The Execution

On certain nights as soon as I lie down my bed starts drifting into Russia, and presently I'm led to a ravine, to a ravine led to be killed.

I wake—and in the darkness, from a chair where watch and matches lie, into my eyes, like a gun's steadfast muzzle, the glowing dial stare.

With both hands shielding breast and neck—now any instant it will blast!—I dare not turn my gaze away from that disk of dull fire.

The watch's ticking comes in contact with frozen consciousness; the fortunate protection of my exile I repossess.

But how you would have wished, my heart, that thus it all had really been: Russia, the stars, the night of execution and full of racemosas the ravine!

Berlin, 1927

Notes

Lines 17-20. Freudsians have found here a "death wish," and Marxists, no less grotesquely, "the expiation of feudal guilt." I can assure both groups that the exclamation in this stanza is wholly rhetorical, a trick of style, a deliberately planted surprise, not unlike underpromotion in a chess problem.

"Racemosas" is the name I use for the Russian *obryomuba*, the "racemose old-world bird cherry," *Padus racemosa* Schneider (see my commentary to Eugene Onegin, vol. 3, p. 11).