

ARCANET

Translated by Elaine Feinstein

MARINA TSVETAeva
Bride of Ice: New Selected Poems



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Translated with an introduction by
Elaine Feinstein

from literal versions by

Daisy Cockburn, Valentina Coe, Bernard Comrie, Simon Franklin, Jana Howlett, Angela Livingston
Cathy Porter, Tatiana Retivov, Maxwell Shorter and Vera Traill

CARCANET

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List of Collaborators

Literal versions of the poems were provided by the following:

Valentina Coe

POEM OF THE MOUNTAIN

Daisy Cockburn

Verse

Your narrow, foreign shape

Bernard Comrie

Yesterday he still looked in my eyes

Simon Franklin

God help us Smoke!

Ophelia: In Defence of the Queen

from WIRES: Lyric 1

Sahara

Appointment

Rails

You loved me

To Boris Pasternak

from THE RATCATCHER: from Chapter 1 and from Chapter 2

Desk

Bus

Jana Howlett

from SWANS: ENCAMPMENT

Angela Livingstone

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When I look at the flight of the leaves

from poems to czechoslovakia

Cathy Porter

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I opened my veins

Vera Traill

from the ratcatcher: from *The Children's Paradise*

Introduction

The poetry of Marina Tsvetaeva drew me initially¹ through the intensity of her emotions, and the honesty with which she exposed them. In this, she has remained an enduring and exacting mentor. Her themes, too, seemed immediately relevant: her desperate need for love, and the tension between poetry and domestic responsibilities. Over the years I celebrated her dedication to poetry, while hardly touching on the ruthlessness which underpinned her stamina, still less the inner vulnerabilities that lay beneath her wilfulness. In 2008 I invented her as a Virgil to lead me around Stalin's Hell in *The Russian Jerusalem*. In doing so, I became uneasily aware of elements in her complex personality given greater prominence in other biographies. This new selection of her poems contains several sequences which suggest the sources of her own inspiration, and her longing for intimacy with poets of equal genius.

Marina Ivanovna Tsvetaeva (1892–1941) was the daughter of a Professor of Fine Arts at Moscow University, and grew up in material comfort. Her mother, Maria, was by far the most powerful presence in the household; a gifted woman, of bitter intensity, she had renounced her first love to marry a widower much older than herself. Her considerable musical talents were frustrated, and she turned all her energies towards educating Marina, her precocious elder daughter. Insistence on hours of music practice and a stern refusal of any words of praise made Marina's childhood unusually austere.

When Marina was fourteen, her mother died of tuberculosis, expressing a passionate indifference to the world she was leaving: 'I only regret music and the sun.' After her death, Marina abandoned the study of music and began to develop her passion for literature. 'After a mother like that,' she reflected, 'I had only one alternative: to become a poet.'²

Her mother remained in her dreams, sometimes as a longed-for, benevolent figure. In one dream however, Tsvetaeva meets a bent old woman who whispers surprisingly: 'A mean little thing she was a clinging one, believe me, sweetheart.' This is the witchy crone of Russian folklore, and we meet her again in Tsvetaeva's cruel fairy tale 'On a Red Horse'.

By the age of eighteen, Tsvetaeva had acquired sufficient reputation as a poet to be welcome as a house guest at the Crimean dacha of Maximilian Voloshin. There she met her future husband, Sergo Efron, the half-Jewish orphan of an earlier generation of revolutionaries. At seventeen, he was struck with huge grey eyes, overwhelmed by Tsvetaeva's poetic genius. They fell instantly in love, and he was the most loyal affection Tsvetaeva was ever to find. They were married in January 1912. For two years after their marriage, they were irresponsibly happy together. Seryozha, as he was usually known, was an aspirant writer and a charming actor. Most people who knew Efron liked him, but some thought him too much under the influence of his wife. He was certainly weak physically – he suffered from TB all his life – but Irma Kudrova, recently allowed access to files of his 1940 NKVD interrogations,³ has uncovered a man of unusual courage and integrity.

When war came in August 1914, Seryozha was eager to enlist, and was sent initially to the front line as a male nurse in an ambulance train. Soon afterwards, Tsvetaeva fell in love with Sofia Parnok, a talented poet from a middle-class Jewish family in the Black Sea port of Taganrog. Tsvetaeva had been wildly but innocently attracted to beautiful young girls in her early adolescence, but Parnok was an open lesbian. She was not exactly beautiful, but she possessed a sexual assurance which had never been the main bond in Tsvetaeva's affection for Seryozha.

Tsvetaeva was well provided for since her father's death in 1913, and for fifteen months she threw herself into her passion for Parnok, with little thought for her husband and two-year-old child. She and Parnok travelled brazenly over the wilds of Russia together and even visited Voloshin's dacha. The lyrics for Parnok are both more sensual, and less tormented, than other love poetry written by Tsvetaeva. Sergei had a brief love affair of his own.

In Parnok's poems for Tsvetaeva, she describes her as an 'awkward little girl', but her claim to have been the first to give Tsvetaeva intense sexual pleasure may have been no more than a boast. In any case, as the affair came to an end, it soon became clear that it was to Seryozha that Tsvetaeva felt the strongest bond. When the Revolution came, she was in hospital giving birth to their second child. Separated from him in the confusion at the start of the Civil War, she wrote in her diary: 'If God performs this miracle and leaves you alive, I will follow you like a dog.'

Through the Moscow famine, Tsvetaeva and her two children lived in Boris and Gleb Lane, in unheated rooms, sometimes without light. She and Efron were to be separated for five years. In those years, she and her elder daughter, Ariadne, were almost like sisters. Alya, as she was usually called, was as precociously observant a child as Tsvetaeva had been herself. This is how she writes of Tsvetaeva:

My mother is not at all like a mother. Mothers always think their own children are wonderful, and other children too, but Marina doesn't like little children... She is always hurrying somewhere. She has a great soul. A kind voice. A quick walk. She has green eyes, a hooked nose and red lips. Marina's hands are all covered with rings... she doesn't like people bothering her with stupid questions...⁴

The family fared badly in the Moscow famine. Marina was unskilled at bartering trinkets for food, and she and Alya often lived on potatoes boiled in a samovar. They sometimes went out on a sledge together in the freezing cold to exchange bottle tops for a few kopeks, often leaving the younger child Irina, strapped against a table leg to prevent her coming to harm. When starvation looked imminent in the winter of 1919-20, Tsvetaeva put both children into the Kuntsevo orphanage, which was thought to be supplied by American food aid. When she arrived on her first visit, Alya was running a high temperature and Tsvetaeva, frightened, took her home to nurse her. Alya pulled through but Irina died of starvation in the orphanage in February 1920. Tsvetaeva was unable to make herself go to the funeral. She blamed Seryozha's sisters, probably unfairly, for refusing to help her, claiming they had behaved 'like animals'. She told all her friends to write to Seryozha that the child had died of pneumonia rather than hunger. There was much gossip about her own neglect of the child. Certainly she was never as close to Irina as to Alya.

The following year was taken up by a new infatuation – Yevgeny Lann, a poet friend of her sister Asya – a humiliating rejection by him, and anxiety about Seryozha as the defeat of the White Army loomed closer. In January 1921, Tsvetaeva wrote a poem of pitiless inquiry into the nature of her own inspiration: 'On a Red Horse'. The tone resembles that of her other folkloric poems of the period such as 'The Tsar Maiden' (1920) and 'The Swain' (1922) but the story of 'On a Red Horse' is not taken from one of Alexander Afansyev's volumes of Russian fairy tales; it is her own invention. A handsome rider of implacable cruelty demands that all her other loves be sacrificed for him. The dream-like sacrifices do not secure his kindness, however, and an old woman she encounters reveals the bleak truth: '*Your Angel doesn't love you!*' Released from the hope of winning his affection, she plunges into battle as a male figure. A phrase from the resolution of this poem gives this book its title.

And he whispers *I wanted this.*

*It is for this I chose you,
you are my passion, my sister,
mine till the end of time*

*my bride of ice – in armour –
Mine. Will you stay with me...⁵*

In 1922, the Civil War ended in victory for the Bolsheviki. Ilya Ehrenburg, who was always in touch with what was happening to his friends, learned that Seryozha had made his escape to Prague, where he had been offered a student grant to study at the university. Ehrenburg brought Tsvetaeva the news, and, without hesitation, she and Alya prepared to set off into exile to join him – though it has to be said that Tsvetaeva found Berlin almost irresistibly exciting along the way. When the family was reunited, she was shocked to find how little Seryozha had changed from the boyish young man she remembered. She herself had been shattered by her experience and was prematurely grey at thirty. In Prague, Seryozha was given a room in a student hostel, while Tsvetaeva and Alya lived in the village of Horni Mokropsky.

At first, Tsvetaeva was welcomed in Prague as a major literary figure, but her more conventional compatriots soon turned away from her. She failed, as Nina Berberova makes clear in her autobiography *The Italics Are Mine*,⁶ to show the domestic graces that make poverty bearable. Men of comparable genius usually find women to take care of them. Anna Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva's only equal as a Russian woman poet, always found friends to look after her, even in old age. Tsvetaeva was less fortunate and she resented the burden of the daily round. Nevertheless, it was in Prague that she had her short, fierce affair with Konstantin Rodzevich, which drew from her some of her greatest poetry: 'Poem of the End', 'Poem of the Mountain' and 'An Attempt at Jealousy'. Rodzevich ended the affair and went on to marry an 'ordinary' woman with a private income.

When I met Rodzevich in the 1970s, while writing my biography of Tsvetaeva, he was a handsome, well-dressed man in late middle-age. His wife was so jealous of him that he would only agree to meet me when he was sure she would be out. He talked of his love for Tsvetaeva as *un grand amour* and showed me a portrait he had painted of her which he kept in a locked drawer. Why then had he ended their affair? He attributed this to the great affection he felt for Seryozha. I was sceptical, but I was already suspicious of him. He had fought in the Red Army in the Civil War, but told the émigrés in Prague that he had been part of the White Army, a well-judged subterfuge which did not suggest he was particularly trustworthy.

He had two other secrets, however, which I have only recently discovered. I knew he was an enthusiastic member of the Eurasian movement, along with Seryozha, who drew a salary from it, and my old Cambridge friend Vera Traill's husband Peter Suvchinsky. I knew, too, that this became the front organisation for the NKVD. What I had not guessed was that Rodzevich was himself working as a Soviet agent. Nor did I guess that he was Vera Traill's lover. That last is evident in an intimate and long-running exchange of letters discussed in Irma Kudrova's *Death of a Poet* and throws new light on Vera's irritable dismissal of Tsvetaeva's womanliness, even as she praised her genius as a poet.

About one thing Rodzevich was accurate enough. The distress of Tsvetaeva's affair drove Seryozha to the point of leaving her. When he suggested separation to Tsvetaeva, however, she was distraught: 'For two weeks she was in a state of madness... finally she informed me that she was unable to leave

me since she was unable to enjoy a moment's peace.'⁷

Tsvetaeva has often been accused of preferring to make her closest relationships at a distance, usually inventing the qualities of their recipients. Indeed, she was locked in an epistolary romance with a young Berlin critic whom she had never met at the very moment she entered her affair with Rodzevich. Her important relationship with Boris Pasternak is another matter. For one thing, it was initiated by him and his enthusiasm was equal to hers.

She and Pasternak had only known one another slightly in Moscow; though he was one of the poets she most admired. Pasternak wrote to her after reading a copy of Tsvetaeva's early poem, overwhelmed by her lyric genius. His words – 'You are not a child, my dear, golden, incomparable poet,'⁸ – restored her sense of her own worth. Their correspondence continued with mounting warmth as poems and plans for poems were exchanged. She had found a twin soul. Soon, he was suggesting that she join him in Berlin where he was visiting his parents. She failed to arrange the correct papers in time, and he returned to Russia without meeting her, though they continued to plan for it. In 1931 when she heard that Pasternak had separated from his wife, she seems to have experienced a kind of panic. She wrote to her friend Raisa Lomonsova: 'For eight years Boris and I had a secret agreement to keep on until we can be together. But the *catastrophe* of a meeting kept being postponed.' It seems likely that she was afraid of being rejected as a woman. Her cycle of lyrics, 'Wires', is an extraordinary example of the poems he drew from her. Two of these appeared in my earlier selection but both are amended here, and the other eight are now included.

The only other poet to whom Tsvetaeva wrote with comparable excitement was Rainer Maria Rilke in 1926. The correspondence came about after Leonid Pasternak, Boris's painter father, received a letter from Rilke, whose portrait he had made when the German poet visited Moscow. In his letter Rilke praised the poems of Leonid's son, which he was able to read in a French translation in a journal edited by Paul Valéry. Pasternak was overwhelmed with joy to hear as much, and was eager to include Tsvetaeva in the exchange. She took up the opportunity enthusiastically, perhaps a little too eagerly for Rilke, who was lying mortally ill in a sanatorium. She was unhappy to discover that he was unable to read her poems in Russian and, after a few exchanges, he fell silent, which she took as rejection. There is a sad postcard from Bellevue dated 7 November 1926 on which Tsvetaeva writes simply:

Dear Rainer,
This is where I live.
Do you still love me?
Marina⁹

The elegy she wrote for his death at the end of 1926 has been analysed with great eloquence in an essay of Joseph Brodsky, 'Footnote to a Poem' ¹⁰ He praises the amazing energy miraculous sustaining a sequence which has the nerve, as he puts it, to open on 'High C'. In it, we are transported from the ordinary chat of the literary world to look back on the earth as if from a theatre box far out in the universe.

Do you ever – think about me, I wonder?
What do you feel now, what is it like up there?
How was your first sight of the Universe,
a last vision of the whole planet –

which must include this poet remaining in it,
not yet ashes, still a spirit in a body –
seen from however many miles stretch
from Creation to eternity, far above
the Mediterranean in its crystal saucer –
where else would you look, leaning out
with your elbows on the edge of your box seat
if not on this poet, with her many griefs...¹¹

Seryozha and Marina had one more child, a son, Georgy, before they moved to Paris. For a time Seryozha found work as a film extra, but he was often ill, and Tsvetaeva tried to sustain their finances by writing articles for the Russian-language press and accepting charitable handouts from rich friends. She gave the occasional reading, for which she had to beg a simple washable dress from her Czech friend Anna Tesková. As she wrote in a letter to Teskova: ‘We are devoured by coal, gas, the milkman, the baker... the only meat we eat is horsemeat.’¹²

Seryozha moved from support of the Eurasian Movement to working directly for the Union for the Repatriation of Russians abroad. From this organization, he drew a small salary. Tsvetaeva inquired very little into the nature of this work. Her own isolation among White émigrés grew, and not only because of her refusal to sign a letter condemning Mayakovsky’s talents as a poet after his suicide. ‘In Paris,’ she wrote to her Czech friend Anna Teskova, ‘with rare personal exceptions, everyone hates me; they write all sorts of nasty things about me, leave me out in all sorts of ways, and so on.’ Sadly, she came to feel equally isolated in her own home. Alya, once so close, had begun to find it easier to relate to her father. Both Seryozha and Alya moved towards the ideals of socialism as the 1930s went on. As soon as Alya was given a passport by the Soviet regime, she made her own way back to Russia. It was never going to be easy for Seryozha to do the same. The Soviet authorities had not forgotten that he once fought for the White Army and demanded some evidence of a change of heart; hence, although he was an unlikely hit-man, Seryozha’s involvement in the murder of the defector Ignace Reiss in September 1937. Tsvetaeva guessed nothing of his activities until the Soviet regime arranged for his passage back to Russia to prevent his arrest. Even when the French police interrogated her, she found it impossible to believe that Seryozha was guilty of such treachery.

With his departure, she no longer had any source of income. No émigré journal would publish her work. Friends who had once supported her, turned their backs. She hesitated, nevertheless, even though her teenage son Georgy was eager to return to Russia. For a time she toyed with living once again in Prague. The German invasion made that impossible. By 1939, she and Georgy had little choice but to follow Efron back to Russia, as she had once followed him into exile; ‘like a dog’, as she noted in the journal she wrote aboard the *Maria Ulyanova* on 12 June 1939, echoing her earlier promise.

Nobody had warned her about Stalin’s Terror, not even Pasternak, who had met her briefly in Paris in 1935 during a Peace Conference – a ‘non-meeting’ she called it. In any case, that great weariness which she evoked in her poem ‘Bus’ already consumed her. She found Efron had been given a small house in Bolshevo, a little way outside Moscow. Other news was bewildering. Both her sister Asya and her nephew had been arrested. Her old friend Prince Mirsky, a dedicated Communist and brilliant literary critic, had also been imprisoned. Osip Mandelstam was dead.

Tsvetaeva felt lonely in Bolshevo even while her own surviving family were still with her. Other members of the household were members of the group of Soviet agents Seryozha had recruited

France. Her son, a good-looking young man, enjoyed teenage flirtations. Tsvetaeva had neither time nor energy to write more than scraps. 'Dishwater and tears', she jotted in a notebook. The year of the Nazi–Soviet pact was a crisis. Worse was to follow. First Alya was arrested, and interrogated brutally as a result she implicated Seryozha as a French spy. Alya was sentenced to fifteen years in the Gulag in spite of her 'confession'. Then Seryozha himself was arrested.

When Tsvetaeva visited Moscow, she found old friends were afraid to meet her, as a relation of convicted criminals. Even Ehrenburg was brusque and preoccupied. Pasternak received her without the least intimacy during a party for Georgian friends. Anna Akhmatova, however, agreed to meet her at the flat of Viktor Ardiv on the Ordynka, an act of some courage since her own son, Lev, was already held in the Camps. Akhmatova never discussed what was said between them, but in later conversation she remembered reading Tsvetaeva part of 'Poem Without a Hero', noting ironically that Tsvetaeva objected to her use of figures from *commedia dell'arte*. Tsvetaeva read her part of her 'Attempt at a Room', which Akhmatova thought too abstract.

The two women were very different creatures. Tsvetaeva did not perceive herself as a beautiful woman. She once remarked scornfully that, although she would be the most important woman in all her friends' memoirs, she 'had never counted in the masculine present'. After her affair with Rodzevich ended, she wrote poignantly to her young friend Bakhrakh in Berlin: 'To be loved is something of which I have not mastered the art...' ¹⁴ Yet Tsvetaeva had her own sense of grandeur. She knew herself to belong among the finest poets of her century. She did not make the mistake of blurring the distinction between serving poetry and serving God, any more than she would ever allow for poetry the utilitarian hope that Art can do civic good. In the closing passage from 'Art in the Light of Conscience' she makes that clear: 'To be a human being is more important, because it is more needed... The doctor and the priest are humanly more important, all the others are socially more important.' ¹⁵ Tsvetaeva had written no more than scraps of journal for nearly two years.

When the Germans invaded Russia in 1941, Tsvetaeva evacuated Georgy and herself to Yelabuga in the Tatar Republic, just across the river Kama from Christopol where the Writers' Union was housing many key writers. Tsvetaeva was not denied lodging there, but she feared there would be no job for her. Her indecision was obvious to Ludia Chukovskaya, Akhmatova's friend. It may be that she heard then that Seryozha had already been shot in the Lubianka. Whatever the trigger, the depression which gripped her was deepened by Georgy's hostility when she returned to the village hut in Yelabuga. She took her own life there by hanging herself from a nail on 31 August 1941.

*

All translation is difficult; Tsvetaeva is a particularly difficult poet. Her pauses and sudden changes of speed are felt always against the deliberate constraint of the forms she had chosen. Perhaps the exact metres could not be kept, but some sense of her shapeliness, as well as her roughness, had to survive. For this reason I usually followed her stanzaic patterning, though I have frequently indented lines where she does not. This slight shift is one of many designed to dispel any sense of the static solidity which blocks of lines convey to an English eye, and which is not induced by the Russian.

English poetry demands a natural syntax, and in looking for that I observed that some of Tsvetaeva's abruptness had been smoothed out, and the poems had gained a different, more logical scheme of development. There were other problems. Tsvetaeva's punctuation is strongly individual, but to have reproduced it pedantically would often have destroyed the tone of the English version. In my first drafts I experimented with using extra spaces between words, but sometimes restored

Tsvetaeva's dash, at least in the early poems; in later poems a space has often seemed closer to the movement of her lines. Dashes that indicated the beginning of direct speech are retained, but for this edition I have made clearer who is speaking in lyrics 5 and 6 of 'Poem of the End'. I frequently left out exclamation marks where their presence seemed to weaken a line that was already loud and vibrant. Furthermore, there were difficulties of diction. Words with echoes of ancient folksongs and the Bible were particularly hard to carry across into English.

I am not sure how far a discussion of methods of translation attracts much useful reflection. Yet in some word seems necessary, especially since I have worked with different linguists. Some of the poems, such as 'Poem of the End', as Angela Livingstone describes in her detailed Note on Working Method, p. 164, below, were transliterated into English, as well as written out in word-for-word literal versions, which indicated, by hyphenation, words that represented a single Russian word. Other poems, such as the 'Insomnia' cycle and 'Verses about Moscow', also prepared for me by Angela Livingstone, were first read on to tape in Russian; and then (on the same tape) as literal versions, which I wrote out myself and used alongside the printed Russian text. For 'An Attempt at Jealousy' I used the literal prose version at the foot of the page in the *Penguin Book of Russian Verse*. For the 1981 edition, Simon Franklin produced written literal versions very much as Angela Livingstone had done, though without transliterations; and he too gave full indications in his notes of changes in rhythm, musical stress and word-play.

The poems are arranged in order of their original composition, with the new translations fitted in to the chronology. Chronological order is particularly important for an understanding of many of the poems.

All my collaborators are listed in full on p. vii, but I should particularly like to acknowledge the work of Tatiana Retivov, once a student of Joseph Brodsky, who made literal versions of all the new lyrics for this edition, alongside the Cyrillic text, and made useful comments. Naturally, all distortions introduced in order to turn these versions into English poems are my responsibility.

Elaine Feinstein
January 2000

Notes

- [1](#) *Selected Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva*, trans. Elaine Feinstein (Oxford University Press 1977 paperback enlarged edition, Oxford University Press 1981; third edition re-issued Hutchinson 1986; fourth, further enlarged, edition, with revised introduction, Oxford Poets, Oxford University Press 1993; enlarged fifth edition Carcanet Press 1999).
- [2](#) 'Mother and Music', in J. Marin King (ed.), *A Captive Spirit: Selected Prose of Marina Tsvetayeva* (Ann Arbor, Ardis 1980), p. 276.
- [3](#) Irma Kudrova, *Death of a Poet: The Last Days of Marina Tsvetaeva*, trans. Mary Ann Szporluk (London, Duckworth 2004), pp. 99–114.
- [4](#) Elaine Feinstein, *A Captive Lion: The Life of Marina Tsvetayeva* (London, Hutchinson 1987), p. 65.
- [5](#) 'On a Red Horse', p. 60, below.
- [6](#) Nina Berberova, *The Italics are Mine: Memoirs of the Russian Literary Emigration*, trans. Philip Bradley (New York, Harcourt, Brace and World 1969), *passim*.
- [7](#) Viktoria Schweitzer, *Tsvetaeva*, trans. Robert Chandler and H.T. Willetts (London, HarperCollins 1997), p. 10.

1992), p. 242.

- [8](#) Letter from Boris Pasternak, 13 June 1922, in Elaine Feinstein, *Marina Tsvetaeva* (Lives Modern Women, Harmondsworth, Penguin 1989), p.102.
- [9](#) Yevgeny Pasternak, Yelena Pasternak and Konstantin M. Azadovsky (eds), *Boris Pasternak Marina Tsvetaeva, Rainer Maria Rilke: Letters, Summer 1926*, trans. Mararet Wettlin and Walter Arndt (London, Jonathan Cape 1986), p. 264.
- [10](#) 'Footnote to a Poem', in Joseph Brodsky, *Less than One: Selected Essays* (New York, Farrar Straus, and Giroux 1986), p. 195.
- [11](#) 'New Year's Greetings', p. 121, below.
- [12](#) Feinstein, *A Captive Lion*, p. 186.
- [13](#) Feinstein, *A Captive Lion*, p. 146.
- [14](#) Feinstein, *A Captive Lion*, *ibid.*
- [15](#) Marina Tsvetaeva, *Art in the Light of Conscience: Eight Essays on Poetry*, trans. Angela Livingstone (London, Bristol Classical 1992).

POEMS

Verse

Written so long ago, I didn't even
know I was a poet,
my lines fell like spray from a fountain
or flashes from a rocket,

like imps, they burst into sanctuaries
filled with sleep and incense,
to speak of youth and dying.
All my unread pages

lie scattered in dusty bookshops
where nobody picks them up
to this day. Like expensive wines,
your time will come, my lines.

May 19

from *GIRLFRIEND*

1

Are you happy? You never tell me.
Maybe it's better like this.
You've kissed so many others –
which makes for sadness.

In you, I see the heroines
of Shakespeare's tragedies.
You, unhappy lady, were
never saved by anybody.

You have grown tired of repeating
the familiar words of love!
An iron ring on a bloodless hand
is more expressive,

I love you – like a storm burst
overhead – I must confess it;
all the more fiercely because you burn
and bite, and most of all

because our secret lives take
very different paths:
seduction and dark fate
are your inspiration.

To you, my aquiline demon,
I apologise. In a flash –
as if over a coffin – I realise
it was always too late to save you!

Even as I tremble – it may be
am dreaming – there
remains one enchanting irony:
for *you* – are not *he*.

16 October 19

2

Beneath this caressing, plush blanket

I call up yesterday's dream.
What was it? Whose was the victory?
Who was defeated?

As I think it over again and again
I keep trying to find
the words for what happened:
Was it love?

Who was the hunter? Who the prey?
The roles reverse.
What does the Siberian tiger
understand as he purrs?

Who in our duel of wills
was left holding a bauble?
Was it your heart – or mine
flew off at a gallop?

And, after all, what did happen?
Something desired – or regretted?
I can't decide if I won
or if I was conquered,

23 October 19

3

Today it thawed, today
I stood by the window
soberly, with my lungs free,
almost satisfied.

I don't know why – maybe,
my soul is tired –
I had no wish to touch
my mutinous pencil.

Instead I stood in a mist
neither good nor wicked,
with my finger quietly prodding
the window pane.

My soul felt no better and no worse
than that passer-by over there
or those puddles of mother-of-pearl
splattered by the sky,

the bird flying above
— or a dog running;
even a beggar's song does not
move me to tears.

Sweetly and cleverly, forgetfulness
has already taken over —
and by today another huge emotion
has melted in my soul.

24 October 19

4

You were too lazy to dress yourself,
or get up from the armchair.
— When I go towards you, the day
is joyful with my happiness.

You were troubled about leaving
so late at night in the cold.
— Any hour when I approach you
is healthy with my joy.

You mean no harm by any of this,
unchangeably innocent,
— I am your youth, which already
begins to pass you by.

25 October 19

5

About eight this evening, a sleigh
rushed past me, recklessly,
along Bolshaya Lubyanka
like a bullet or a snowball.

I heard your tinkling laugh
in the distance and froze,
staring: your fawn-coloured fur,
the tall figure at your side...

You are enjoying the pleasures
of a sleigh with someone else,
a chosen lover, already more
desired than I was!

— *Oh, je n'en puis plus, j'étouffe,*

you screamed at me today.
And now, boldly, you cover her
with the furs inside the sleigh.

The rest of the world is happy.
The evening glamorous.
Gifts and muffs... and you both rushing
into the blizzard – fur to fur.

Then a brutal surge of snow
turns everything white.
I could only follow the two of you
for a matter of seconds.

I stroke the long hair on my
coat and feel no anger...
Your little Kay has frozen to death
O great Snow Queen.

26 October 19

6

Night weeps over coffee grounds
as it looks to the east.
Its mouth is a tender blossom
but it has a monstrous flower.

Soon a young, thin moon will take
the place of scarlet dawn,
and I shall give you many
combs and rings.

The young moon between the branches
never guards anyone.
I shall give you ear-rings
bracelets, and chains!

Your bright eyes sparkle, as if
from under a heavy mane.
Are your horses jealous – those
thoroughbreds, so light on their feet?

9

You entered with incomparable panache,
and I dared not touch your hand.
Already I could feel the pain of longing

as if you were my very first love.

My heart whispered: *Darling!*

I forgave you in advance,
without knowing your name, I murmured
Love me! Please love me!

I looked at the curve of your lips,
that deliberate arrogance,
those heavy eyebrows – and
my heart began to thunder.

Your dress was a silky black shell,
your voice husky as a gypsy;
everything about you sweetly poignant
– even the fact you are no beauty.

You won't fade over the summer even
if your flower and stalk are not steely,
for you are meaner and sharper than any
– from what island do you come,

with that huge fan, and walking stick?
In every bone, and wicked finger
I make out the gentleness of a woman
and the audacity of a boy.

How shall I treat these ironies in verse
or explain to the world
all the qualities I see in you?
My stranger with Beethoven's brow!

14 January 19

10

How can I forget that perfume
of White Rose and tea,
those figures of Sèvres above
a blazing fireplace.

There we stood. I was dressed
in splendid golden silk.
You – in a black knit jacket
with a winged collar.

As you entered, I remember your face
was almost colourless;

you stood biting a finger,
— your head slightly tilted.

A helmet of red hair surrounded
your powerful forehead.
You were neither woman nor boy —
but stronger than I was.

With no reason to move, I stood up
and at once people gathered round —
someone even tried, as if in a joke,
to introduce us.

How calmly you put
your hand in mine,
and left in my palm a lingering
splinter of ice.

You took out a cigarette.
I offered you a light,
afraid of what I might do
if you looked into my face.

I remember how our glasses clinked
over a blue vase. *Please*
be my Orestes, I murmured
— and gave you a flower.

Your grey eyes flashed as you took
a handkerchief out of your
black suede purse — and slowly
let it drop to the floor.

28 January 19

11

Many eyes sparkle under the sun
and one day is not
like another. Let me tell you this,
in case I am unfaithful:

whoever I am kissing
in the hour of love,
whatever vows I make
in the dark of night
— since I can't live like

an obedient child
or bloom like a flower without
looking at anyone else –

I swear by this cross of cypress
– you know it well –
if you whistle under my window
all my love will re-awaken.

22 February 19

12

Moscow's hills are blue, the warm air
tasting of dust and tar.

I sleep all day or else I laugh
as if well again after winter.

I go home quietly without regretting
the poems I haven't written,
the sound of wheels, or roasted almonds
matter more than a quatrain.

My head is magnificently empty,
my heart dangerously full;
my days are like tiny waves
seen from a small bridge.

Perhaps my look is too tender
for air that is barely warm.
I am already sick of summer –
though hardly recovered from winter.

13 March 19

13

Let me repeat, at the end of our love
on the very eve of parting,
how much I loved those powerful
hands of yours,

those eyes which do – or don't –
look someone over, and
nevertheless demand a report
on my most casual glance.

Three times is your passion cursed!
God sees all of you

and insists on repentance
— for every casual sigh.

Now let me say again, wearily
— don't be too eager to hear this —
your soul now stands
in the way of my own.

And something else, since
it is almost evening —
that mouth of yours was young
when we first kissed,

your gaze was bold and light then
your being — five years old...
How fortunate are those
who have not crossed your path.

28 April 19

14

Some names are like sultry flowers
and glances like dancing flames.
There are dark and sinuous mouths
whose corners are deep and moist.

There are women with hair like helmets
whose fans smell faintly of ruin.
They are thirty. Why would you need
the soul of a Spartan child?

Annunciation Day 19

15

I want to look in the mirror, where
sleep is wrapped in mist.
I wonder where you are going
and where you will find solace.

I see the mast of a ship
with you on the deck,
or standing in the smoke of a train
in the sad fields of evening.

There is dew on the night grass
and above that — ravens.
I send you my blessings now

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