

Vladislav Khodasevich
The Dactyls

1.

He had six fingers, my father. Across the stretch of canvas,
Bruni tutored the soft trail of his brush.
Where the Academy sphinxes have stared each other out, he would
dash in a summer jacket across the frozen Neva.
He returned to Lithuania, the cheerfully penniless painter
of murals in many churches, Polish and Russian.

2.

He had six fingers, my father. That kind of birth is lucky.
Where the pear trees are standing on the green boundary,
the Viliya bringing its azure waters into the Neman,
he met his joy in the poorest of poor families.
As a child I found in a drawer Mama's veil and bridal slippers.
Mama! To me you are prayers; love; faithfulness; death.

3.

He had six fingers, my father. We would play at "Mister Magpie"
of an evening on the divan that we loved. That's when
I would painstakingly fold his fatherly fingers over,
one by one – that's five. And the sixth one is me.
Half a dozen children. And truly, by hard work he brought
five up to adulthood, but he didn't last into mine.

4.

He had six fingers, my father. That tiny superfluous pinky
he could hide neatly inside the fist of his left,
and so inside his soul for ever, unmentioned under a bushel,
he would hide his past, his grief for his sacred craft.
He went into business out of need, not a hint or a word
of a memory, a murmur. He liked just to say nothing.

5.

He had six fingers, my father. How many streaks of paint did he
tightly conceal in his dry and handsome palm?
The artist considers the world – judges it, and with a bold
will, the will of his demon, creates a new one.
But he had closed his eyes, his painting gear put away,
not to create or to judge... the hard, sweet vocation!

6.

He had six fingers, my father. His son? He has inherited
neither the humble heart, the brood of children,
nor the six fingers. Like placing a bet on a dubious card
he stakes his soul, his fate, on a word, on a sound.
Now on a January night, drunken with six-fingered metre and
six-fingered verses, the son remembers his father.

Translated by Peter Daniels