big deal! You ought to try this some day then you'd know what it means to demand the impossible. I cannot stand.

ADJUTANT

I'll lift him up!

COLONEL

Don't touch him. Don't bother. In that case, madam, and with your permission, I will also have a seat. Otherwise, it's rather awkward. After all, I am your superior in age and in rank.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Do please have a seat, monsieur. Please be so kind!

COLONEL

Thank you. Do I smell coffee?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Oh yes.

COLONEL

And where is this enchanting aroma emanating from?

LEBEDUSHKIN

From this metal cup. It's my coffee.

COLONEL

Where did you get it?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Class A Turkish coffee [arabika]. I was able to set aside a tiny bit. So tell me, how is the weather today?

COLONEL

I see. So a soldier spends his day lounging on a sofa, drinking coffee and reading. (*Looks over the book.*) Paul Eluard.

LEBEDUSHKIN

I'm also working on a play. Here is the manuscript.

COLONEL

So, Nikolai, you are a writer, too.

ADJUTANT

I've never seen another soldier like him.

LEBEDUSHKIN

I am not a soldier. I am an artist. I might even be a genius!

COLONEL

Being a lady is not enough. On top of that he's got to be a genius.

ADJUTANT

This broad is brilliant!

LEBEDUSHKIN

I don't mean that in the sense that I am a perfected genius like Picasso or Pissarro or Tolstoy or Olivier. I just mean to say that I have a sensation of genius inside of me and I have a responsibility to it!

COLONEL: So who is responsible for whom? The actress or the writer?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Someday I'll be a great actress! But if my dreams of a life in the theater do not pan out, I will become a writer or a pianist or, at least, a painter. But whatever happens, art is my destiny!

COLONEL

You definitely have a knack for acting, Lebedushkin. You flawlessly command the art of transformation. We are living witnesses to that.

LEBEDUSHKIN

But that is not the art of transformation. I would call it the art of survival.

COLONEL

Are you aware, Nikolai -

LEBEDUSHKIN

I don't want to have to repeat this all the time: My name is Natasha.

COLONEL

All right... Natalya... are you aware that the overriding majority of great talents have been men? Stanislavsky, for instance. Nemirovich-Danchenko. Shakespeare. There

are no female composers at all. The best writers and actors have all been men.

LEBEDUSHKIN

That is a lie created by men in order to support their own myth of superiority.

COLONEL

In short, I consider it my duty to return you to your natural state. Moreover, I see that as my duty before the international artistic community.

ADJUTANT

I will personally be responsible for your training. We will work every day at night so that none of the other soldiers see us. Tomorrow we have cross-country, rifle range, target practice, chemical defense and physical education.

LEBEDUSHKIN

I don't have time for all that nonsense.

COLONEL

Is that so?

LEBEDUSHKIN

I'm swamped right now.

COLONEL

For example.

LEBEDUSHKIN

My new show is just about to open.

ADJUTANT

What show?

LEBEDUSHKIN

The one I'm working on.

COLONEL

And where is this show going to be?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Right here on this stage! I've already begun rehearsing. Your stage here, though small, is quite nice. You even have lighting. It's amateur stuff, but it will do. You have a tape deck and you even have a small library of tapes. True, there's only one actress in my troupe, but that's no big problem. The show soon opens and you are invited.

COLONEL

When is the premiere?

LEBEDUSHKIN

In ten days.

COLONEL

And you can't postpone that?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Not even a single day.

COLONEL

So what is it going to be, "Romeo and Juliet"?

ADJUTANT

"Uncle Vanya"!

LEBEDUSHKIN

No comments from the peanut gallery, thank you. The show is called "Ozelma - The King of the Bees."

COLONEL

I don't know that play.

LEBEDUSHKIN

I wrote it myself.

COLONEL

Ah, yes! I forgot. You are a writer as well!

LEBEDUSHKIN

In fact I can draw pretty well, too. And I sing.

ADJUTANT

And do you embroider, Kolya?

COLONEL

Premiere in ten days, huh? Interesting.

ADJUTANT

What are the chances of getting comps?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Tickets are not for sale. Just come see the show. I'll play for applause.

COLONEL

Change in training schedule. Not one, but two cross-country runs a day. From one end of the territory to the other.

ADJUTANT

In full metal jacket!

LEBEDUSHKIN

Colonel, sir. I'll never be a soldier. You can see that yourself. Am I a soldier? I'll be killed in my first battle. And it won't be a bullet that will kill me. It will happen for no reason at all. It will happen simply because I'm so lethargic. I can't defend my country. Let me go home, please. Andrei Isayevich, let me go.

COLONEL

I can't let you go home looking like that. I'll be drummed out of the army. And I've given the army forty years of my life. Tomorrow don't wear that dress. You'll ruin it. It's too nice a dress for that.

*The Colonel and Adjutant  
leave.*

### **ACT THREE**

*Night. The stage of the club.  
Lebedushkin sleeps on a  
metal-framed army bed.  
Approaching steps are heard.  
Enter Kinchin.*

COLONEL

Reveille! Alarm!

LEBEDUSHKIN

What have I done to deserve this punishment? My God. How can you wake a person in the middle of the night when the soul is in tender repose?!

COLONEL

*(Looks at his watch.)* Time is wasting. Get a move on, Lebedushkin. You've got thirty-five seconds. Make it lively! Get the lead out! See if you can make it on time!

LEBEDUSHKIN

I can't move as quickly as you would like! My eyes can't see. My arms are asleep. My legs are still dreaming.

COLONEL

Move it! Fall out!

LEBEDUSHKIN

What are you shouting about? It's three o'clock in the morning. I am lost in dreamland. If life is a dream, then give me life.

COLONEL

Too late. As you were. We're going to work on this.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Colonel, sir. You are drunk. You stink to high heaven. And judging by the look on your face, you've been drinking alone. At night! It's as plain as day. You been having trouble sleeping?

COLONEL

My conscience won't leave me in peace.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Finally! I can't believe it! And I thought you had no feelings of empathy at all.

COLONEL

I couldn't get to sleep. One thought kept driving me crazy. What if you really are a genius? Why don't you read me your play?

LEBEDUSHKIN

You'll think it's boring.

COLONEL

Don't think so lowly of me, madam. I'll take a seat in this armchair here and drink some coffee while I listen to you read your play. Go on, Natalya. Won't you offer your superior a cup of coffee?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Natalya Sergeyevna.

COLONEL

Be so kind, Natalya Sergeyevna. Nasty weather we're having. The wind is howling like a pack of wolves. If you don't start reading me your play instantly, Natalya Sergeyevna, we are going to go out there and practice digging ditches in the frozen earth until the sun comes up!

LEBEDUSHKIN

My dear, sweet mother. I was awakened at 3 a.m. this morning with reveille and ordered to read a few excerpts from my latest. Mama, when I come home, I am going to sleep for weeks on end. I want to have dreams within dreams. I want to dissolve into the kingdom of Morpheus. I want to drink silence as if it were water, in great big, huge gulps! Only promise me one thing, sir: When I finish reading you will leave and I can go back to sleep.

COLONEL

I swear on the stockpile of artillery weapons!

LEBEDUSHKIN

All right, then. But you asked for it. I'm warning you - it's a complex play.

COLONEL

You can't frighten us, Adelaida Afenagenovna. We're already terrified. We've been through three wars.

LEBEDUSHKIN

As you like it, sir. You asked for it.

COLONEL

I'm waiting, Serafima Spiridonovna. Get to it! But can't you offer me a cup of coffee?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Only one. I'm trying to make it last. You can call me what you want. You can't offend me.

COLONEL

I'll drink it in little sips.

LEBEDUSHKIN

It's not even a play, really. It's actually a monologue. But before I read it, I'd like to add on a short libretto, something like a synopsis. That is so that you, who have been through three wars, won't have any trouble understanding.

COLONEL

That would be very kind of you, miss.

LEBEDUSHKIN

And so: The play's action is set partly just beyond the earth's atmosphere and partly in the other-world kingdom.

COLONEL

Just as I expected.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Already losing interest?

COLONEL

No, no. Go ahead, my dear. Go right ahead. Wonderful. Wonderful. The dirt of this sinful world is not a topic for everyone.

LEBEDUSHKIN

The characters are: Ozelma, the king of the bees, and the beautiful Solminor, who has lost her way in the cosmic gloom. All others are unseen. And so, Solminor descends to the planet of Alkan. She drinks of the dew. She feeds on the cool morning air.

COLONEL: Just like my Olga. She used to eat a small, buttered liver pie and wash it down with tea. She was always afraid of gaining weight. I used to say, "Olenka, if you keep eating like this, the climate will kill you."

LEBEDUSHKIN

And so: Ozelma sees Solminor drinking dew in the meadow and falls in love with her.

COLONEL

We met in a café, too. I was a student in the military academy and I was on leave. It happened so suddenly. I turned around and saw the most beautiful woman the world had ever seen. She was eating ice cream. My heart came to a standstill and it didn't begin beating again until I spoke to her for the first time. And what did I say? I don't even remember anymore.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Solminor falls in love with the king of the bees and they begin a passionate love affair.

COLONEL

We didn't set foot outside the hotel for four days running. We didn't eat. We didn't sleep. We made love as though we were possessed there in that cheap hotel in the city of Rostov-on-Don.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Maybe you would like to continue and I'll listen to you silently for awhile?

COLONEL

No, no, Artemida Prokopyevna. My lips are sealed!

LEBEDUSHKIN

The King of the bees and Solminor found each other on the planet of Alkan, but set course for the small

planet of Zimur in order to be alone. There they set up their nest.

COLONEL

If only that's all it took to solve the housing crunch. For twelve years we bounced around from apartment to apartment with two kids. Go on. Go on. I'm not stopping you.

LEBEDUSHKIN

They were very happy together and spent all their free time dancing the Silver Crane Tango.

COLONEL

Olga was the manager of this club right here. She got me to do the renovation job and she hung the curtains herself. She brought them all the way from Moscow. Picked them out herself. There's no two ways about it: the woman had taste. She was sick and tired of army life. I don't blame her. She spent thirty years kicking around various garrisons with me. Okay, okay. My lips are sealed!

LEBEDUSHKIN

Suddenly the Angel of Evil appears on the planet of Limur.

COLONEL

Oh yeah. I know all about it. The Angel of Evil.

LEBEDUSHKIN

When the Angel of Evil spies the beautiful Solminor, he turns into a handsome youth and sets about seducing her.

COLONEL

I used to think she had someone in Moscow, too. But it wasn't true. She was just tired of living in this God-forsaken hole. She was lonely. I worked twenty hours a day and she was left to her own devices. But a woman needs attention. She packed up her things and the kids and she left.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Solminor does not fall for the charms of the Angel of Evil and so the Black Angel kills the King of the bees.

COLONEL

I wanted to kill this guy, too. But he didn't exist. She hadn't had any affair!

LEBEDUSHKIN

And so Solminor prays over the body of the king of the bees. Basically, my whole play is her prayer. It's a single monologue.

COLONEL

Perform your monologue.

LEBEDUSHKIN

It's a performance. A ritual. A liturgy. A parting with the soul of a loved one. It's an action. The text alone means nothing. Without costumes, without a set, without music, the whole thing is pointless.

COLONEL

Perform it.

LEBEDUSHKIN

You are dead.  
Your eyes hungrily swallow the doom,  
As two drops of water after a long flight across  
the desert.

You are deafened.  
You are blinded.  
You lost consciousness and the power of speech.  
Such are the rules of the journey ahead!

COLONEL

Symbolism! Abstraction! Smoke in the eyes!

LEBEDUSHKIN

Two billion years ago God created the world.  
God's earth then gained your soul.  
Your soul gained spirit and thus it is immortal,  
For spirit is that everlasting order of the soul  
That cannot be changed by the eternal rotting,

Sulphuric stench of eternity.

COLONEL

Oho! Rotting eternity!

LEBEDUSHKIN

I alone know the formula of your spirit:  
It is flowers so sweet that tumble eternally like  
love.

It is the ripe-orange fruit of the Sun and the  
smell of burnt sugar

Singed on a large table spoon.

And it is angels filling the vacuum between stars  
with the trills of nightingales.

COLONEL

Stop right there!

LEBEDUSHKIN

I haven't finished!

COLONEL

Lebedushkin, do you think you are going to perform this  
twaddle in an empty hall?!

LEBEDUSHKIN

Yes! Alone before the universe itself.

COLONEL

Natalya Sergejevna. You are an otherworldly woman. You  
are not a human. You are a being.

LEBEDUSHKIN

It's better than drinking all night. Alone.

COLONEL

Okay. I'm outta here. My conscience is clean. You're no  
genius. Let's go dig ditches. Tomorrow! You will defend  
your country!

LEBEDUSHKIN

But there is no war!

COLONEL

I don't care! There will be. Someday another war is bound to start!

LEBEDUSHKIN

Good night, sir.

COLONEL

Good night, Lebedushkin.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Sleep! Sleep! Sleep!

COLONEL

Where'd they go?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Where'd what go?

COLONEL

The curtains.

LEBEDUSHKIN

What curtains?

COLONEL

The ones that hung on the windows here in this club. The ones my Olga brought from Moscow.

LEBEDUSHKIN

I took them down.

COLONEL

Why?

LEBEDUSHKIN

I ripped out all the seams. I'm going to make costumes of them for my show.

COLONEL

You what?! You ripped out the seams?! Of the curtains my Olga bought?! That is all I have left of her. Did you think I came here to listen to the hallucinations of a faker? I came here to see the curtains! Where are they? Where are my curtains?

LEBEDUSHKIN

I made costumes out of them. I've finished one; the other is still being measured. They'll be costumes in my show!

COLONEL

What show?

LEBEDUSHKIN

"Ozelma - the King of the Bees."

COLONEL

I want to see them!

LEBEDUSHKIN

One second. Just one second! (*Leaves and returns wearing a costume.*)

COLONEL

But there were eight curtains!

LEBEDUSHKIN

But they were all small. Each panel was just 12 inches in width. Some of the material went into the fringe. There was one whole curtain left, but I took it down so that nobody would ask where the others went.

COLONEL

Twenty-five penalty details! The pig sty! To the pigs with you! I want you digging pig shit!

LEBEDUSHKIN

Only please don't send me to the pig sty!

COLONEL

Until your last day of service. To the pigs! To the farm!

LEBEDUSHKIN

I agree that the curtains were splendid. But when you see my show in full costume, with music and lighting, you will realize that the sacrifice was not too great.

COLONEL

We're not talking about pigs, as you might understand yourself. There is another thing here, and I mean the pig-tender. He weighs two times more than the fattest hog and he's twice as horny. Maybe I can finally get him to quit jerking off. And so, Kolya, it's off to the pig sty for you. Do I hear wedding bells in your future?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Please! I implore you! Don't send me to the farm! Give me a chance! Let me perform my play!

COLONEL

Okay! Play it. And I'll watch. But if it's a bad play, I'll keep my word.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Do you have a match?

COLONEL

Why?

LEBEDUSHKIN

I need some makeup. And for makeup I need some soot. I'll burn a sheet of paper.

COLONEL

*(Gives her a match.)* My curtains!

LEBEDUSHKIN

Wait just one second. I'm nervous.

COLONEL

You'd better be!

LEBEDUSHKIN

I wasn't this nervous when I applied to the Moscow Art Theater school.

COLONEL

Your fiancé, Natalya Sergejevna, has an ugly mug to beat any I have ever seen. His fingernails are packed with mud from all the worms and flora and fauna of the earth. Your future husband stinks so bad the pigs

faint. Even ammonium chloride won't bring them to. Yes, I would think you would be nervous. That's just why I sent him to the pig sty - because a paratrooper can't stink like that.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Just one second and I'll set the lighting.

COLONEL

I don't like your show already.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Don't jump to conclusions. The sense I get is that you are a person of great taste.

COLONEL

But I won't wait forever. My curtains!

*Music is heard. A spotlight shines. Lebedushkin performs in costume to musical accompaniment.*

LEBEDUSHKIN

You are dead.  
Your eyes hungrily swallow the doom,  
As two drops of water after a long flight across  
the desert.

You are deafened.  
You are blinded.  
You lost consciousness and the power of speech.  
Such are the rules of the journey ahead!

Two billion years ago God created the world.  
God's earth then gained your soul.  
Your soul gained spirit and thus it is immortal,  
For spirit is that everlasting order of the soul  
That cannot be changed by the eternal rotting,  
Sulphuric stench of eternity.

I alone know the formula of your spirit:  
It is flowers so sweet that tumble eternally like  
love.

It is the ripe-orange fruit of the Sun and the  
smell of burnt sugar

Singed on a large table spoon.

And it is angels filling the vacuum between stars  
with the trills of nightingales.

Your body shall be committed to earth and fire.

It will burn. It will break down into atoms.

But fear not, for the body is but a shell

And your soul a beautiful dragon fly.

It will break free from its shell and will fly

Forty days in the cosmic atmosphere,

Listening to pledges of love for you,

Gathering strength for the journey that lies ahead.

Breaching the oceans of time, it will fly to a new  
life

And soon your eternal soul

Shall reach its goal and find new life!

Your eyes, having drunk their fill of gloom,

Again will open to greet the light of the sun

And you shall run barefoot in the dew.

COLONEL

To the pig sty with you!

LEBEDUSHKIN

You rotten old shoe!

COLONEL

Pray, Natalya Sergejevna. Because you are no longer a  
soldier. Not a woman, nor an actress. You are a pig-  
keeper. And your husband, who is still sleeping, hasn't  
even dreamed of the happiness that awaits him.

LEBEDUSHKIN

You are insensitive to art and haven't got a clue. It's  
a marvelous play. You just didn't have the patience to  
watch it to the end.

COLONEL

No action. No character. No plot. Nothing at all!

LEBEDUSHKIN

You don't need them in this genre. It's performance art.

COLONEL

To the pig sty. Your play is awful.

LEBEDUSHKIN

My play is wonderful!

COLONEL

You have lost touch with reality, Kolya. You need to spend some time in the real world. We'll start you off in the agricultural sector.

LEBEDUSHKIN

You have no understanding of art!

COLONEL

I understand art no worse than you. Your wedding bells are ringing.

LEBEDUSHKIN

What do you know about art?

COLONEL

I belong to those people who are capable of thinking and who, therefore, enjoy success in everything they do. If I were a politician, I would be president. If I were a carpenter, I would work with nothing but mahogany. I chose the military and I have made it to colonel. That is not my limit. I am expecting a promotion to general. But if I were to act on the stage, I would become a great actor. That is how I am. I am always the victor. I was born in the house of Pluto rising!

LEBEDUSHKIN

Drunken boasting. Who knows what kind of actor you could be?

COLONEL

A great actor!

LEBEDUSHKIN

Braggart.

COLONEL

I am a man of ambition. I would become the best of the best.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Ambition isn't enough in theater. You must have talent, too.

COLONEL

A talented person is talented in everything.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Okay. Let's say I give you a part. My theater needs good actors. No matter how you look at it, it's better than drinking vodka all night.

COLONEL

I wouldn't perform your play on the pain of death. They could draw and quarter me and I still wouldn't play it. Phony. Silly. Pointless. Inane. Miss pig-keeper, I suggest you give up writing. You don't have what it takes.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Fine. Your choice of any play in the world. What would play if you had the chance.

COLONEL

Shakespeare. He's a good writer.

LEBEDUSHKIN

A good writer. But he's worn out, frayed at the edges, a cliché.

COLONEL

Listen to you.

LEBEDUSHKIN

So what would you suggest by Shakespeare?

COLONEL

Pick any play.

LEBEDUSHKIN

"Othello" would suit our duet well. You'll be the Moor; I'll be Desdemona. Our difference in age is obvious. He is an officer, almost a general, and you can understand that. She is a girl. Let's play one three-minute scene and see what a genius you are.

COLONEL

All right, Kolya. I'll give you a lesson or two in acting.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Your word?

COLONEL

The word of an officer.

LEBEDUSHKIN

One second. I'll be right back.

COLONEL

Where are you going?

LEBEDUSHKIN

To get William. The library.

COLONEL

But you don't have a key.

LEBEDUSHKIN

I've learned how to pick the lock with two needles.

COLONEL

Aren't you a little she-bear.

LEBEDUSHKIN

The love of literature works wonders. The library is in the next room. How could I have resisted? (*Leaves.*)

COLONEL

What the hell is wrong with me? Give the word of an officer. Oh, so what. I've been in bigger fixes than this.

LEBEDUSHKIN

*(Returns with a book.)* Here's the book. We'll play just one scene. I know the whole thing almost by heart. I rehearsed Iago in my second year at the institute. You can read; I'll peek over your shoulder now and then.

COLONEL

Is this a tall tale, or what? The unit CO, colonel of the guard, at night, by candlelight, is rehearsing "Othello." And with whom? A yellowbellied private first class recruit, an imposter who couldn't throw a live grenade more than twenty feet.

LEBEDUSHKIN

And is this a tall tale, or what? I am rehearsing Desdemona, but with whom? The unit CO, at night by candlelight. What would they think about them apples if anyone found out about it at the Moscow Art Theater school where they kicked me out in the second year?

COLONEL

What were you kicked out for?

LEBEDUSHKIN

I spoke my mind to one influential person.

COLONEL

About what?

LEBEDUSHKIN

I said a show he staged was a falsification of art, a fraud. Moreover, I was insulting about it.

COLONEL

You are a difficult person to get on with, aren't you, Natalya Sergeyevna?

LEBEDUSHKIN

You're no picnic yourself.

COLONEL

I've never rehearsed before. Tell me what to do.

LEBEDUSHKIN

First we read our parts in turn. You and then I. You know what theater is?

COLONEL

How would a thick-headed person like me know?

LEBEDUSHKIN

It is a place where people walk on a stage and speak in turn. Speak.

COLONEL

*(Holds the book in hand and reads.)*

Such is my duty...

...before you virgin stars.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Okay, Othello. Go on. Kiss Desdemona.

COLONEL

What's that supposed to mean? I'm supposed to kiss you?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Naturally.

COLONEL

Wait. Let's find another place where Othello doesn't kiss Desdemona.

LEBEDUSHKIN

There's no big deal about your kissing me. First of all, it's a convention, a game, art. Second --

COLONEL

I can't stand it when men kiss. It's disgusting.

LEBEDUSHKIN

How often do I have to tell you: I am a woman.

COLONEL

No, no. Let's do another scene.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Okay. Scene two. Page thirty two. I start.

COLONEL

Shoot!

LEBEDUSHKIN

(*For Desdemona.*) My lord, what is your will?

COLONEL: (*For Othello.*) Pray, chuck, come hither.

DESDEMONA

What is your pleasure?

OTHELLO

Let me see your eyes;  
Look in my face.

DESDEMONA

What horrible fancy's this?  
Upon my knees, what doth your speech import?  
I understand a fury in your words,  
But not the words.

OTHELLO

Why, what art thou?

DESDEMONA

Your wife, my lord; your true and loyal wife.

OTHELLO

Come, swear it, damn thyself;  
Lest, being like one of heaven, the devils  
themselves  
Should fear to seize thee: therefore be double-  
damn'ed;  
Swear thou art honest.

DESDEMONA

Heaven doth truly know it.

OTHELLO

Heaven truly knows that thou art false as hell.

DESDEMONA

To whom, my lord? with whom? how am I false?

OTHELLO

O Desdemona! away! away! away!

LEBEDUSHKIN

Andrei Isayevich! Hold on to your horses! Your eyes will pop out of your head! It's early yet to be playing results.

COLONEL

I like that! I was completely caught up in it. I think I'm getting the hang of it.

LEBEDUSHKIN

What art can't do with people!

COLONEL

Your turn.

LEBEDUSHKIN

DESDEMONA

Alas the heavy day! Why do you weep?  
Am I the motive of these tears, my lord?  
If haply you my father do suspect  
An instrument of this your calling back,  
Lay not your blame on me: if you have lost him,  
Why, I have lost him too.

OTHELLO

Had it pleased heaven  
To try me with affliction - (*Weeps*)

LEBEDUSHKIN

What's wrong? Why did you stop?

COLONEL

Wait a second. You mean I am supposed to cry here?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Yes. Othello cries here.

COLONEL

Natalya Sergejevna. Let's do a different scene.

LEBEDUSHKIN

What's wrong this time?

COLONEL

I refuse to cry.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Why?

COLONEL

I didn't cry even at my mother's funeral. I didn't cry when my best friend was blown to bits by a grenade thrower near Pandsher. I will not cry. Let's do another scene.

LEBEDUSHKIN

How long are you going to make us keep jumping around the play? He can't cry here because he's a real man. He can't kiss Desdemona there because he can't tell the difference between a boy and a girl. Othello is a man, too, you know. Not a colonel, like some people. He's a general. Didn't bother him, though. He squeezed out a tear.

COLONEL

But he's a Moor. An African. A man from the passionate South. I'm from the cold North.

LEBEDUSHKIN

You think men don't cry in the North?

COLONEL

It's not something we do.

LEBEDUSHKIN

But you're playing a Moor, not yourself!

COLONEL

Let's find another scene.

LEBEDUSHKIN

No. We're staying with this one. I'm digging in and I won't budge. No retreat. I don't care if it kills us. There's no going back.

COLONEL

I want another scene!

LEBEDUSHKIN

When you begin to understand why the Moor cries, you won't have any trouble doing it yourself.

COLONEL

Why does he cry?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Because he's losing the woman he loves. He senses that happiness has begun to slip away from him slowly but surely.

COLONEL

I lost the woman I loved and with whom I had lived my whole life happily. But I didn't cry.

LEBEDUSHKIN

You lost the woman you loved. But he lost more. He lost a being from another world.

COLONEL: What is she, a ghost from Planet X? The cousin of the King of Bees?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Let me explain. He is approaching middle age. She is as young as a spring flower. He is a man of the military, a general. She is a naïve child. It is obvious why he loves her, but the miracle is that she loves him. And there you have his tears.

COLONEL

All right. I'll cover my face with my hands and pretend that I'm crying.

LEBEDUSHKIN

I don't think you understood me. Tell me, Andrei Isayevich, have you ever experienced an unreal love?

COLONEL

What is that supposed to mean?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Have you ever been in love with someone who is entirely out of your reach? Say, Barbara Streisand, or someone like that?

COLONEL

A ballerina. I saw her once on TV and fell head over heels in love with her. I bought a ticket to the Bolshoi Theater. I was a senior lieutenant then. The seat was horrible, up in the peanut gallery. But I got around that. I took my field glasses to the theater - 34 power.

LEBEDUSHKIN

What was her name?

COLONEL

What's the difference? She was a famous ballerina. The whole world still worships her.

LEBEDUSHKIN

You can tell me. I can keep a secret.

COLONEL

I don't get it. Are we going to work or are we going to talk? Are we actors or are we gossip columnists?

LEBEDUSHKIN

There you have the most important element of an actor's work. We dig down into the play's inner meaning and you cry. Your tears will flow like a river and you will never experience any shame for crying.

COLONEL

I'm not so sure.

LEBEDUSHKIN

What was her name?

COLONEL

I'm not saying.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Imagine this, colonel, sir. You fell in love with this ballerina and you sent her a bouquet with a note inside. You told her you would wait for her at the stage door entrance. She appears and you instantly begin a torrid affair. She marries you, gives up her career in Moscow and follows you out here to this

frozen, God-forsaken hole. Do you see what I mean about unreal love? Impossible love? Desdemona, by the way, left Venice and to follow her beloved Othello to God-forsaken Cyprus.

COLONEL

And...?

LEBEDUSHKIN

And you realize that she adores you. You are on seventh heaven!

COLONEL

And...?

LEBEDUSHKIN

And suddenly, a few months later, someone begins hinting that she is cheating on you. You fall from the heavens and crash land on earth. You lie prostrated, kicking and beating the earth. The pain is unbearable. There are your tears. You see?

COLONEL

I see. But I'm not going to cry.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Why not?

COLONEL

Because I'm a paratrooper.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Theater directors stand only behind miners in mortality statistics. Just in case you're wondering.

COLONEL

What about people in the armed forces?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Sixteenth place.

COLONEL

Then why don't you take up a less dangerous profession?

LEBEDUSHKIN

You are a clever one, aren't you?

COLONEL

Enough talking. Let's get to work.

LEBEDUSHKIN

I told you it was catching.

OTHELLO

Had it pleased heaven  
 To try me with affliction; had they rain'd  
 All kinds of sores and shames on my bare head,  
 Steep'd me in poverty to the very lips,  
 Given to captivity me and my utmost hopes,  
 I should have found in some place of my soul  
 A drop of patience: but, alas, to make me  
 A fixed figure for the time of scorn  
 To point his slow unmoving finger at!  
 Yet could I bear that too; well, very well;  
 But there, where I have garner'd up my heart,  
 Where either I must live or ear no life,  
 The fountain from the which my current runs,  
 Or else dries up; to be discarded thence!  
 Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads  
 To knot and gender in.

DESDEMONA

Alas, what ignorant sin have I committed?

OTHELLO

Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,  
 Made to write 'whore' upon? What committed!  
 Committed! O thou public commoner!  
 I should make very forges of my cheeks,  
 That would to cinders burn up modesty,  
 Did I but speak thy deeds. What committed!  
 Heaven stops the nose at it, and the moon winks;  
 The bawdy wind, that kisses all it meets,  
 Is hush'd within the hollow mine of earth.  
 Impudent strumpet!

DESDEMONA

By heaven, you do me wrong.

OTHELLO

Are not you a strumpet?

DESDEMONA

No, as I am a Christian -

LEBEDUSHKIN

That's enough! Stop!

COLONEL

That's rough stuff.

LEBEDUSHKIN

All you men are the same. I used to throw jealous temper tantrums at Masha, too. That's enough for today. I'm tired. In the last letter I got from her she wrote that my handwriting had changed.

COLONEL

All the more reason we can't discharge you. I can imagine how upset she would be.

LEBEDUSHKIN

That's where you're wrong. Girls can be happy with girls, too, you know.

COLONEL

You girls would know best.

LEBEDUSHKIN

For example, my mother always wanted a daughter.

COLONEL

Do you have a father?

LEBEDUSHKIN

My father was Don Juan. His saber flashed and he disappeared in a puff of blue smoke. Incidentally, while I've been stuck here in this hole, my Masha was offered a starring role in a movie.

COLONEL

Acting gives you such a strange sensation. It reminded me somehow of pleasure. Where does this thrilling feeling come from?

LEBEDUSHKIN

The soul is immortal. It experiences joy every time it takes on a new form.

COLONEL

I don't believe it. There's nothing beyond this but darkness and cold.

LEBEDUSHKIN

That's not true at all. There are tons of new roles ahead of us!

COLONEL

It's three-thirty already. Pour me a cup of coffee, Kolya.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Only if you promise to discharge me.

COLONEL

You should be ashamed of yourself, Lebedushkin. What's so bad about your situation here? You've got a library; your own home theater; coffee; James Joyce.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Let me go home.

COLONEL

I can't! The rumors will start about my regiment - they turn men into girls. They'll forget everything I've ever done for my country. But this one sad episode, they'll remember. Moreover, they'll start rubbing it in. That's the way people are.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Then make one little concession. Free me of training duty. That's inhuman to make a girl drag boxes of ammo and grenade throwers around a field.

COLONEL

I'll think about it.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Thank you, Andrei Isayevich.

COLONEL

Good night, Nikolai.

LEBEDUSHKIN

What about the coffee?

COLONEL

Forget it. Next time. (*Leaves.*)

*Lebedushkin turns down his  
bed. Enter Bagayev.*

BAGAYEV

Well, hello, hello, my fine little beauty.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Good day, captain, sir.

BAGAYEV

Tell me, soldier, why is it that you went and told the brass about the way things are done in my company?

LEBEDUSHKIN

There was an awkward pause in the conversation. When it became too uncomfortable to bear any more, I had to say something. I couldn't think of anything better to say.

BAGAYEV

Thanks to you, I've been passed over for promotion again. You think I never want to rise above captain?

LEBEDUSHKIN

On the other hand, you occupy a high-ranking place in all lands forsaken by God. The kingdom of darkness has its own hierarchy.

BAGAYEV

Is that so?

LEBEDUSHKIN

And you number among the elite. You are a malevolent soul of the sixteenth cyclone in the coven of His Majesty, Satan. You ought to go to church and get down

on your knees and pray for seventeen weeks straight. Maybe then some light might shine on your soul.

BAGAYEV

What gives you such a sharp tongue, Private Lebedushkin? Is it because you're now an intimate of the colonel? And what kind of intimacy is this that gives a private first class the right to read morals to his superiors? What was he doing here? What were you doing with the CO? Don't tell me the goal of his visit here was adultery, so to speak?

LEBEDUSHKIN

How sad when a man's consciousness cannot be distinguished from a worn-out boot heel.

BAGAYEV

Did he grope you?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Don't touch me, you monster!

BAGAYEV

Wanna go to the movies? You'll see. He'll never ask you to marry him. Me, I'm a different story. I won't let you down.

LEBEDUSHKIN

You smell of sulphur. You are hell on two legs. Pus, rot, syphilis, malignance, the reek of carrion, the stench of a prison shithole - these are the essential components of which your pathetic soul was concocted in hell.

BAGAYEV

You want to go home? To Moscow? We'll send you home. In a zinc box. I'll put colonel's stripes in your casket. I give you my word. You will not leave here alive. Farewell!

LEBEDUSHKIN

I'm not afraid of you.

BAGAYEV

That's your problem. I am your grim reaper. Fear me.  
Think of me.

**ACT FOUR**

*The Military club.*

COLONEL

Good evening.

LEBEDUSHKIN

See to it that the door is clocked securely.

COLONEL

Why do you always ask me to do that? Two weeks and every night it's the same. Has anyone been bothering you?

LEBEDUSHKIN

No. There's another snowstorm. I just went out and gave myself a snow bath. It is so cold that the snowflakes don't even stick to each other. I wanted to make a snowball, but it kept falling apart.

COLONEL

The winters are severe here. Here's the box of makeup I promised.

LEBEDUSHKIN

That's a valuable gift just fifteen minutes before the opening curtain. It's 11:45. Get into your costume and put on your makeup.

COLONEL

Stage?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Ready.

COLONEL

Lights?

LEBEDUSHKIN

In place.

COLONEL  
Makeup?

LEBEDUSHKIN  
Not too much.

COLONEL  
Face?

LEBEDUSHKIN  
The color of a storm cloud.

COLONEL  
Lips?

LEBEDUSHKIN  
Violet.

COLONEL  
Eyes?

LEBEDUSHKIN  
Light at the top.

COLONEL  
Tongue?

LEBEDUSHKIN  
We don't make up tongues.

COLONEL  
Iago's ought to be black.

LEBEDUSHKIN  
A nice metaphor, but we have no Iago.

COLONEL  
We don't have anybody. No Iago, no Rodrigo, no Brabantio. We have an empty hall and our show only lasts six minutes.

LEBEDUSHKIN  
Sometimes it happens that there are more people on stage than there are in the seats and sometimes it

happens that the hall is packed and the show runs for six hours but everybody is filled only with emptiness. We are going to play this right. We are going to nail it. And that will make up for anything else we have fallen short on.

COLONEL

Night. Mirror. Snow. My face. My hands. My eyes.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Night is the crack between two flashes of light.

COLONEL

*(Looking at himself in a mirror.)* Who is this? What am I doing here?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Finish your makeup. Midnight is upon us.

COLONEL

The company commander, a combat officer, is smearing his face with cream that looks like apple sauce. He is going to recite a written text pretending he is someone he is not. He is going to playact and make believe. This cannot go on any further! I'm not going on.

LEBEDUSHKIN

What are you talking about?

COLONEL

What kind of actor am I?! I'm going to check the night watch.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Running out five minutes before the opening curtain is the height of cowardice. I would ask you to get a grip on yourself.

COLONEL

I'm not afraid. I just don't understand anything.

LEBEDUSHKIN

What?

COLONEL

Why are we doing this?

LEBEDUSHKIN

There is no answer to that question.

COLONEL

I'm going.

LEBEDUSHKIN

It's like suicide. One life less.

COLONEL

I'm going. Good night.

LEBEDUSHKIN

I wanted to run the first time I was to go on stage, too.

COLONEL

Good bye. I'll come by in a few days.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Farewell!

COLONEL

I can't go. Something inside won't let me.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Your soul is against it. You are depriving it of an extra life.

COLONEL

Aping someone else's words. How silly can you get?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Unlike the play in which you perform every day, morning to night; in a play written by a playwright, every word is measured and has meaning. Let's begin.

COLONEL

I'm not ready.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Light. Music. Your entrance.

COLONEL

I'm nervous.

LEBEDUSHKIN

No wonder. It's your debut. Go.

*They perform the same scenes  
which they rehearsed earlier.*

LEBEDUSHKIN

Bravo, colonel, sir! Take your bows!

COLONEL

It was over with so quickly!

LEBEDUSHKIN

Take your bows! Take your bows! You're right. You could be an actor. And a good one, too.

COLONEL

Thank you. You lost the bet.

LEBEDUSHKIN

But we didn't wager anything.

COLONEL

My loss.

LEBEDUSHKIN

I like the way you played "no poteryat' sokrovishcnnitsu serdtsa."

COLONEL

And you're good at improvising.

LEBEDUSHKIN

We ought to find a small play for two. A ninety-minute thing. I'll write Masha and ask her to send something.

COLONEL

I'll be kicked out of the army with a dishonorable discharge.

LEBEDUSHKIN

My throat and mouth are parched. I need some water.

COLONEL

There's something sad about it.

LEBEDUSHKIN

What?

COLONEL

There are fewer and fewer surprises [belye pyatna] left in life.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Do you have any special dream?

COLONEL

When I was a kid I wanted to be a bird and so I became one. I know the sky like the back of my own hand. Skydiving in the sky, I have fallen like a rock although it seemed like I was floating like a feather. My dream now is to plop down on a hot, sandy beach, maybe in Sochi [Black Sea], to drink an icy bottle of soda and to stare up at the clouds. All I want to do is lie there motionlessly, thinking of nothing. For a long, long time. What do you dream about?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Playing a big part in a big movie. Preferably a knock-down story about love. One that would be a hit all over the whole world. Every now and then I close my eyes and imagine myself climbing the stairs at Cannes in a black smoking jacket.

COLONEL

I'll be a run-down old retired soldier sitting in front of my TV watching. And I'll be thrilled to see your moment of triumph.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Why not?

COLONEL

It all will happen. You'll see!

LEBEDUSHKIN

Colonel, sir. Let me go home.

COLONEL

Nobody twisted your arm. You said it yourself. Now we're going to start rehearsing a big play for two.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Please?

COLONEL

All right. I'll think about it. Pour me a cup of coffee.

LEBEDUSHKIN

There are only three spoonfuls left.

COLONEL

Oh, I forgot. I brought you a whole jar.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Where is it?

COLONEL

In my overcoat. The right pocket.

LEBEDUSHKIN

That's a rare gift.

COLONEL

Arabica. Your favorite.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Absolutely pathetic!

COLONEL

The coffee?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Everything we just played. It was completely wrong. We missed the whole point; the play's not about that. We were justifying Othello, but he should evoke disgust!

COLONEL

What are you talking about?

LEBEDUSHKIN

It's no story about jealousy. It has a deeper meaning. God gave us this spectacular planet. He gave us love, words and consciousness. He breathed spirit into our souls. He provided us with everything we need for happiness but people are incapable of being happy because, by nature, they are petty, stupid and egotistical. Iago is no angel of evil. He is a common man, banal even. He's like most everyone. Othello is just like him, another ordinary man. One is envious. The other is jealous. Humans destroy the best that God gives us - poets, beautiful women, exalted feelings, geniuses, saints. It happened to Pushkin. It happened to Christ. Let's start rehearsing again.

COLONEL

Couldn't you have had this revelation a bit earlier?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Everything in its own time.

COLONEL

Three weeks of work down the tubes.

LEBEDUSHKIN

That's right.

COLONEL

I liked what we did. Especially what I did. I would even say that in a couple of places I outdid you.

LEBEDUSHKIN

How quickly the illnesses of acting progress.

COLONEL

But seriously. I thought it wasn't bad it all. Now I'm upset.

LEBEDUSHKIN

The ugliest chimera of all is an artist with his eyes so glazed over that he can't be honest about himself and his work. What you do is you work and you rework, you work and you rework. Let's get down to rehearsals right now!

COLONEL

I'm going home. I'm tired. This has been one tough day. An exchange of unfriendly fire, three meetings and a premiere.

LEBEDUSHKIN

If you leave now, I will consider it betrayal.

COLONEL

Some of us lie in bed all day reading Parny. Some of us command a regiment.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Who are you to complain? Get a grip! You're a man!

COLONEL

My whole life long I have given in to some murky instinct. I tried to prove to everyone that I was uncommonly brave and strong. When I was a kid, I bossed around the neighborhood gang. I was the best in my class at the military academy and ever since I have been the bravest officer of them all. I have been working to project the right image for my whole life. I'm tired. I am a common man. I want to sleep. I'm going to go home, turn back the bed and lie down to sleep. And that's final!

LEBEDUSHKIN

Okay. Get some rest. And we'll start over tomorrow.

COLONEL

You are too kind. Natalya Sergeevna, thank you!

*Enter the Adjutant.*

ADJUTANT

Colonel, sir. You have an urgent message from headquarters.

COLONEL

There is only one person who always knows exactly where I am. Those are the rules of military life. Let me see it.

ADJUTANT

What's that costume you have on?

COLONEL

This fall we are introducing new military uniforms: pantaloons, tassels and jabots.

ADJUTANT

Where did you get that luscious suntan?

COLONEL

In the bright lights of glory. Sound reveille. Sound the alarm.

ADJUTANT

Yes sir, colonel!

COLONEL

I want every group commander in my office in fifteen minutes. We have snap training exercises for all companies stationed in the northeast territories. About face!

*The Adjutant leaves.*

LEBEDUSHKIN

What is this supposed to mean?

COLONEL

You stay here and keep out of trouble. None of this concerns you.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Yes sir, colonel.

COLONEL

I'll be back in a week. Don't so much as set foot out of this room! My orders are for you to guard the pantaloons, the coffee machine and the candles!

LEBEDUSHKIN

I'll do my best, Andrei Isayevich.

COLONEL

Did you take the oath of service, Private Lebedushkin?

LEBEDUSHKIN

Yes sir. This fall.

COLONEL

Then answer properly.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Pantaloons, coffee machine and candles shall be guarded, colonel, sir!

COLONEL

That sounds a little better. (*Leaves.*)

*After a short time, enter  
Bagayev.*

BAGAYEV

Alarm! Fall in! Two minutes!

LEBEDUSHKIN

I will not fall in. Those are the orders of the CO.

BAGAYEV

This entire regiment has just been put on alert. You are a soldier in my company. I'm ordering you: Fall in!

LEBEDUSHKIN

I have different orders that concern entirely other matters than those of the armed forces.

BAGAYEV

You either do what I say voluntarily, or you will do it under duress. We will carry you out of here.

LEBEDUSHKIN

Oh, heavens! I am being hunted by a centaur! A horse's torso is pursuing me into the night!

BAGAYEV

Fall in!

LEBEDUSHKIN

Don't touch me. I'm going.

*Bagayev and Lebedushkin  
leave.*

**ACT FIVE**

*The stage at the club.  
Freight stands on the stage  
ready to go. Enter the  
Colonel, the Doctor, Bagayev  
and the Adjutant.*

COLONEL

Come on, out with it! Speak!

ADJUTANT

I have no more words.

COLONEL

How could this happen?

ADJUTANT

I've told you three times: He fell beneath the wheels  
of an armored vehicle.

COLONEL

I know that. That's not what I'm asking about. Was it  
an accident or was he pushed? Captain Bagayev!

BAGAYEV

The whole company saw it, sir. He was in formation and  
then suddenly stopped as if he remembered something.  
And the vehicle wiped him out.

COLONEL

I gave him orders to remain in the club!

BAGAYEV

I swear I knew nothing about that. Lebedushkin is under  
my command in the fifth company. We were called to  
alert and he was bound to participate.

COLONEL

Was he in the sky?

BAGAYEV

Like everybody else.

COLONEL

Parachute training? At night?

BAGAYEV

He came down fine. Hit with both feet. We turned in formation and the vehicle came up on the right. Accidents are inevitable in practice maneuvers of this scale.

ADJUTANT

One casualty is pretty good.

DOCTOR

He died instantly. Never knew what hit him.

BAGAYEV

Consider the situation, sir. There were two large divisions involved -

COLONEL

You may go, captain. Major, you may go.

*Bagayev and Morozov leave.*

Has everyone said their farewells?

ADJUTANT

Fifteen hundred men, sir. Everyone but the soldiers in the guard. I gave orders to seal the casket.

COLONEL

Wait a minute. You can't do that. You mean there isn't a single priest in this whole town?

ADJUTANT

There was sir. But he drank himself to death.

COLONEL

No, no. That's not right. There's got to be something we can do.

## ADJUTANT

What? The cargo plane is ready for take-off.

## COLONEL

I want you to vacate this room. And I want you to stand guard on the other side of the door. I don't want anyone coming in here!

*The Adjutant leaves.*

*The Colonel busies himself on the stage. Removes a sheet of paper from his pocket.*

You are dead.  
Your eyes hungrily swallow the doom,  
As two drops of water after a long flight across  
the desert.

You are deafened.  
You are blinded.  
You lost consciousness and the power of speech.  
Such are the rules of the journey ahead!

Two billion years ago God created the world.  
God's earth then gained your soul.  
Your soul gained spirit and thus it is immortal,  
For spirit is that everlasting order of the soul  
That cannot be changed by the eternal rotting,  
Sulphuric stench of eternity.

I alone know the formula of your spirit:  
It is flowers so sweet that tumble eternally like  
love.

It is the ripe-orange fruit of the Sun and the  
smell of burnt sugar  
Singed on a large table spoon.  
And it is angels filling the vacuum between stars  
with the trills of nightingales.

Your body shall be committed to earth and fire.  
It will burn. It will break down into atoms.  
But fear not, for the body is but a shell  
And your soul a beautiful dragon fly.  
It will break free from its shell and will fly

Forty days in the cosmic atmosphere,  
 Listening to pledges of love for you,  
 Gathering strength for the journey that lies ahead.

Breaching the oceans of time, it will fly to a new  
 life

And soon your eternal soul  
 Shall reach its goal and find new life!

Your eyes, having drunk their fill of gloom,  
 Again will open to greet the light of the sun  
 And you shall run barefoot in the dew  
 And someday you will remember me.

It will be a vague and murky recollection,  
 A ray cutting through your memory.  
 For a moment you will stop to think.  
 Rain will suddenly begin to fall  
 And you will duck under a streetside awning  
 Having forgotten me forever.

When your soul traverses the twelve oceans of time  
 It will regain the power to meet me  
 But still we will not meet.

We will never meet again.  
 And if we do, in another life,  
 We will not recognize each other.

But your soul will forever retain  
 This murky premonition  
 Without which it could not live again and again  
 Having the power to be inspired.

You mount the stairway to heaven  
 To greet your eternal glory!  
 You will have new faces,  
 New voices and new thoughts!

You will live a thousand more lives!  
 You will have a thousand new names!  
 And you will bring glory to each!  
 Farewell forever!

You have new roles ahead!

THE END