

**Kurt Schwitters**  
**Translated by Peter Wortsman**

**The Onion**  
**(Merzpoem 8)**

It was a very momentous day, the day on which I was to be slaughtered. (Fear not, have faith!) The king was ready, the two attendants were on hand. The butcher had been ordered for half past six; it was a quarter past and I myself arranged for the necessary preparations. We had selected a spacious hall for the occasion, so that many spectators could comfortably take part in the festivities. A telephone was within reach. The doctor lived next door and agreed to be on call if a member of the audience fainted. (A memento of your confirmation.) Two mighty pulleys hung from the ceiling to crank me up afterwards, in case I was to be disemboweled. Four strong lackeys stood ready to lend a hand, former Russian prisoners of war, stout, big-boned boys. (Better Homes and Gardens Magazine.) Two immaculate chambermaids were also on hand, clean-as-a-whistle wenches. It was a pleasant thought that two such pretty girls would whorl my blood and wash and prepare my inner organs.

The hall had been swept and scrubbed clean for the occasion. I had them place two long white smooth-topped tables against one wall; on the surface they'd stacked some dishes, knives and forks. I just had them bring over a water basin, water and a washcloth, some soap too (only Ivory). Anna and Emma, the two scullery maids, brought a bucket and whisk. It is, after all, a curious feeling to know that you are to be slaughtered in ten minutes time. (The sacrifices of motherhood.) I had never yet in all my life been slaughtered. You've got to be ripe to be ready. It's high time when the potatoes have been dug up and the oats harvested, that's the time to act. We haven't really even had much of a summer yet. Ten minutes can seem very long. (Faith, Love, Hope.) (Ducks go goosing along on the lawn.) Everything down to the smallest detail has been made ready.

Then the princess made her appearance. She had a short white skirt on, a little wrinkled from sitting but even the wrinkles looked good on her. The church steeple is very tall, you see. The tassel-time of spring dedicated in friendship. Leap restlessly kicking dainty little princess legs. How I love those fickle kicking littleladylegs. Tail wagging sour cream. She placed her inkwell before me and asked clean-as-a-whistle, all white-lacy-spotless: "Are you to be slaughtered today?" Hot fish knives spurt blood. I lowered my purple gaze enchanted by her greeting. How handsome you are, Alves Baeselstiel!" she said to me with her red lips blood boiling boy voyage pert little turned-up nose: "I bring you the world's last greeting. Get thee to a nunnery! (Make yourself at home.) (Headless leather.) Fulling leather belly button bound. You must've had your hands full these last few days getting everything read for the big day. (Peace be with you!) How did you ripen so quickly, you're almost over-ripe! Cast a cheerful eye upon your ripened self! May it always bring you joy! How nice that the weather has stayed so nice on your slaughterday so that the butcher can ride over by bicycle. (Genuine handmade in Brussels.) Be healthy and happy. "Allow me, princess, to place a call to the butcher. It's half past seven and he isn't here yet." "Hello! Is this the butcher? The spectators are getting restless, why don't you come on over?" (From here to eternity!) "Go ahead and start the festivities! I've just pinioned my sister as a weathervane on the church steeple. The steeple is very pointy, and spears fish in the whiplash wind. The lightning rod was very rusty and didn't slide so smoothly through my sister's stomach. Still naked blade spears fish in whiplash wind. Just begin with the formalities, I'll be right over!"

I had them call the king. "Your Majesty, I commend to you my beautiful body! My corpse is in your hands!" (The six-pronged millimeter slicer measure costs only 20 pfennig.) The king winked. (Fortuna sharpeners.) The two attendants, all decked out in black frockcoat and black gloves, top hat and a black armband, stationed themselves on either side of the king. A black dog flew by yapping. The king winked again. The four Russians, and Anna and Emma prepared to lend a hand. The king winked again. The attendants approached me, introduced themselves and asked after my last wish. (The sky's the limit!/This is your life, pal!)

I requested that the princess sing the great worker's song and then kiss me! (Headless necks, genuine calf's leather.) A lady in the king's entourage swooned. They called the doctor. Heart a racing. The princess sang:

“Comrade Organist  
C-sharp-D  
D-sharp-It  
You your yours yup,”

the whole Workers' Song. Lampost players kissing wide skirts waving lacy kisses. Sling arm in arm wide skirts waving neck lace warm pipes smooth sleek fish karp, karp, karp. (Prier de fermer la porte.) Please, please door shut, you, you, you! I love you so very much! (The world with all its sins.) I'm ready to be slaughtered!

The king winked again, the butcher stepped forward. The place went silent. Pro patria est, dum ludere videmur. (Blue-red-yellow girls' brigade.) (No smoking, no fingering unlit cigars.) Two attendants attend to the butcher's bicycle. (Necessary casualty.) One attendant brings over a club, balloon bulging lemon pale. (Hold onto what you have!) The butcher wears a blue-striped smock fluttering fabric. (Sugar beet girls.) October is conducive to ceremony rival lackeys. –Go! –Dumdum me! –The butcher leans back, head tilted, the club raised ready. (Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home/a slaughterhouse.) The butcher leaps forward (That's true love!), swings a club down down heavy heavy heavy blow, ardent swing down heavy heavy heavy very very very very.—

My skull cracked open.

I had no recourse but to collapse; so I collapsed lapsed lapsed, flat. Aaaaa aaaaaa aaa aaaaa a. (Applause throughout the house.)

What now? They bound up my arms and legs in, bound bound me up. Lowered slung flat collapse crooked carcass. (General appeal to all blue and white collar operatives.) They speared me in the side. Blood spurted

bucket blue spray red thick whip. Whirl girls whirl it up wheels engines roaring whirl Emma Anna. (Today you have given your heart in holy matrimony!) The king asked for a sip. Blue fell flame death very down very down. Hollow burned the belly flame sulfur blood. The king has been missing a beard ever since. Semper fidelis, duty calls. (Transmitted straight from the newsroom.) Everything has its crime and treason. (Amplifiers, Collective League for Capitalist Construction, Ltd., Berlin.)

They wanted to disembowel me. (New new mocha candies, sweet taste that can't be beat.) Transfers drive knife slit shivering innards. (Arms for Peace.) It was a very elegant garden restaurant. A thousand pleasures flooded my guts saviours tomorrow twenty. Only three chandeliers had that greenhouse grown socket sprouted. (Storm of applause.) Mooncalf glows soft inside innards drawn fat excruciating ear attack. (Everything for the Red Army.) Clean, clean, be clean girls, wash it clean, don't let it burn. (God be with you.) (God be with you.)

Flame scorching, flame scorching! Earthworms make merry in my gut, tickle me quietly. The king craves my eyes. Bring me, daughter, the eyes of the Baptist! (Today you leave your father's house!) The eyes round balls smooth slime inside spring out softly, melts in your mouth not in your hands. On a plate with knife and fork they served up the eyes. (Deaf and dumb veterans will receive advice and information free of charge.) Smooth slimed oyster eyes sink stomach heavy. Children under twelve will only be admitted under adult supervision, children under eight must also be lead by the hand when asked by the management. (Admission price 50 cents, or at least a buck.)

"Poison!" cried the king and writhed on the ground. (The future depends on the fruit of the womb.) "Sweet dreams, darling, I've been poisoned." (August has 31 days, the days are reduced by an hour and 56 minutes.) Yes, isn't it awful! "Lord, you are my rock and my salvation!" Two mushrooms grew stalk-eyed smooth onion bulbs spurting milk and drilled holes a pair into the king's royal gut. Eyes eyed cross-eyed. Silently shrieked king chalk-like on the collective blackboard. The princess suffered filial heart palpitations. (Acetylene banishes the odor of bodily secretions.)

She was so sorry for her father. The doctor was called over and took pains to tend to the holes in the king's gut. (Veritas vincit, with Anna Blume playing the lead.) The old king swooned. Terror mounts in silver strains stone upon stone. The princess winked and ordered me to be put back together again. (This is how bed feathers get cleaned, dusted, washed, steamed and blown dry.)

They started to put me back together. First with a delicate jolt my eyes were reinserted in their sockets. (Fear not, faith, love, hope are your guiding lights.) Then they fetched back my inner organs. Fortunately, none of it had yet been cooked or ground into sausage meat. (Vaincu, mais non dompté.) It'd still be nice to have a mild fall. As a consequence of my own magnetic drives, my innards immediately flew back into place and refastened themselves in rapid reverse as soon as they were reinserted. (Marriage is the key to a happy life.) A slight disorder in the arrangement of my reconstituted inner organs gave rise to a few minor organic problems. (Saint Florian moved into the new German Theater, enjoying a nightly storm of applause.) But I immediately noticed what was wrong and jiggled my inner magnet power lines AC-DC back and forth a bit, criss-cross, one two one two one two one to rearrange the beam in my eye. I tugged and twisted with a fierce magnetic fury till everything was back in its proper place again. My knowledge of man's inner workings came in awfully handy here. (A year's probation, then a permanent position in the Prussian civil service.) Yes, indeed! My solid parts had meanwhile reassembled, only my blood was still lacking. (Bordens sweet milk chocolate.) The scullery maids held the cup of blood beneath the incision in my side and whisked with a backwards motion. The king gave off a loud groan. My inner magnetism worked wonders drawing a thick gush of blood from the rich red cup up into my thirsty wound. (A girl is not allowed to be told what every woman must know.) My arteries slowly swelled, my inner parts pumped blood. But my heart as yet refused to thump, I was still dead. (WET PAINT.) The butcher brought his knife back to the wound in my side, pierced deeply and promptly pulled the blade back out, and—the wound closed shut. (Tear along the dotted line and mail to the above address.) That's why every woman considering matrimony ought to find out the facts. So I

had all my parts back together again with just a few things missing, since shreds of my physical self stayed stuck to the knife. Where there's a will there's a way, they say, if the moment is ripe. But a good deal of blood was lacking since the king had drunk it. (All for the Worker's Cause.) I've been a little anemic ever since. Take the bird home with you and buy yourself a cage. They lowered reel real pulley-like. Then I had to rise, intuitively I felt it, and so I rose; rapidly at first, then ever more slowly till I was standing upright. (My ticker and yapper are out of wack.) In Burgundy arose a maiden fair; I'm only a woman, sir. Be mindful, child, of where you're bound! Be pious and good! Have faith and face life without fear! (Vote Socialist!) The two cupbearers assumed a ceremonial stance beside me and grasped my clumsy paws. (Prescriptions filled for all health plans.) Alas, my childhood days are gone, life's bitter battle has begun. I was very curious how exactly they intended to bring me back to life. (Isthmus Organizer by Jefim Golycheff.) Touching artworks is strictly forbidden. I felt dizzy. (Strindberg silently undermining Stramm.) Our dear old teacher liked to spice up his lessons with a little humor, and we were glad he did. (A snatch of sunshine.) I believe in absolutely nothing. (Trombone tones.) You guessed it! Arise, oh gentle Sunday School teachers, Germany needs you! (What a man ought to know about pregnancy and birthing!) Your mouth is a semi-circular saw. (Dr. Sunshine, D.D.S.) The butcher picked up his cudgel again (The tragedy of becoming human), stood before me (Consider man's behaviour during pregnancy) and softly lay the brutal instrument against my split skull. (Rudolf Bauer is an artist, after all.) Anna Blume bathed in lilac blue roses shoots barbs blank abed in a Posturpedic mattress. (Ripe for plucking, inwardly composed.) Partial explanation misses the point. Then the butcher took a mighty leap backwards. (The Colonel is and will always be a gentleman even if he happens to be an idiot.) The woman must know everything about it. A mighty crash resounded as the cudgel separated from my head. The occasion suggests a book for women only. Table of contents: 1. How to Hook a Man. -2. The Tamed Shrew. -3. What Girls Look for in a Guy. -4. Advice in Kissing. -5. How to Make an Impression. -6. How to Respond to a Bouquet of Flowers. -7. Is Fear of Marriage Justified? -8. Causes of Coyness. -9. Old-fashioned views. -10. How to Take it Slowly. -11. Some Good Advice. -12. Is Love Blind?

-13. How to Recognize True Love. -14. A Prospective Suitor's Past. -15. The Most Intimate Facts. -16. The Rebirth of Religion. -17. The Dark Star. The butcher leaped backwards to his original position. (He should be your Lord and Master.) She's the boss's right hand, no blemish on that girl's good reputation. (Jamais embrassé.) The severed sections of my skull flew back together, I was more or less my old self again. (A sweet consummation.) You don't know how to make dumplings, dear, and pickles make my face break out. After all, theatre is only geared to figments of the imagination, artificial people. Delivery upon receipt of payment, the book is lavishly illustrated. It was an uncanny feeling to be alive again. Seltzer sails aloft luminous scent of Maria. I sensed that a little posturing Lazarus-like was expected of me, so I postured. (The king is dead.) With a sweeping gesture I marched over to the princess and silently gave her my hand. (Kiss me!) The princess fell down on her sweet knees before me. (We're all from the same neighborhood.) The doctor, meanwhile, gnawed on ham hocks. For a continuation of the help wanted ads, see the Sunday supplement. She begged me with all her heart to save her father. (Heaven Can Wait) I knew that kindness wasn't called for here, kindness is the sign of a fool. (Be adamant Anna Blume.) (You're at a dangerous age.) "Your father, the king," I said, "the king stays dead." (Whet your blade on a genuine seal skin barber strap.) The doctor swooned. I ordered that two yellow candles be inserted in the holes in his majesty's royal gut and that they be ceremoniously lit. (Postage stamps are acceptable forms of payment.) When the little flame burnt all the way down into the king's innards, the king exploded. The people called out a rousing hip-hip-hurrah on my behalf. (Socialism means work.)

#### NOTE

'The Onion' ('Die Zwiebel') was first published in the German literary review *Der Sturm* in 1919. Painter, sculptor, designer, composer and poet, Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) was best known for his collages in image, word and tone. A true 'realist' of the 20th-century, he presented the fragmented reality of culture's collapse. Condemned by the Nazis as an "entarteter" (degenerate) artist, Schwitters fled first to Norway and then to England, where he died. "I sympathize with nonsense," he once said. Or as he put it in a letter: "We play till death takes us away."

## Author Info

Peter Wortsman is a writer in multiple modes and translator from German. His work includes fiction (*A Modern Way to Die*, 1991), drama (*The Tattooed Man Tells All*, 2000, and *Burning Words*, 2004) and travel writing (in *The Best Travel Writing*, 2008 and 2009). His translations include *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, by Robert Musil, now in its third edition, *Travel Pictures*, by Heinrich Heine, and *Selected Prose of Heinrich von Kleist*. He was the Holtzbrinck Fellow in Spring 2010 at the American Academy in Berlin.

---

[cambridgeliteraryreview.org](http://cambridgeliteraryreview.org)