

Peter Lugg

**A NOBLEMAN WRITES TO AN
IMPOVERISHED COUSIN
IN EAST RUSSIA, 1870**

You remain in the front row
of life's ballet
long after the applause has ended.
Since my visit I understand
the boredom of landowners,
the weariness which attends
gazing at the birchgroves.

Staring at the far horizon
you await the puffs of dust
announcing Mirsky's return from Moscow.
Instead you see the postilion
bearing the morning mail
to the rutted thoroughfares of Minsk.

I relive the cadence of your days.
You snap your fingers for servants,
already forgetting the emancipation.
You amble on gouty legs to the cognac.
How cool it keeps on wicker table
beneath the perfumed linden —
it is memory's chloroform.

Insects drone. As sunset approaches
your eyes mist with cognac and indecision.
The birches gossip to themselves,
offering no resolution.
Clutching faded books of account
you lurch along dim cedar halls.

Steadfast, mirrors avoid your gaze
You stumble over luggage heaped in the kitchen
slurp borsch cold from Kolya's English silver,
then climb stairs to a vast and empty bed.
Through a window stares
the moon's unblinking eye,
pale accomplice to your insomnia.

The silk counterpane rustles
as legs writhe with the mind's torment.
At first light auctioneers from St Petersburg
will arrive on your estate
their eyes full of officers' clubs
and the glint of gold roubles.

The estate will fall
to a shrewd prince from Siberia —
absentee landlord of all he fails to survey.
What then, dear cousin?
Will you sit besieged by baggage
waiting for a droshky to Moscow,
sadly accepting the Tsar's commission?

Or will you visit insouciant relatives in Pskov,
to spend eternity under the birches
waiting for the clamour of Easter bells?