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## Tchaikovsky in Iraq

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# “TCHAIKOVSKY IN IRAQ”

*by Etienne Horvilleur*

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Overture 1812 in my headset  
*Performed by The Fourth of July  
Orchestra in Fallujah Auditorium, 2004*

M16s in E major.  
M60s in F major.  
Ak47s in B major.

*I*  
An interlude allows me  
to breathe

To settle the mounting  
adrenaline still charging  
through my arteries  
like a cavalry of severed heads  
it runs directionless  
steadied by hours of repetition

My trigger finger trembles only after  
the fact

We assemble  
take a knee  
and closely listen  
to what needs to be done  
has been done  
many times before

It's all sewn into my cortex  
grey strands bunched together  
like us  
in a circle  
spitting out pieces of the sun.

*II*  
We must be more than machines  
more than simple gears  
of voluble metal

We must be electrical pulses  
conducting chaos into  
splendid holes that are nothing  
more than windows from one body  
to the next

*III*  
The convoy moves  
like a caravan of camels

I look out the window  
in awe of our audience

Before I walk out  
into the oven

I rub a sandy fistful  
into my face  
hoping to confuse the desert

*IV*

Four by four  
we disperse through the streets  
like dogs startled by water

We bang on each door  
looking  
for our tombstones

Asking the residents  
if they've seen Sheikh Abdullah or  
better yet  
if they've seen death

We try to stay ahead of  
it  
firing into windows to confuse  
it  
with shards of  
its  
own reflection

But to some of us  
the mere pops and hisses  
become Medusa's gaze  
and we stand frozen  
in torrid awe  
reciting Christian prayers

while others  
opposite us  
chant the calligraphy  
of the Quran into flowering  
explosions

*V*

Thought after thought  
sprouts  
blossoms  
and dies in a coffin the length  
of a minute

Yet showered in turned-over dirt  
we press on

Door after door  
face after face  
persecuting the answer  
to the end

*VI*

The clamor  
of night's lost riot  
settles down

As we hook fresh detainees  
over our shoulders  
like stringed fish

And we carry them  
to the market where  
cleavers of questions  
will file the truth  
to the market  
where their price  
will be haggled over in the dark  
by men whose hearts are  
nothing more  
than mere warehouses

*VII*

Music knows nothing  
of the innocence of bystanders

Our audience stands  
in angry ovation  
throwing thorny insults at our feet

What used to be a baby exposes  
its innards to a tenuous sun

An opera of orders swirls  
in the black hawks whirlwind

And soon the  
thump—thump—thump—  
of the blades  
is lost in the—thump—  
of machine fire

We bring our audience  
to their knees  
And soon  
before we raid the house

We realize  
that this is not about flags  
or the slippery whereabouts  
of petroleum

It's about us  
and them  
and nothing more

And it will repeat again  
and again

Maneuvering through sordid notes  
in an overture  
long ago composed  
through the speed of automatic fire

And I will recall them as minutes  
that Tchaikovsky has made  
an eternity in Iraq

And the Iraq of my youth  
will recall me  
and them  
for minutes on end  
to come.