

DACHSHUND AND BORZOI—THE NABOKOV'S FAVORITE BREEDS

In his memoir, Nabokov recalls a succession of dachshunds in the family and speaks of his mother's "particular fondness" for the breed (*SM* 48). In the 1908 family photograph, taken in Vyra, Elena Ivanovna is holding a dachshund, named Trainy, which Vladimir Dmitrievich acquired in 1904 at a dog show in Germany (see *SM* 140 and 48). In another family photograph of Nabokov and his siblings, taken ten years later in the city of Yalta, in Crimea, his sister Elena is shown "firmly clasping Box II," another dachshund, "whose grandparents were Dr. Anton Chekhov's Quina and Brom" (*SM* 214 and 48).

As might be expected, dachshunds, which Nabokov depicts expertly and lovingly, populate many of his works. One such dachshund appears already in his first novel, *Mary*. The dog belongs to Frau Dorn, the landlady of the pension, in which the novel's principal characters dwell. The pet is described as an "affectionate black dachshund [with] the wart on its hoary muzzle" (*Mary* 7). The landlady's last name bears a Chekhovian allusion since this is the physician's surname in the writer's play *The Seagull*. The combination Dorn-dachshund may be seen as Nabokov's tribute to Chekhov, a physician by training, who favored dogs of this breed.

Another dachshund, "with a patched, blue little overcoat and low-swinging ears," turns up in *The Defense* (*Def* 202). The description brings to mind Nabokov's mother's dachshund "in a patched and ill-fitting coat" (*SM* 48). A dachshund also appears in Nabokov's retrospective story "A Bad Day," in which it is described as "a corpulent brown dachshund" moving "very indolently, sideways" (*Stories* 274). Subsequently, a "fat yellow dachshund" (*Laugh* 30) may be found in *Laughter in the Dark*, where it belongs to Frau Levandovsky, the landlady and the procuress of Margot who used to take the pet for walks (see *Laugh* 31 and 34). Here the dog's age is not given. However, in *Kamera obskura*, the novel's original version, it is characterized as having "gray hair on its muzzle" (*s sedinoi na morde*) and is described as "trott[ing] off while holding its body sideways as do all old dachshunds" (*zatrusila, derzha telo bochkom, kak eto delaiut vse starye taksy*) (*Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, 3:264 and 265). This dog evokes Elena Ivanovna's dachshund that followed the Nabokovs into exile and was her "tremendously old" companion in the 1930s in Prague (*SM* 48). It is instructive that Nabokov also included a member of this breed in the portrayal of a family reminiscent of his own: "a family in Biarritz, complete with governess, tutor, clean-shaven valet, and brown dachshund" (*Glory* 136). This string of dachshunds may be viewed as Nabokov's tribute to his mother.

While dachshunds were Elena Ivanovna's favorite breed, a borzoi, which appears in the winter 1905 photograph, taken in Vyra, evidently was a favorite breed of Vladimir Dmitrievich (see Jane Grayson, *Vladimir Nabokov* [Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2001], 19). This may be gathered from the poem "Evening on a Vacant Lot," which Nabokov composed in 1932, on the tenth anniversary of his father's tragic death, and which he dedicated to his memory. In the beginning of this poem, its lyrical "I" notices "a skull of happiness, long, slender, like the skull of a borzoi" (*Selected Poems* 92). By the power of his imagination, the poet turns this simile into the image of a borzoi, "a slender hound with snow-white coat" (*Selected Poems* 93), like the one in the photograph, which Vladimir Dmitrievich was presumably in the habit of taking for a stroll. The poem ends with a figure of the poet's father, whom he recognizes by the dog-summoning whistle and by his "energetic stride" (*Selected Poems* 93).

In addition to this poem, Nabokov makes use of borzoi imagery throughout his oeuvre. Thus, the breed is mentioned literally in "A Matter of Chance" (see *Stories* 55) and figuratively in "Could, Castle, Lake" and "The Visit to the Museum" (to be precise, Nabokov employs

“borzoi” in the original Russian texts of these two stories; see *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, 4:584 and 5:400. In the English translations, the locution is rendered as “a Russian wolfhound,” which is synonymous with borzoi, and “greyhound[s],” respectively; see *Stories* 432 and 280). Of special interest is Nabokov’s last interview, conducted in February of 1977, in which the writer alludes to himself when speaking about “my old borzoi[,]” thereby underscoring his Russian roots (see Robert Robinson, “The Last Interview,” in *Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute*, ed. Peter Quennell [New York: William Morrow, 1980], 123).

Vladimir Dmitrievich’s fondness for borzois and Elena Ivanovna’s fondness for dachshunds may explain why Nabokov enjoyed looking at “a charming borzoi with ash-blue specks on her forehead (like yesterday’s evening sky)” “playing with a russet dachshund,” and thought that “these two long tender snouts, prodding each other, were wonderful” (*Letters to Véra* 96). The frolicking of these two canines seems to make Nabokov exceedingly happy. It appears that the joyous encounter of the members of these two breeds, respectively favored by his father and mother, evoked in the writer’s mind, by association, his parents’ blissful relationship and the happiness of his own childhood and youth.

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