

Three nutcracker figurines are arranged vertically. The two outer ones are upright, and the middle one is inverted. They are dressed in red, green, and black uniforms with yellow accents and white beards. The text 'The Nutcracker' is overlaid in the center.

The Nutcracker

Colin John Holcombe

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The Nutcracker

Hold your caps and grab the loiterers,
the bells are jingling, and our little troikas
are off now merrily through the snow.
Flick the tinsel-jingling horses' bridle,
hear how softly clip-clop horses go.
History passes and is never idle
in this sentinel of mother Russia.
Beyond the tumuli of Tartar bones,
the Scythian princes and the mammoth tombs,
how the wind in forests shrieks and moans,
and fires of birch wood smoke out peasants' rooms:
hold your seats and mufflers: off we go
across this wonder-world of fire and snow.

Eternally the heart of men
reclathes the landscape of again.
Scythian chariot, Mongol hordes,
a ravished city, burning farm,
the glittering pennants and the swords
must come to stasis and to calm.
Vast the carnage, fields of corpse,
the haunt of kites and jabbing crows:
from night to day the horrors shrink
towards a hermit's wayside cross:
in history an eyelid's blink.
Shuttered up, now closed and gone
is the landscape travelling on.

Oh, what a joy this is: now, children, hold
on tightly as in din and smoke we pass
the lines of mining towns embossed on cold
and endlessly high-waving steppeland grass.

Here the patriarch and bearded clerics
instruct their students in the holy books.
Here is Baku bristling with its derricks
and loud with labourers and gangland crooks.

Here we pass the rushing rivers, thick
with boulders under Asia's blue-eyed vault.
Now dawdling on the Darya we pick
our way through buttercups to rustic halt.

Oysters, caviar, bejewelled eggs;
monasteries and churches, onion domes:
a land beset by khans and atabegs,
where huddled turf-clad hovels serve for homes.

Resplendent St Petersburg subdues the Baltic
with domes and palaces on marbled streets,
as Vladivostoc, in the all-too-Nordic
blue Pacific, looks on whaling fleets.

Princess Orlova has a chill, poor
creature, stays at home: the doorman snores.
And driven out from village barn and store
the children sleep together out of doors.

That's all there is, this soil, this sky, the rain
that falls in the springtime, or as snow.
The wind's monotony and greyness stain
the steppes as far as steppelands go.

The years of growing are a puff of air,
the gift of motherlands you never reach:
imagination's tricks will hold you there.
Beware, my little ones, what grown-ups teach.

My name is Drosselmeyer, cabinetmaker,
craftsman extraordinary, court magician.
I am the purveyor of dreams and the fabricator
of all that you could wish for. Children listen

It's more lamentable than you can know,
this world. Nor is the toy the thing it seems.
The window thickens with its clotted snow,
falls white as paper and it folds in reams.

What would you write there? Tell me. I can see
into the souls of children. I have hidden sight.
Think into yourself and tell me. You can be
anyone you want for this enchanted night.

Anyone at all. You choose. The midnight hour
will soon be welcomed as the Christmas tree
adopts the sofa, and each candied flower
will mark the places set for grown-up's tea.

Hear them chattering. What do they say?
Mere empty, casual things, as you will soon.
What do they know then? Nothing. Children, pay
attention, if you please, to fork and spoon.

If you will listen you will hear the walls
reverberate with Rimsky-Korsakov,
and wheezing bodies in the first-row stalls
drown out where orchestra must stop and cough.

The eyes of the children, the delighted ones
who follow pas de deux and flounce of tulle,
will help the tipsy aunt that they had once
thought all too lovable to play the fool.

Such commotion as the clocks mark time,
Watch the little minutes march up and down.
What is missing at the midnight's chime
but mouse and nursemaid who have gone to town?

Listen: over steppelands running,
as the steady rain is drumming,
Subutai of silvered hair
attacks the Kipchaks: Bolgar burns.

Ryazan, Kolomna fare
nowise better: now he turns
northwards on to Vladimir.
The steppes are burning: cities fall
to massacre, and antique knights
are lost upon the rally call:
the ravens fatten on the sights.
A plague, a pestilence from God
with blood the horses' hooves are shod.

Children, look away in horror:
the Mongol years are come again.
Executioner and coroner,
our Party Chairman wields his pen.

At Stalingrad the conscripts die
in ditch and cellar, by the wall.
A prey to rats the figures lie
beyond all counting or recall.

Kharkov's taken and retaken:
the womb of Russia foams with blood.
True patriots are never shaken,
never yield their foot of mud.

At Leningrad the rations halve
and halve again, there's no supply.
The blockade tightens, people starve:
they eat their children and they die.

Depredations break and smother
the single conscience and its voice.
Children, ask your crying mother
whom she pleases out of choice.

Nighttime and the cannons roar
carnage as the mornings broke:
a long, consuming total war
where sunlight comes with choking smoke.

The shells are falling, people scatter.
A man on fire runs through the street.
A woman with a fearful tatter
defends herself with stumps for feet.

Confused and struggling, starving men
lock and tussle, knife each other.
A darkness falls and once again
the blood of Cain is on his brother.

Till the world be painted red,
and all our foe be shot or fled:
do not flinch from my decrees,
from lingering torment, lightning breath.
Our foes are clever, by degrees
they'll gain their fatal second breath.
The renegades lie all around,
they may be children or your wife,
your erstwhile comrade, new-made friend:
they lurk malignantly with life
sufficient to undo our end.
Root them out, be proud to feel
as Stalin does, the man of steel.

Children, unlike you, he had no friends,
or much of family: the others died.
His mother sewed and drudged to make amends.
Doting Yekaterina, how she tried.

His bully of a father in a brawl
beaten, drunk as usual, also died.
Poor sickly Josif didn't grow up tall
or take the trials of childhood in his stride.

He got the smallpox: what a sight he was
trudging daily, sadly through the snow:
always apart and solitary because
of more injustices than he could know.

Lenin's follower, he was to make
himself as needed, as the Party teaches
He planned and organized, and for the sake
of unity made hardly any speeches.

A humble man and fatherly, an air
of fool about him, from the peasant class;
No great ambitions, efficient, always there:
so crept the long-striped tiger through the grass.

It's understandable that Josif grew
by turns intractable or even wicked.
Grown-ups were shocked to have his 'things to do'
and promptly awarded him a one-way ticket

No stops permitted, to west Siberia where
he hunts and fishes, whiles away his time.
He liked the place: the bracing, piney air,
the girls got up in cheeky pantomime.

He even married one: Yekaterina,
just like his mother: adorable, tongue-tied.
But life, once difficult, grew only meaner:
she caught a chill, poor thing, and promptly died.

Lenin is our first of men,
intrepid leader once again,
returned from penury abroad,
clandestine meeting, boarding house.
He's brought the party to accord,
changed flighty mistress to a spouse.
Abnegation, martyrdom,
sacrifice yourself, he said.
Russia's but a crucible,
laboratory, a launching pad.
In argument invincible
to take from owners what they had:
the civil war will never end
while the bourgeoisie has a friend.

Grief-stricken, desolate, what could he do
but go about bewildered as ill-fortune sends?
He had the Bolsheviks to help him through,
a sort of far-extended group of friends.

Not, it must be said, the most desirable:
quite outrageous were the things they said,
but Josif dazed and inconsolable
was all too easily, alas, misled.

They said authority stole from the poor
and made such rules up there was nothing left.
All thinking, honest folk would see, therefore,
that every property must count as theft.

Josif brooded, agitated, a small-
town revolutionary not known
beyond the police files. So they did not call,
on him, the Bolsheviks, when they had grown

Large enough to found the Georgian branch
or the International Democratic lot:
one rootless boulder in the avalanche,
a weed that sprouted in a harmless plot.

He tried the seminary, but was expelled,
became a tutor, failed, and then a clerk.
He tried so many callings, but excelled
at none of them: became the party's mark

In out of way small places, at Batum
he planned and agitated, wrote at length
and took 'indomitable' as nom de plume
and quietly lost each trial of strength.

But kept his sons, those workers, whom he taught
to question servitude and all its rules:
a true man's loyalty is never bought,
and Russian patriotism speaks to fools.

The river bubbles from its source.
The peasant stops, unyokes his horse.
By his hut two poplars stand
that always have and always will.
All he asks for is his land,
no more than that. The air is still.
The last leaf folds upon the ground:
a fullness and a blessedness
on all his kith and country folk
who meekly to the grave progress
across the lands where thunder spoke
to nothing and to no one. Calm
is now the village croft and farm.

Draw your troikas up and listen close,
you cannot hide from him, our bogeyman.
His glance grows heavy and his eyebrows gross,
but he can catch you out, oh yes he can.

The lives of many go to make the loom.
The flute is singing and the deep bassoon
keeps company with all who in the room
must now surrender to the picked platoon.

In distant Russia with its moody spells
of light and darkness, in its fervid faiths,
its church and monastery where evening bells
flood out to shaman and to forest wraiths.

Since nightmares have their logics, and their ways
of adding calmly to a madman's views,
they make officially each culling phase
no less expected than a change of shoes.

Remember that and smile as each one talks
and says there must be reason, must be cause,
and quells suspicion as a terror stalks
and picks according to its personal laws.

Children, the nutcracker is a thing of fear.
It grows mechanically through year on year.
It listens and asks when no one's near
what is it exactly that you hear?

The souls of children should be white as snow,
the which they can be when not led astray,
so tell the Party Chairman what you know
and he will gladly make the others pay.

Has your schoolfriend's father sold a pig
he shouldn't have, or hidden seed corn in
a barn? Whatever the peccadillo, big
or small, know not to say so is a sin.

Recall that, childhood, as we go
across the bright-lit world of snow,
a land of privilege and class
which now is altered. All the same
the misery that each must pass
in bringing in this new age blame.
But sit to teatime in this tinsel
world of radiant children born
upon the cusp of time to be
the first arrivals in the dawn
of Soviet audacity.
All is possible but waits
upon the feckless artists' fates.

Where Neve's waters on the Baltic break
it's far the currents there have had to roam.
Tell us what their gypsy authors make
in their uncomfortable and second home.

Tell us endlessly the public reads
and finds that life is just the same as books;
tell us the plagiarizing writer heeds
the recipes devised by Party cooks.

That Akhmatova, tall, beautiful,
in love with poetry and more with life,
composed her monumental sadness: such their pull
all Russia chose her for their second wife.

That Mayakovsky's Mystery Bouffe
made the party faithful catch a cold:
it said that Dostoevsky had the truth,
a truth for which they shot poor Mayerhold.

That Osip Mandelstaum who prayed and yearned
for someone caring, on a childish whim,
made Stalin a black beetle. Unconcerned,
our good, bluff Party Chairman stamped on him.

If Eisenstein's October filming brought
a cast of thousands to the palace stairs.
Far more terrible was Ivan's court,
the Oprichnina and bloodied lairs.

Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony
brought to gloomy nineteen forty-two
reverberations as an endless sea
of memories and faces sunk from view.

In Ilya Repin, Roerich, Levitan:
the mists of Russia murmured and took shape.
The rest were banished, dwindling to a clan
that lacked the nerve or papers to escape.

Paint the picture as you can:
Stalin was a wicked man:
Controlled the papers, made up lies:
all his policies were doing well.
One by one, each kulak dies
who cannot furnish, cannot sell
what the party thinks he should.
The bones poke through as stomachs bloat,
for no one hoards and no one saves
a single cow or pig or goat.
Hardly strength to dig the graves.
But folk are animal, mere freight
in Lenin's automated state

Their world is twisted like a coloured gem
that this way sparkles but will fold again
in various cameos of us and them:
Oh, children, children, do not speak to men.

But look into the household fire and see
the imp there flickering, the jinn that flames
into a bubbling, mocking dance to be
all you wanted with a thousand names.

Close your eyes, dear children, all you dream
of mother Russia, of the peopled land
of serfs and boyars and its fools can seem
a long way off unless you understand

That you and they and all are marching on
and, as the sun in rising floods the steppe,
which is the fatherland when you are gone,
the continent is moving, step in step.

The future beckons, changes: when you gaze
on this harsh world of pain it does not stay,
turns brighter always, and the sun's last rays
will rise tomorrow on a better day.

What you give and gladly's never shut
in selfishness or wasted. He above
that's worshipped in some church or forest hut
acknowledges that staying bond of love.

Each small action here that disappoints,
each road to hardship that goes on and on,
the broken nails, the dirt, the aching joints,
the hurts and heart's privations undergone,

All this and more: the endless dreary towns,
the bureaucratic communes built the same,
the clothes and hemlines tattered, hand-me-down,
have serve to bring the bourgeois past to blame.

That world of writing was the czar's.
Modernism's commissars
arrive and tell us what to do.
All is altered. All must change.
They shout at us and shoot a few
and off they go. When out of range
we scratch around and try to make
some sense of truth in what we're told.
We see the new tracks in the grass:
the orchards blossom, fruit, grow old:
the seasons stir us as they pass.
What the landmarks we can tether
across the steppeland's stormy weather?

The great conspirator, the man of smiles,
whom hardship, disappointment, long privation,
his being overlooked or slighted never riles,
but forged himself the father of the nation,

He will harass you. Now children, look
in photographs he seems the kind buffoon
whose name is praised throughout the history books,
but he will catch you napping, late or soon.

Safety is illusory, a dream
when people blurt and bleed out things you say.
And honesty's a tiny, ringing scream
down corridors, which then is scrubbed away.

For he can beat and beat you till the bones
wear clean through body, come undone:
and he can talk to you in friendly tones
as currents bend and fry you just for fun.

Imagine how it crackles, how it burns
as, worse than grinding toothache in the teeth,
all starts to swelter, infiltrate, and turns
the body's organs into mulch beneath.

But can they now do that, of course they can:
if what you say or do is deemed an error.
The Party Chairman is a dangerous man,
the land of Rus become a holy terror.

The coloured windows and the onion dome
where eyes are dim and lost in shuttered trance
are now replaced by factory, shop and home,
and lives administered as Stalin grants.

Forgo the revolutionary, stay
beside your wireless and your party news.
The blood of martyrs marks the five-year way,
and yours as well, perhaps: now children choose.

The lands around you are a dream.
Our truths will tell you what must seem
intoxicating, natural
is not that way at all, in fact
is muddled and provisional.
Now is always time to act,
to trust the party, every word
and stake your winnings, bet by bet,
and do your muscle-straining best
to go beyond the quota set,
believe the party for the rest.
It's all so simple: comrades try
not to quail or question why.

Unexceptional, immemorial,
unnoticeable to passer-by,
but something indestructible
is locked within the peasant's eye.

The painters searched: it spoke to them
of mysteries in common earth:
even drunkenness would not condemn
the stumbling peasant or the serf.

But in their bones and daily bread
there stayed the greater, burning cost,
a cost indelible as people said
of something which was somehow lost.

Where does this come from in a land
of forest, steppe and vacant sky?
The great pines rise. On either hand
the path is crossed by bending rye.

Here they stand, have always stood,
though sky be colour of the mud:
a strip of marshland, water, wood:
astringencies that taint the blood.

Wide views, high clouds, the land a sea
of waving grasses, scattered woods:
both sadness and futility
are mother Russia's sisterhoods.

The rooks are cawing in the birch
whose branches dwindle into wraiths.
Beneath the hill there stands a church:
repository of many faiths.

That, no more, just mud and ice
that thaws in brownish puddles: sky
is thick with snow-clouds: paradise
lies further than the peasant's eye.

Perhaps the settlers, those old men of toil,
illiterates now sunk beneath the soil,
hold in their imponderable old bones,
or in their drinking, or their matted hair,
more golden wisdom than have Kiev's thrones.
He who knows the bushy fox's lair
is close to some primeval, rural faith.
Its fields and forests and its dark-brown earth
that stretches on, is inexhaustible
with clouds and distances, a rolling girth
that's prodigal and more, the bountiful,
as though in pod soil humuses will seep
the lore of customs that are races deep.

Perhaps there's somewhere though it's far away
where holy Russia has its simple folk
who knew that justice fell on judgement day,
and bread wrought miracles, and icons spoke.

Where candles toil and waver in the air
as peasants mumble on in fervent passion,
why dry-eyed images hold hands and stare
at true believers in their distant fashion.

Alexy stole Vassily's plot of land,
and Nicolas when drunk beats up his wife,
Peotr is shifty, stupid, underhand:
You made it difficult, dear Lord, this life.

Perm to Vladivostok, women pawn
themselves for lace-trimmed petticoats and tights.
The tavern does its roaring trade till dawn,
and young Ludmilla's never home at nights.

Who can say the battening morrow holds
to feed or take the mischief out of bones?
Children, listen how the bittern scolds
or water's hardness, curling, breaks on stones.

The labouring cart goes up the hill, its creaking
woodwork with the harness jingling. Look
and see now, children: hear them speaking
more of sorrow than the history book.

A land forever, of more cloud than hills
where plundering Turkomen and Mongol lie.
Where sorrow from the very wayside spills,
and road to servitude is lost in sky.

Welcome, children, to the world of men,
where all are grown-ups and they cannot dream
but plan and toil and sleep, say how and when
their workman purposes will make a team.

Beyond the conifers and hanging lights
the north wind circles, and the north wind bites.
Beneath the-ever-crystal, rock-hard lake,
and on through wastes of taiga, on through snow
the patient nodding donkeys creak and take
the ebullient and aromatic flow
to steel-lined vaults in Moscow's central banks.
The figures glitter, spin, the digits blink
and glow again to reddened, sombre fire.
Into perspex now the totals sink
to rows of zeroes, blanks, and then expire.
To oil concessions, camps and mineral claims
blow out the blizzard of forgotten names.

Across the township-studded plain
the power stations catch the light,
and heavy with their long-eared rain
the clouds continue out of sight.

Russia, mother Russia, filled
with bitter-sweet rememberings:
a past already distant, tilled
for monstrous and exotic things.

As far as emptiness and days
of seeing nothing, no one, just
the clouds and rounding earth that stays
companionable as well it must.

New generations rise: they go
to school, to workplace, have their lives
commendably set out for show
in decent, working, honest wives.

Enough of visions, enough of change,
the lies diminish and condemn:
the promised land is out of sight:
the thin brown loam is tired of them.

Sometimes when the wind is free
it rolls across the open ground
leaving what was meant to be
but wondered at and never found.

New hopes, new people eat their bread
with salt of exile where it's said
they live no more by being bred
for sacrifice or simply led.

One by one the lights come on
in streets of gaunt industrial cities:
beside some local Rubicon
the folk await their destinies.

The quiet of evening and the loss
of brightness as there drift across
the wastes of tundra and of taiga,
the ever-falling snowland haunts
of mink and bear and arctic tiger,
where the Volga eddies out and flaunts
itself in staging post and Cossack town
in undone miles of silver coils,
where seeping out, by slow degrees,
the thickening water softens soils
in fields, in gardens, through the trees:
till the hoar frost reaches skies
and the sturgeon, spawning, dies.

Birch and alder, then the fir-tree screens
the streams now tumbling into deep ravines.
High up, the Urals like an unclothed breast
display a warm bravado in each brazen slope,
where glittering morning's brightness comes to rest
as dull galena in its mineral stope.
Forever toiling up the winding path
beneath the headframe where the tailings spill
as quiet as minnows in the crystal rivers:
a glint of gold and green and then there's still.
A wad of sound, the wind: the aspen shivers,
and of a sudden through the lands of Rus
there's hope from exile and some home for us.