

OLGA PARTAN
(COLLEGE OF THE HOLY CROSS, USA)
ORCID 0009-0009-4387-9274

THE POETICS OF WAR TRAUMA AND DEVASTATION: VERA PAVLOVA AND ZHENYA BERKOVICH

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the anti-war poems written by Vera Pavlova and Zhenya Berkovich during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. After a brief biographical overview, the analysis focuses on the poetics of war trauma and devastation in the era of the Russian-Ukrainian war, conducting a close textual analysis of several poems. The paper demonstrates how contrasting poetic depictions of the natural world simultaneously accentuate the human trauma and signal nostalgia for the peaceful past.

KEYWORDS: Vera Pavlova, Zhenya Berkovich, anti-war poetry, ecopoetry, Russian-Ukrainian war

INTRODUCTION

In April 2024, I found myself in Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, Ireland. One sculpture made an indelible impression on me: a charred, barren tree symbolizing the tragic loss of human life in wartime and the devastation that war brings to the natural world. The monument, *The Tree of Remembrance*, held paper leaves inscribed with the names of loved ones affected by various military conflicts around the world. Those individual messages included both prayers for the deceased and messages of hope.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022, the falsehood of official Russian state propaganda about the so-called "special military operation" for the "de-Nazification of Ukraine" is juxtaposed to narratives exposing the horrors of the war and the Russian nation's historic responsibility for its outcomes. A striking polyphony of Russian women-artists' antiwar voices boldly and decisively expressed their civil and moral position condemning the fratricidal war. These voices include writers, journalists,



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singers, rock musicians, actors, film and theater directors, critics and, of course, poets. The list includes Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Liya Akhedzhakova, Alla Pugacheva, Zemphira, Renata Litvinova and Chulpan Khamatova, to name just a few. Many of their statements were followed by emigration, dislocation, exile or imprisonment.

This paper is dedicated to several recent anti-war poems written by two leading contemporary Russian female poets – Vera Pavlova and Zhenya Berkovich – during Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has brought devastation to hundreds of thousands of human beings, as well as to Ukraine’s infrastructure and environment. After a brief biographical overview, the paper focuses on the poetics of war trauma and devastation in the era of the Russian-Ukrainian war, conducting a close textual analysis of several poems. I aim to demonstrate that the poetic depiction of the natural world in these poems simultaneously accentuates the human trauma and signals nostalgia for the peaceful past. The war-era destruction of mother nature is inseparable from themes of ruined childhood, adulthood and motherhood.

At the current stage of Russian history, the Kremlin’s official propagandistic discourse has created, using Mikhail Epstein’s definition, an “anti-language” that is “a language of lies, propaganda, aggression, disinformation, hate. This includes words, expressions, phrases that distort the meaning, denigrating white or whitening black” (Epstein 2023: 191)¹. Epstein provides examples such as *иноагент* (foreign agent) – as an anti-word that the State Duma started to use officially back to 2012 – or Russian Patriarch Kirill’s infamous “Russia has never attacked anyone” – among many others as an examples of such anti-language (*ibidem*).

In their turn, Pavlova and Berkovich break through the official anti-language, returning genuine meaning to the words, and describing the trauma and devastation of the war between two Slavic nations, mourning the lack of resistance to the dictatorship, lawlessness of the judicial system, and environmental catastrophe.

Proclaiming Marina Tsvetaeva to be the leading poet of the 20th century, Joseph Brodsky, the Russian-American poet and recipient of the 1987 Nobel Prize for literature, expresses his view that it is precisely the female poetic voice that is capable of best absorbing and then expressing the tragic atmosphere of the era. Brodsky believes that in Tsvetaeva “Russian literature acquired a dimension that was not inherent before: she [Tsvetaeva] demonstrated the interest of the language itself in the tragic content” (Brodskii 1998: 74). Similarly, the contemporary female anti-war poetic discourse depicts the tragic historic content, experimenting with a variety of poetic forms and structures, expressing the extent of the national, personal and ecological trauma. During the last two years, Russian poetry has been producing a fundamentally new type of poetic narrative of the era of the war and new

¹ Here and hereafter, unless otherwise stated, translations are the author’s.

political repressions, and there is an urgent need to develop a set of new critical tools to document and analyze these new poetic phenomena.

Pavlova currently resides in emigration, dividing her time between Toronto and New York city, freely publishing her poems on social media and in Russian language publications published outside Russia (such as Freedom Letters, founded by Georgii Urushadze). Berkovich is serving six years in a Russian prison after being falsely accused of providing “justification for terrorism” in a stage production of the play *Finist the Brave Falcon* (*Finist Iasnyi Sokol*). This award-winning play was written by Svetlana Petriychuk, a playwright who nowadays is serving a prison sentence together with Berkovich. Pavlova is a poet and a professional pianist who holds a degree in musicology. Berkovich is a poet, theater director and playwright. Frequently their other *métiers* can be detected in their poetic discourse. While Pavlova’s poems have distinctive structure, rhythm and verbal musicality, Berkovich often introduces elements of performativity and theatricality, establishing intertextual dialogues with her poetic predecessors. The two poets belong to different generations – Pavlova was born in 1963 and Berkovich in 1985. However, this generational gap does not significantly affect their moral and civil position and their indebtedness to the Russian poetic tradition. Pavlova and Berkovich’s intertextual allusions to modernist poetic predecessors illustrate the view that ecopoetry frequently echoes the modernist movement with such features as “an aesthetic of collage, allusion and multiple association” (Clark 2019: 67).

It is quite challenging to define Pavlova and Berkovich’s place in the current Russian language poetic milieu, since neither of them seems to belong to a certain “-ism” within the post-Soviet plethora of poetic forms such as Post-conceptualism, New Realism, New Sentimentalism, Confessionalism, New Social Movement, *vers libre* to name just a few (Bunimovich 2008: ix–xv). Undeniably, several of their poems in recent years could be classified as ecopoetry where the contrasting poetic depictions of the natural world simultaneously accentuate human trauma, signal nostalgia for the past, and occasionally bring hope for a peaceful future. Evelyn Reilly perceives the genre of ‘ecopoetics’ as not necessarily a genre or a movement, but “rather a fact of writing in a world of accelerated environmental change, meaning one cannot not touch it” (Reilly 2013). In turn, Timothy Clark also notes: “All new poetry is going to be ‘environmental’ in some way or other, simply because things just cannot be read in the old way” (Clark 2019: 58).

VERA PAVLOVA

Mark Lipovetsky and Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya suggest that Pavlova’s poems “[...] create a lyrical biography of a contemporary woman, resonating with the poetry of Marina Tsvetaeva” (Lipovetsky, Wakamiya 2014: 83). I would connect Pavlova’s poetic style not to Tsvetaeva, but rather to Akhmatova since the syntactic and linguis-

tic complexity as well as originality of form that are so characteristic for Tsvetaeva are not present in Pavlova's work. However, Pavlova's poetic style has palpable similarities and multiple textual allusions to Anna Akhmatova. Like Akhmatova, Pavlova is able to convey a striking dramatic message within a very short poem – only eight lines – using language that is clear and accessible. In particular, Pavlova's new poetic cycle *War-era Poems* (*Voennye stikhi*) has numerous intertextual connections to Akhmatova's *Requiem* in its clarity, poignancy and pain. The war-era poetic cycle consists of 202 short poems and represents yet another poetic Requiem at a different stage of Russian history. The following excerpts signal the intertextual dialogue between Akhmatova's 1940 poetic lines and those written by Pavlova in 2022:

Quietly flows the quiet Don
Yellow moon slips into a home.

He slips in with cap askew.
He sees a shadow, yellow moon.

This woman is ill,
This woman is alone,

Husband in the grave, son in prison
Say a prayer for me² (Akhmatova 2000: 137).

Both rhythm and sound of Pavlova's lines echo her predecessor's personal trauma:

You wake up – there is war.
It's impossible to sleep,
If the bedroom is destroyed,
If the house is burned down,
If the town is turned to cinders,
Old and young – to ashes,
If the fight doesn't end
And hell surrounds us³ (Pavlova 2023: 61).

In both cases the verbal simplicity of the depiction of the surrounding world produces a powerful emotional effect on the reader. The personal drama is inseparable from the history of the nation. Furthermore, the rhythmical structure and musicality of Pavlova's poetic discourse clearly indicate a reverence to Akhmatova's

² “Тихо льется тихий Дон, / Желтый месяц входит в дом. // Входит в шапке набекрень, / Видит желтый месяц тень. // Эта женщина больна, / Эта женщина одна. // Муж в могиле, сын в тюрьме, / Помолитесь обо мне” (Akhmatova 2000: 136).

³ “Просыпаешься – война. / Да какой тут сон, / Если спальня спалена, / Если дом сожжён, / Если город стал золой / Пеплом – стар и млад, / Если не смолкает бой / И творится ад.”

prosody. Mirroring Akhmatova's imagery, Pavlova chooses night as the time for realization of the full scale of the personal and national devastation. Akhmatova's poetic persona's tragic losses – the imprisonment of her son and the death of her husband – are mirrored in the distorted hellish surroundings of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The Stalinist era of political repression and persecution is now replaced with mass murder and the destruction of Ukrainian infrastructure. The isolated voice of a female poet in both cases sounds like a lament for the individual and national destiny unable to resist institutional violence.

While Pavlova currently resides far from her native land, her poetic persona cannot disconnect herself from the horror and absurdity of the war. Pavlova's latest poems are dramatically different in their content from her pre-war publications that often addressed romantic and intimate topics. Nowadays, her poems are mourning the hellish destruction that her nation brought to its neighbor, as she feels a moral responsibility to perform the role of a bard who observes and documents the crimes, praying to the Almighty for punishment of the aggressors and salvation of the victims. In a private interview, Pavlova admits that sometimes she sees the war poems in her dreams, and that every morning these poems are bursting from her, asking to be written, read and heard⁴.

The following lines exhibits the features of environmental poetics which, using Lindstrom and Garrard's definition, "tries to grapple with the changing relationship between human societies and natural environment" (Clark 2019: 64).

The leaves are yellow, the sky is blue:
Autumn stands for Ukraine.
And in Russia, a mother buys
winter underwear for her son.
Combat boots. Felt one are not allowed.
Hat. Scarf. Mittens.
Hugs: farewell, my little one,
be a good murderer⁵ (Pavlova 2023: 94).

The first two short poetic lines depict the harmonious fall landscape with two colors – yellow and blue – the colors of the Ukrainian flag. The surrounding natural world is peaceful and idyllic with the contrasting brightness of leaves and sky above. The autumn denotes a metonymic trope that is frequently used in trauma narratives to accentuate the artistic expression or to create a striking contrast between peace and destruction⁶. After these two idyllic lines the poetic persona juxtaposes the peaceful

⁴ Vera Pavlova's conversation with the author (July 27, 2023. Eastham, MA, USA).

⁵ "Листья – жёлтые, небо – синее: / осень за Украину. / А в России белишко зимнее / мать покупает сыну. / Берцы – не разрешили валенки. / Шапку. Шарф. Рукавицы. / Обнимает: прощай, мой маленький, / будь хорошим убийцей."

⁶ Nouri Gana observes how poetic discourse could use metonymy and repetition "to register and simultaneously loosen up the hold of trauma on the psyche" (Gana 2014: 79).

natural world with anthropocentric preparation for violence. The Russian mother prepares her son to be sent to the frontline, blessing him for murder and destruction. The packing list looks both sinister with its combat boots and harmless with a kindergarten-like must have winter packing list: scarf, hat and mittens. The same device is used in the mother's ominous farewell with a blessing to murder: "farewell, my little one / be a good murderer".

In Pavlova's other poem, the violence against any living creature is equated in crime to the murder of a human being. For the poetic persona, any destruction of the environment, any violence against a non-human – animals, birds or insects – is a crime against the innocent victims of the military operation.

Don't say: I shoot to miss.
 A bullet is no fool – it flies to the end.
 Shoot into the sky – you'll kill a cherub.
 Shoot into the ground – you'll kill a buried corpse.
 A bird. A mole. A dragonfly. A vole.
 A bullet is no fool – it will find its target.
 Don't listen to the battalion commander – throw down your rifle.
 Listen to your mother – hide in a crack⁷ (Pavlova 2023: 60).

The poetic persona appeals to a soldier to disobey the military commanders, throwing down their rifle since any shooting disturbs the world's harmony and the mystical spiritual hereafter as well the human remains buried in the earth, which are a part of the universal harmony that must be respected and cherished. The mention of a mother at the end of the poem contrasts strikingly with the mother in the previous poem – here instead of blessing her son for killing, the mother's advice is to "hide in a crack" to avoid committing a crime.

ZHENYA BERKOVICH

As it was mentioned before, on May 4, 2023, the Russian police arrested Berkovich together with her colleague, Petriychuk in a fabricated criminal case. The two women were accused of justifying terrorism in their critically acclaimed 2020 stage production of *Finist the Brave Falcon*, a play that was awarded a prestigious Golden Mask award in 2022. Undoubtedly, the legal persecution was connected not with the stage production but instead with Berkovich's anti-war position, which she openly expressed in her poems and interviews. In one poem, written on the eve of the

⁷ Не говори: я стреляю мимо. / Пуля не дура – летит до конца. / Выстрелишь в небо – убьёшь херувима. / Выстрелишь в землю – убьёшь мертвеца. / Птицу. Крота. Стрекозу. Полёвку. / Пуля не дура – найдёт себе цель. / Не слушай комбата – бросай винтовку. / Послушайся маму – забейся в щель.

Victory Day celebration in Russia in May 2022, a deceased grandfather and veteran of World War II appears in a dream to his grandson, begging him not to take his portrait to the annual parade called the “immortal regiment” (*Bessmertnyi polk*)⁸. The grandfather states, “I would be glad if you didn’t carry me to the parade”⁹ (Berkovich 2023). This particular poem is written in the form of a mini-play illustrating the clash of generations and the power of the Kremlin’s militarist propaganda.

Berkovich’s rebellious poems instantly spread across the Internet and are read and quoted by a widespread virtual audience. Unlike Pavlova, Berkovich’s poetic style is eclectic and experimental. She frequently relies on an aesthetic of poetic collage and pastiche, creating multiple allusions to modernist Russian poetry. Her theater background sparkles through her poetic production and many of her poems display elements of performativity. Berkovich’s poem *Fish (Ryby)* commemorates the lost lives of the victims of the destruction of the Drama Theater in the Ukrainian city of Mariupol on March 16, 2022. A Russian bombardment destroyed the theater where, according to Ukrainian authorities, the theater’s basement served as a bomb shelter for as many as 600 to 1300 civilians, many of whom died during the bombardment. After the bombing, the authorities of the self-proclaimed separatist Donetsk People Republic stated that the strong smell coming from the destroyed Mariupol Drama Theater was not due to the decomposing bodies of victims, but rather from fish stored in the theater basement. They further claimed that the theater itself wasn’t bombed by the Russians but instead was blown up from the inside by Ukrainian nationalists. This tragic war-era episode inspired Berkovich’s theatricalized poem where human theater workers are replaced by non-humans – different types of fish. Berkovich’s poem is written as dramatic response to the absurdity of propagandistic falsehood and is full of tragic irony:

Do you love theater the way fish do?
There are so many of them in every theater:
Huge manta-ray-like masses [...] (Berkovich 2023).

While mocking the absurdity of the Russian authorities’ official statements, the poem mourns all those who perished in the Mariupol theater basement. The beauty of the underwater world is described as an imaginary eternal hereafter for the innocent victims.

And if some remained lying in the basement,
Then they didn’t die – the fish called them to join them,

⁸ The Immortal Regiment is a civil event highly politicized in the Russian media and frequently attended by President Putin, when relatives of the veterans of WWII walk through Russian cities, carrying portraits of their family members who participated in the War.

⁹ “Я был бы рад, если бы ты не носил меня на парад.”

¹⁰ “Любите ли вы театр так, как его любят рыбы? / В каждом театре их много: / Огромные манти-глыбы [...]”

And there they dive among the coral,
 Much more alive than certain generals,
 Fish smile at them from every coral branch [...] ¹¹ (*ibidem*).

Indeed, the rhyming of “corals” with “generals” creates a dramatic opposition of the natural beauty of the underwater world with the military aggressors. The untouched oceanic ecosystem and smiling fish provide eternal salvation from the horror of the violence and destruction of Ukrainian land.

The following poem, written nine months after the beginning of the Ukrainian war, is another example of Berkovich’s powerful anti-war statements:

Train cars and echelons everywhere,
 We used to be together,
 Now we are apart.
 Nine months have passed, but
 Nothing has been born.

Except for the dirt under foot,
 Except for the dust in the corners.
 And houses, like origami,
 Are folded in half ¹² (*ibidem*).

In the first stanza, images of military trains forcibly separate the beloved, breaking apart the young family that in peaceful times could carry and deliver a child. Nothing was born signals that the war’s devastation and trauma equally affect mother-earth, which is incapable of producing a harvest. The distinctive rhythmical pattern of the poem seems to reproduce the tramp of military boots. The striking use of simile creates a comparison between destroyed houses and folded origami paper, emphasizing the fragility of human existence.

The night is infinitely bottomless
 The sky is more scarlet than scarlet.
 Nine months of homelessness
 Nine eternal Februarys.

And drone-birds are rushing,
 And their flight is carefree,

¹¹ “А если некоторые остались лежать в подвале, / То они не умерли, их рыбы к себе позвали, / И там они все ныряют среди кораллов, / Гораздо живее некоторых генералов, / Рыбы им улыбаются с каждой коралловой ветки [...]”

¹² “Все вагоны, эшелоны. / Были вместе, стали врозь. / Девять месяцев прошло, но / Ничего не родилось. // Кроме грязи под ногами, / Кроме пыли по углам. / И дома, как оригами, / Пополам и пополам.”

To see how death will be born,
And the birth will die¹³ (*ibidem*).

The sky's scarlet color after the darkness of night symbolizes explosions, fires, evoking the red blood of the victims. In an apocalyptic war era landscape, military drones are flying rapidly across the sky, bringing more and more destruction. The concise rhythmical lines describe the trauma and devastation of human beings and the environment.

Another poem was written after the destruction of the Ukrainian city of Mariupol, and the horrific military crimes by Russian troops in Bucha. The poetic depiction of the natural world in this poem accentuates the human trauma and signals nostalgia for the peaceful past. The poem starts with a request to donate clothing for an old woman who is still alive but lost all her belongings during the Russian bombardment. Her hometown is erased from the face of the earth and the letters that signify the sizes of her clothing – M and L or the size of her bra B – intertwine the historic war trauma with personal trauma.

Clothing is needed for a woman,
Seventy-nine years old,
From a city that no longer exists.
T-shirt size M – Mariupol.
Jacket size L – Lisichansk,
Bra cup size B –
Bucha and Borodyanka¹⁴ (Berkovich 2022).

The next stanzas are dedicated to a newborn boy. While the old woman ends her life in a city that disappeared, the newborn simply does not have a place of birth – he came to this world at the wrong time. Still he needs clothing since life goes on.

Clothing is needed for a boy,
Who was just born,
In a city that no longer exists,
Where only details remain of people.
Where was he these eight cursed years?
Somewhere, where there is no war
No Azov Steel,
Somewhere where cats run,
A stream flows,

¹³ “Ночь бездонного бездонней, / Небо – алого алей. / Девять месяцев бездомных, / Девять вечных февралей. // И несутся дроны-птицы, / И беспечен их полет, / Поглядеть как смерть родится / И рождение умрет.”

¹⁴ “Нужна одежда на женщину, / Семьдесят девять лет, / Из города, которого больше нет. / Футболка М – Мариуполь, / Куртка L – Лисичанск, / Лифчик на чашку В – / Bucha и Борозянка.”

Somewhere, where there are no Buryats or Muscovites,
 Where there is a harmless forest
 And manna for breakfast,
 Where there are no explosions,
 No executioners,
 Where one can silently watch from the sky
 How a living mother still walks
 To a living school¹⁵ (*ibidem*).

In this anti-war poem, once again we observe how the anthropocentric reality of destruction and hostility is juxtaposed to the peaceful surroundings of the natural world. The innocent child was born to the world in a horrific time, and the poetic persona nostalgically recreates the picture of how his childhood should have been if he had been born before the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The new war-era reality has its new concepts and definitions such as “Azov Steel” (a symbol of Ukrainian resistance and Russian aggression that stunned the whole world), the young Buryats and Muscovite recruits, as well as constant explosions, that are contrasted with the harmonious idyll of a peaceful natural world in which cats run, a stream flows and the forest is not scary, since the trees are in bloom and are not charred or burned. The poem concludes with the notion that the mother of this newborn is still alive, which makes it clear to the reader that the newborn child, alas, is destined to grow up as an orphan. His mother, like many other mothers in the war zone, was killed after giving birth.

Reflecting on the moral responsibility of a poet living in a totalitarian state, Berkovich persistently revisits iconic Russian verses known to well-read Russian-speaking readers and to the biography of Russian/Soviet poet-martyrs. For instance, Pasternak’s prosody is reproduced by Berkovich with a new meaning signaling her sense of moral responsibility as an artist. In February 2023, to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine that started in February 2022, and reflecting on the dreadfulness of this date for Russian history, Berkovich composed a poem paraphrasing Pasternak’s two well-known poems written in 1912 and 1946: “Февраль. Достать чернил и плакать!/ February. Get ink and weep!” and the poem “Winter night” from the novel *Doctor Zhivago* where February is mentioned once again in its final stanza (Pasternak 1990: I, 75; II, 71–72).

It was snowing and snowing the whole of February;
 And again and again,

¹⁵ “Нужна одежда на мальчика, / Он только пришёл на свет, / В городе, которого больше нет, / Где от людей остались одни детали. / Где он был эти восемь проклятых лет? / Где-то, где нет войны / И Азовской стали, / Где-то, где бегают кошки, / Течёт ручей, / Где-то, где нет бурятов и москвичей, / Там, где нестрашный лес / И на завтрак манна. / Там, где нет ни взрывов, / Ни палачей, / Там, где можно неслышно смотреть с небес, / Как ещё идёт / в живую школу / живая мама.”

A candle was burning on the table
 A candle was burning¹⁶ (Pasternak 1990: II, 72).

In turn, Berkovich follows Pasternak's poetic rhythm and overall structure composing her own chilling February poem that depicts an atmosphere of fear and censorship in Putin's Russia where former friends became enemies, choosing silence and blindness in exchange for comfort and safety. The poem's two final stanzas:

It sweeps and sweeps all over the earth
 Wolf's contamination.
 Sit like a fly in February
 In darkness, silently.

And don't let yourself drop a word
 On human language.
 February. Time to get out the ink.
 But there is nothing left to cry with¹⁷ (Berkovich 2023).

Berkovich adopts and rephrase Pasternak's lines to emphasize a new sinister stage of Russian history, mourning innocent victims of the invasion. Through her poetic work and her dramatic fate, Berkovich continues the sorrowful tradition of several generations of her predecessors, becoming a poet-martyr and a poet-prophet who feels a deep responsibility toward the people. Her poetic words represent her swords against state violence and the Russian nation's lack of resistance and protest.

CONCLUSIONS

In his book *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Poetry*, which was published in 2004 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Michael Wachtel discussed the cultural mythology of the dissident poet as a cultural hero.

Looking back to the Soviet era, Wachtel observes:

In a society that controlled all sources of information, people looked to literature as a secret source of wisdom and a moral compass. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the familiar and accepted role of a poet as martyr or poet as prophet lost their relevance (Wachtel 2004:10).

Undoubtedly, the poetic work of Pavlova and Berkovich indicates that in Putin's Russia in general, and during the era of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in particular, the role of a poet as prophet and martyr has once again become relevant.

¹⁶ "Мело весь месяц в феврале / И то и дело / Свеча горела на столе / Свеча горела."

¹⁷ "Метёт, метёт по всей земле / Зараза волчья. / Сиди, как муха в феврале, / Темно и молча. // И слова чтоб не обронил / На человечьем. / Февраль. Пора достать чернил. / А плакать нечем.

I would like to conclude this paper with the same image I started with – the image of a tree – but this time with the image of an idyllic forest where the trees are not burned by war. One can only hope that in the near future, the poetic pages and stanzas dedicated to the horror and violence of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the destruction of human and non-human lives and of the environment, will become poetry of remembrance similar to the paper leaves attached to the charred tree in Saint Patrick's Cathedral.

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