The Tale of Igor’s Campaign

I

The discourse on Igor’s campaign, Igor son of Sviatoslav, grandson of Oleg.

II

It was never fitting, brothers, for us to begin the story of Igor’s campaign, Igor Sviatoslavich, Using the ardent words of vexing tales. This song should begin in accordance with the events of our own time and not as a fantasy of Boian.

III

For Boian was a wizard; when he wished to create a song, He would move in all directions through the tree as a squirrel— as a grey wolf along the ground, as a dusky eagle beneath the clouds. He remembered, he said, the wars of the first times. He would free ten falcons to attack a flock of swans; The first swan seized sang the first song to old Iaroslav, to brave Mstislav who slew Rededia as Cherkess troops looked on, to fair Roman Sviatoslavich.

IV

But Boian’s ten falcons, brothers, attacked no flock of swans. His own magic fingers struck, and strings alive pulsed glory to the princes.

V

We shall begin then, brothers, this tale from old Vladimir down to the present Igor, Who tensed his mind with battle-strength, quickened his heart.

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with valor, and, swollen with the spirit of war,
Led out his brave troops
   into the Polovtsian steppe for the land of Rus.

VI

Then Igor looked up at the bright sun and saw all his warriors
darkened from it by a shadow.
And Igor said to his retinue:
   “Brothers and companions! It is better to be slain than taken captive.
Mount, brothers, your swift horses that we may glimpse the Blue Don.”
In his fervor, the Prince’s foresight ebbed from him,
   and his zeal to taste the great Don veiled the omen from him.
“"I wish,” he said, “to break my lance at the end
   of the Polovtsian steppe with you, men of Rus;
I wish to lay down my head, or drink with my helmet from the Don.”

VII

O Boian! Nightingale of a former time!
If you were to chirr the glory of these campaigns,
Flitting as a nightingale through the thought-tree,
   flying in the mind beneath clouds,
Weaving glories together at both ends of this time,
   loping along the path of Troian
   through the steppes toward the mountains,
You would have sung this song to Igor, the grandson of Oleg:

“No storm has carried the falcons across the wide steppe.
Flocks of daws race toward the great Don.”
Or would you sing, wizard Boian, grandson of Veles:
“Horses neigh beyond the Sula; glory rings in Kiev;
Trumpets blare in Novgorod; banners stand in Putivl!”

VIII

Igor awaits his beloved brother, and Fierce Bull Vsevolod speaks:
   “You are my one brother, Igor, my one shining light;
we are both sons of Sviatoslav.
Saddle, brother, your swift horses,
   for mine are ready, saddled ahead at Kursk.
And these, my men of Kursk, are hardened fighters,
swaddled to the blare of trumpets,  
cradled under war helmets,  
fed with the tip of the lance.
The paths are known to them, and they know the ravines.  
Their bows are strung taut; their quivers are opened;  
their sabres are honed.
They leap like gray wolves in the steppe, seeking honor for themselves  
and for their prince--glory!"

IX

Then Prince Igor stepped into the golden stirrup,  
set out through the open steppe.
The sun barred his way with darkness.
Night groaning at him awoke birds with the threat;  
the howling of beasts rose up.
Div is aroused, he shrieks a command to the unknown land,  
to the Volga, Pomorie, Posulie, Surozh and Korsun;  
from the treetops he bids them take heed.
“And to you too, O idol of Timutorokan!”

X

The Polovtsians, by uncharted routes, raced toward the great Don.  
Their carts screech at midnight, a sound like startled swans.
Igor is leading his warriors to the Don.  
In the oak groves birds foretell his misfortunes, and in the ravines  
wolves stir up a storm; eagles call beasts to the bones;  
foxes bark at scarlet shields.
0 land of Rus! You are already behind the hill!

XI

The night darkens long and is suddenly black; the morning star has shed its light;  
mist has covered the steppe; the nightingale’s trill is stilled;  
the chatter of daws begins.
The Men of Rus with scarlet shields, have barred the great steppe,  
seeking honor for themselves and for their prince--glory.

XII

Past dawn on that day they trampled pagan Polovtsian troops.
Scattering like arrows over the land, they seized beautiful Polovtsian maidens, 
And with them gold, brocades, and patterned velvets. 
Across the swamps and marshes they began to lay bridges 
with cloaks, mantles, furs, 
and all kinds of fine Polovtsian raiments. 
The scarlet banner, the white pennon, the scarlet fringe, the silver lance, 
All to the brave son of Sviatoslav!

XIII
Oleg’s bold brood slumbers in the steppe. Far has it flown! 
It was not born for the affront of falcon or gerfalcon, 
or you, black raven, pagan Polovtsian!

XIV
Gzak runs as a gray wolf; Konchak shows him the way 
to the great Don.

XV
Early the second day blood in the sky heralds the light; 
black clouds come from the sea 
with blue lightning flashing within; 
They will cover the four suns; there shall be great thunder; 
there shall he rain with arrows from the great Don; 
Here shall the lances be broken; here shall the sabre 
be dulled on Polovtsian helmets; 
on the River Kaiala, near the Great Don. 
0 land of Rus! You are already behind the hill!

XVI
These winds, the grandsons of Stribog, blow as arrows, 
from the sea onto the brave warriors of Igor. 
The earth rumbles; rivers flow murkily; dust covers the steppe; 
banners speak!

XVII
Polovtsians come from the Don, from the sea and from all sides; 
they have encircled the warriors of Rus.
The devil’s children have barred the steppe with shouting,
but the brave Rus have barred their way with scarlet shields.

**XVIII**

Fierce Bull Vsevolod!
You stand at bay!
You dart at the enemy like arrows!
You smash helmets with your Frankish sword!
Wherever the Bull leaps, his golden helmet flashing,
there lie pagan Polovtsian heads,
their Avar helmets split by tempered sabres,
by you, Fierce Bull Vsevolod!
He cursed his wounds, dear brothers, having forgotten honor and life,
the city of Chernigov, his father’s golden throne,
And the beautiful daughter of Gleb, his beloved’s love and affection.

**XIX**

The times of Troian have passed; the years of Iaroslav are gone;
and the campaigns of Oleg, Oleg Sviatoslavich.
With his sword that prince forged discord throughout the land
and sowed the earth with arrows.
He steps into the golden stirrup
in the city of Tmutorokan!
Distant great Iaroslav had heard that same discord,
but Vsevolod’s son, Vladimir, in Chernigov
stopped his ears each morning.
Pride brought Boris Viacheslavich to judgment on the River Kanina.
Pride spread a green shroud for the brave and young prince,
to the disgrace of Oleg.
From that same Kanina, Sviatopolk cradled his father
between Hungarian amblers to Saint Sophia, to Kiev.
Then in the time of Oleg, Son of Woe,
the land was sown and it sprouted with discord.
The living of Dazhbog’s grandson was ruined;
the ages of mankind were cut short by the feuds of the princes;
Throughout the land of Rus the plowman seldom called out,
but the ravens often cawed,
portioning the corpses among themselves,
and grackles called in their tongue, waiting to fly to the feast.
XX

So it was with those wars and those campaigns of the past, but no one has heard such a battle as this. From early morning until evening, from evening until daybreak, tempered arrows fly, sabres crash on helmets, Frankish lances crack like thunder in the unknown steppe on the Polovtsian land.

XXI

Bones were sown and watered with blood in the black earth beneath the hooves; they sprouted up with grief throughout the land of Rus.

XXII

What sounds do I hear? What rings to me just before daybreak? Because he pities his dear brother, Vsevolod, Igor turns back his warriors. They battled through the day; they fought for another; on the third day at noon, Igor’s banners fell. There the brothers were parted on the banks of the swift Kaiala.

XXIII

There the blood-wine ran out; there the brave sons of Rus completed the feast, gave drink to the matchmakers, they themselves lay down for the land of Rus. The grass droops with anguish, and the tree with sorrow is bent toward the earth. For already, brothers, a sorrowful time has begun; emptiness has covered the warriors. Bitter Obida has come among the forces of Dazhbog’s grandson; she has stepped like a maiden onto the land of Trojan; she has splashed her swan’s wings upon the blue sea; ruffling near the Don, she has awakened baneful times.

XXIV

Warfare of the princes against the pagans has ceased, for now brother says to brother:
“This is mine, and that too!”
Princes have begun to say of trifles, “This is a great thing.”
One against the other they have begun to forge discord
but the pagans from every land have come for victories.

XXV

Too far has the falcon flown, striking birds toward the sea,
and Igor’s brave warriors are not to be resurrected.
Following them, Karna shrieked and Zhelia leapt over the land of Rus,
scattering embers in a flaming horn.
The women of Rus lament:
“No longer shall we hold in mind our dear loved ones,
or counsel them with our counsel,
or see them with our eyes, or touch gold or silver.”
Kiev, brothers, groaned with sorrow, and Chernigov, with constant attacks.
Anguish poured over the land of Rus; thick sadness flowed
throughout the Rus land, but the princes themselves
forged discord each against the other.

XXVI

And the pagans riding victoriously throughout the land of Rus
seized from every household a tribute of one squirrel skin.
These two brave sons of Sviatoslav, Igor and Vsevolod,
awakened treachery with their strife,
Treachery which their father, Sviatoslav, dread great prince of Kiev,
had all but stilled—He who once ruled by threat alone.
For he had struck with strong troops and Frankish swords,
attacked the Polovtsian land, trampled down the hills and ravines,
muddied rivers and lakes, dried up streams and swamps,
and like a whirlwind, he snatched up the pagan Kobiak
from the curved edge of the sea,
from the ironclad Polovtsian troops.
And Kobiak came tumbling down in the city of Kiev
in the stronghold of Sviatoslav.
Now Germans and Venetians, Greeks and Morava
sing glory to Sviatoslav.
They reproach Prince Igor who sank his wealth
to the bottom of the Kaiala, the Polovtsian river.
He filled it with the gold of Rus.
Now Prince Igor dismounted from his saddle of gold
into a slave’s saddle.
The ramparts of the cities drooped
and joy has ebbed.

XXVII

On the hills in Kiev, Sviatoslav has seen a murky dream:
“Last night after eventide,” he said, “they were clothing me
in a black shroud on a bed of yew.
They laded me blue wine mingled with sorrow,
piled over me empty quivers of the pagan invaders
and a great pearl onto my chest; they comfort me.
The beams of my gold-domed palace lack the cross-brace,
and all night from eventide blue ravens caw.
In the thickets at Plesensk there were four brother princes,
and they were carrying me toward the dark blue sea.”

XXVIII

The Boyars counseled Sviatoslav:
“O Prince, anguish has seized your mind.
Here are two falcons flown from their father’s golden throne,
to seek the city of Tmutorokan,
or else to drink with their helmets from the Don.
Now the falcons’ wings are clipped by the sabres of the pagans;
they are both fettered in iron bands.”
For it was dark on the third day; two suns had darkened;
both purple pillars burned out and with them
the young moons, Oleg and Sviatoslav.
They were veiled in darkness and sank into the sea.
On the River Kaiala they had shown great boldness to the Khin.

XXIX

Darkness has covered the light. The Polovtsians pour out
across the land of Rus like a pride of cheetahs.
Now shame has smothered glory; force has struck against freedom;
Div has thrown himself to the earth.
Fair Gothic maidens have sung out on the bank of the deep
blue sea. Jangling the gold of Rus they sing
the time of Booz; they sway with Sharokhan’s vengeance!
And we, 0 retinue, are thirsty for joy!

XXX

Then great Sviatoslav let drop this golden word mingled with tears:
“0, my cousins, Igor and Vsevolod! Too soon you began to harry
the Polovtsian land with your swords,
Seeking glory for yourselves. Dishonorably you have been vanquished,
for you spilt pagan blood dishonorably.
Your brave hearts were forged in hard steel and tempered in boldness.
But why did you do this to my silvery gray head?
I no longer see the power of my strong and wealthy brother,
Iaroslav, so mighty in warriors,
with his Chernigov nobles, with his knights, his Tatrans,
his Shelbirs, his Topchaks, Revugs, and Olbers.
For these, without their shields, with only their daggers,
routed their foes with a cry, ringing glory to their forefathers.
But you said,
”Let us ourselves be valorous.
We shall steal the coining glory for ourselves,
and for yourselves divide the glory of the past.”

XXXI

Is it such a wonder, brothers, that an old man springs to life?
If the falcon is fully mature it strikes birds in flight,
allows no harm to its nest.
But here is a prince’s woe: I have no aid;
the times have been turned about.
Now in Rimov they call out beneath Polovtsian sabres,
and Vladimir cries out beneath his wounds.
Anguish and sorrow to the son of Gleb!

XXXII

Great Prince Vsevolod!
Will you not fly in thought from afar to watch your father’s golden throne?
For you can empty the Volga with oars;
You pour out the Don with your helmet
If only you were here, a slave girl would sell for a pittance
and a captive for less,
For you can shoot across dry land with your living fire,
your brave sons of Gleb.

And you, Wild Riurik, and David!
Were you not the ones who swam with golden helmets in blood?
Is it not your brave retinue that roars like wild bulls
Wounded by tempered sabres on the unknown steppe?
My lords, step into golden stirrups for the offense of this time,
    for the land of Rus, for the wounds of Igor,
    fierce son of Sviatoslav!

O Osmomysl, Iaroslav of Galich!
High do you sit on your gold-wrought throne!
You have braced the Hunnish mountains with your iron troops.
Having barred the king’s path,
    you have locked the gates of the Danube.
Flinging missiles through the clouds, you rule to the Danube;
    your threats stream throughout these lands.
You open the gates to Kiev, and from your father’s golden throne,
    you shoot at the Sultan beyond.
My lord, shoot Konchak, the pagan slave,
    for the land of Rus,
    for Igor’s wounds,
    fierce son of Sviatoslav.

XXXIII

And you fierce Roman, and Mstislav!
A brave thought carries your mind to the deed.
You glide high in your ferocity, like a falcon soaring
    on the winds, fiercely seeking to overcome a bird.
For you have iron lads beneath Latin helmets.
Because of them the earth trembles and many countries have trembled:
Khinova, Lithuania, the Iatviagy, and the Deremela;
The Polovtsians as well have thrown down their lances
    and bowed their heads beneath these Frankish swords.
But already, Prince, the sun’s light has dimmed for Igor,
    and the tree has shed its leaves in an ill wind.
Along the Ros and the Sula pagans are portioning the cities
    and Igor’s brave warriors will not be resurrected!
The Don, 0 Prince, summons you, and calls the princes to victory.
And all the brave sons of Oleg prepare to join the fray.
XXXIV

Ingvar and Vsevolod! And all three sons of Mstislav,
six-winged falcons of no mean nest! You have not earned
power for yourselves by the right of victories.
Where then are your golden helmets, your Polish lances and shields?
Close the gates to the steppe with your sharp arrows
for the land of Rus,
for Igor’s wounds,
fierce son of Sviatoslav!

XXXV

Now the silvery current of the Sula no longer flows
to the city of Pereiaslav;
The Dvina flows like a swamp for those awesome men of Polotsk.
To the shouts of pagans Iziaslav, Vasilko’s son,
Rang out alone with his sharp swords against Lithuanian helmets.

He brought down the glory of his grandfather, Vseslav:
Iziaslav himself was struck down beneath crimson shields
by Lithuanian swords on the bloody turf.
And his beloved at the bed said, “The wings of birds, 0 Prince,
cast shadows upon your retinue and beasts have been licking their blood.”
His brothers, Briacheslav and Vsevolod, were not there.
Alone he dripped out his pearly soul
from his brave body through a golden necklace.
Voices have ceased; joy has waned.

XXXVI

The trumpets of Gorodets blare,
fiercely praising all the grandsons of Vseslav!
Lower your banners; sheathe your dull, damaged swords;
already you have leapt away from your grandfather's glory!
For with your discords you have begun to welcome
the pagans into the land of Rus.
What violence from the Polovtsians
ever threatened the living of Vseslav?
XXXVII

In the seventh age of Troian, Vseslav cast lots for a girl,
a maiden he desired for himself.
Sustained by cunning, he mounted a horse and galloped to Kiev,
touched the shaft of his spear on the gold Kievan throne.
He leapt away from them at Belgorod
like a wild beast at midnight wrapped in a blue mist.
Three times he grasped good fortune, opened the gates of Novgorod,
smashed the glory of Iaroslav, and as a wolf leapt to the Nemiga.
He blew clean the threshing floor.
On the Nemiga sheaves are spread like heads;
they thresh them with damask flails.
On the threshing floor they lay down life and winnow souls from bodies.
The Nemiga’s bloody banks were sown with evil,
sown with the bones of the sons of Rus.
Prince Vseslav judged the people; he ruled the cities for the princes,
but at night he roamed as a wolf.
From Kiev, before the cock’s crow, he could lope to Tmutorokan;
as a wolf he crossed the path of great Horus.
They rang the bells for him at matins, early at St. Sophia, in Polotsk;
he heard the sound in Kiev.
And though his wizard’s soul journeyed in another body,
still he often suffered misfortune.
Of him the wizard Boian first spoke well-devised words:
“Neither the skillful one nor the craftiest creature,
not even the cleverest bird, will escape the Judgment of God.”
0 groan, Russian land, recalling the first time and the first princes.

XXXVIII

It was not possible to nail that old Vladimir to the hills of Kiev.
Now some of his banners stand with Riurik and others are with David;
the pennons wave disparately.

XXXIX

Lances sing on the Danube!
laroslavna’s voice is heard. As a gull the unrecognized one calls out early:
“I shall fly,” she said, “as a gull along the Danube.
I shall rinse my beaver sleeve in the River Kaiala
and wipe away bloody wounds from my Prince’s sturdy body.”
On the ramparts of the city of Putivl, Iaroslavna calls at dawn:
“O wind, Great Wind!
Why, my Lord, do you blow so strongly?
Why do you carry arrows of the Khin upon your own light wings
against the warriors of my beloved?
Was it too little for you to blow upwards into the clouds,
carrying ships on the blue sea?
Why, Lord, have you scattered my joy through the feathergrass?”

At dawn in Putivl, Iaroslavna calls from the ramparts:
“O Dniepr, Son of Fame!
You have cut through rocky mountains into the Polovtsian land.
You have cradled upon yourself the boats of Sviatoslav
to meet with Kobiak’s host.
My Lord, cradle my loved one to me so that I need not send tears
so soon to him upon the sea.

At dawn in Putivl, Iaroslavna calls from the ramparts:
“Bright and thrice-bright Sun!
You are warmth and beauty to all!
Why, my Lord, have you spread your hot rays on the warriors of my beloved?
There in the waterless steppe they have bent their bows with thirst
and closed their quivers in sorrow.”

XL

At midnight the sea began to splash; waterspouts approach like mists.
God shows Prince Igor the way from the Polovtsian land
onto the land of Rus, to his father’s golden throne.
The lights of evening have gone out; Igor sleeps; Igor wakes;
he measures the steppe in his thought
from the great Don to the little Donets.
A horse at midnight! Ovlur whistles across the river;
he warns the prince that he ought not remain there.
Ovlur shouted; the ground rumbled; the grass rustled.
The Polovtsian tents stirred, but Prince Igor had dashed
like an ermine to the weeds, like a white gold-eye to the water.
He leapt onto his swift horse and jumped down from him
as a white-footed wolf, and he sped toward the bend of the Donets
and flew as a falcon beneath the mists,
slaying geese and swans for all his meals.
If Igor flew as a falcon, then Ovlur sped as a wolf,
shaking the cold dew from himself,
for they had worn down their swift horses.

XLI

The Donets spoke:
“0 Prince Igor! there is no little greatness for you,
but for Konchak there is anger,
and joy for the land of Rus.”
“Igor spoke:
”0 Donets! there is no little greatness for you,
having carried a prince on your waves, spreading green
grain for him on your silvery banks, clothing him
in warm mists under the shadow of the green tree.
You guarded him with a gold-eye on the water,
gulls on your currents, and lapwings on high winds.
Not such was the River Stugna, having a poor current,
devouring other brooks and streams, spreading out at its mouth.
At its dark banks as the Dnieper it closed over
young prince Rostislav. His mother weeps for the young prince.”
The flowers droop in sorrow, and the tree with sadness
is bent toward the earth.

XLII

Yet it was not magpies chattering:
on Igor’s trail rides Gzak with Konchak.
Now the ravens do not caw; the grackles are silent;
no magpies chatter; they only creep through the willows.
The woodpeckers with their hammering show the way to the river;
nightingales with their joyful songs
announce the coming daybreak.
Gzak says to Konchak: “If the falcon flies to his nest,
we will shoot the falconet with our golden arrows.”
Konchak said to Gzak:
”If the falcon flies to his nest,
then we will snare the falconet with a beautiful maiden.”
And Gzak to Konchak:
”If we snare him with a beautiful maiden,
we will lose both her and the falconet,
and birds will start striking us in the Polovtsian steppe.”

XLIII

Boian even told campaigns against [the Greeks]
from Sviatoslav’s ancient songmaker,
who fiercely praised the favorite of Kagan Oleg.
“Woe is the head without the shoulders,
the body without a head, the land of Rus without Igor--
the sun shines in the heavens, Prince Igor is in the land of Rus.
Maidens sing on the Danube; their voices are heard
across the sea in Kiev.”

XLIV

Igor rides up the Borichev slope
   to the Holy Mother of God Pirogoshchaia;
The lands and cities rejoice.

XLV

Having already sung a song to the old princes,
   then one should sing to the young:
Glory to Igor Sviatoslavich, to his brother Vsevolod,
   and to Vladimir Igorevich!
May the princes and retinue prosper, fighting the pagans for God!
Glory to the princes, and to the retinue, Amen.