

Clear Voices

A Personal Selection of Poems
translated from the Russian

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Translator's Note

I was conscious, in producing this personal selection of Russian poetry, of the way in which all the poets take on the voice of the translator, and thus their special individuality is lost. It is a problem associated with the very act of translation. I would encourage the reader to sample as many different alternative versions of these poets as possible, and thereby try to realise the individual flavour of each poet for herself or himself.

If there is a theme that unites this selection, it is the nature of the Russian spirit itself, its clarity, and uncompromising passion, and its triumphant survival, often against the odds.

Aleksánder Sumarókov (1718-1777)

'In vain I hide my heart's fierce pain,'

In vain I hide my heart's fierce pain,
In vain pretend to inner calm.
I can't be calm a single hour,
I can't no matter how I try.
My heart by sighs, my eyes by tears,
reveal the secret misery.
You make all my efforts vain,
you, who stole my liberty!

Bringing a savage fate to me,
you troubled my spirit's peace,
you changed my freedom to a jail,
you turned my delight to sorrow.
And secretly, to my bitterest hurt,
perhaps you sigh for some other woman,
perhaps devoured by a useless passion,
as I for you, you suffer too for her.

I long to see you: when I do I'm mad,
anxious, lest my eyes give me away:
I'm troubled in your presence, in your absence
I'm sad that you can't know how I love.
Shame tries to drive desire from my heart
while love in turn tries to drive out shame.
And in this fierce conflict thought is clouded,
the heart is torn, it suffers, and it burns.

So I fling myself from torment to torment.
I want to show my heart, ashamed to do it,
I don't know what I want, oh, that's true,
what I do know is I'm filled with sorrow.
I know my mind's held prisoner by you,
wherever I am it conjures your dear image:
I know, consumed by the cruellest passion,
there's no way to forget you on this earth.

Gavriíl Derzhávin (1743-1816)

Nightingale in Dream

I was sleeping on a high hill,
nightingale, I heard you calling,
my soul itself could hear it,
in the very depths of sleep:
now sounding, now re-sounding,
now sorrowing, now laughing,
floating, from the distance, to my ear:
while I lay there with Callisto,
songs, sighs, cries, and trilling,
thrilled me in the very depths of sleep.

If, after death, I lie there
in a sleep that's dull, unending,
and, ah, these songs no longer
travel to my ear:
if I cannot hear the sound then
of that happiness or laughter,
of dancing, or of glory, or of joy –
then it's life on earth I'll cling to,
kiss my darling one, and kiss her,
as I listen to the distant nightingale.

Monument

I have built a monument, marvellous, eternal,
higher than the Pyramids, harder than metal,
fierce gales and thunder will not shatter it,
nor will the flight of time erode it.

So – not all of me will die; the finer part
will cheat death, free from all decay,
my fame will grow, and never fade,
wherever the Slavic race is honoured.

Word of me will pass from White Sea to Black,
where Neva, Volga, Don, and Ural rivers flow,
and among the countless peoples all will know,
how I travelled from obscurity to fame,

the first to venture in our Russian tongue
to celebrate aloud Felitsa's virtues,
to speak with warm simplicity of God,
and with a smile utter truth to princes.

O Muse! Take pride in your hard-won reward,
scorn all those who show scorn for you;
and with untroubled and unhurried hand,
crown your forehead with eternal Dawn.

Vasily Zhukóvsky (1783-1852)

19th March 1823

You stood there
in silence,
your sad gaze
full of feeling.
It brought to mind
the past I loved...
your last gaze
on earth for me.

You vanished,
silent angel:
your grave,
celestial peace!
All earth's memories
are there,
all the thoughts
of heaven, sacred.
Heavenly stars,
silent night! ...

Konstantín Bátyushkov (1787-1855)

My Spirit

O memory of the heart! You are stronger
than the sad memories of reason.
And often from a far-off country,
you bewitch me with your sweetness.
I remember the loved voice sounding.
I remember the eyes of azure.
I remember the careless
curling strands of golden hair.
My shepherdess, without a rival,
I remember her simplicity of dress,
the unforgotten, the dear image
that stays beside me everywhere.
My guardian spirit – granted me by love
to bring me solace in separation:
do I sleep? Bending over my pillow,
it will ease my saddened rest.

Aleksánder Púshkin (1799-1837)

Prologue to 'Ruslan and Lyudmilla'

There's a green oak by the bay,
on the oak a chain of gold:
a learned cat, night and day,
walks round on that chain of old:
to the right – it spins a song,
to the left – a tale of wrong.

Marvels there: the wood-sprite rides,
in the leaves a mermaid hides:
on deep paths of mystery
unknown creatures leave their spoor:
huts on hen's legs you can see,
with no window and no door.
Wood and valley vision-brimming:
there at dawn the waves come washing
over sands and silent shore,
and thirty noble knights appear
one by one, from waters clear,
attended there by their tutor:
a king's son passing by
takes a fierce king prisoner:
a wizard carries through the sky
a knight, past all the people there,
over forests, seas they fly:
a princess in a prison pines,
whom a brown wolf serves with pride:
A mortar, Baba Yaga inside,
takes that old witch for a ride.
King Kaschey grows ill with gold.
It's Russia! – Russian scents unfold!

And I was there and I drank mead,
I saw the green oak by the sea,
I sat there while the learned cat
told its stories – here's one that
I remember, and I'll unfurl,
a story now for all the world...

The Demon

In those days, when life's displays
moved me with their freshness still –
a young girl's glance, the rustling glades,
the nightingale's sweet midnight trill –
when elevated feelings shone,
freedom, glory, purest love,
and the Muse's inspiration,
stirred profoundly in my blood –
my years of hope grew darker,
my joys were dimmed by longing,
for then some evil spirit started
to come to me in secret meeting.
The hours we spent were mournful:
his smile mysterious, and his gaze,
while his cold poison chilled my soul,
his caustic speech, his bitter ways.
With slander's endless stream,
he tempted Providence;
called all beauty but a dream;
inspiration: mind robbed of sense;
he scorned both love and liberty;
the whole of life he ridiculed –
found not a single thing that he
might praise in all that Nature ruled.

The Little Bird

Here in a foreign land
I perform an ancient rite:
I free a bird from my hand
in Spring's cascading light.

The act consoles my heart,
how can I grudge God's will;
if I can grant, to some small part
of Creation, freedom, still?

On the Hills of Georgia

On the hills of Georgia, darkness
I hear Aragva's roar,
light and sad, my grief transparent;
my melancholy filled with you.
You, and you alone...my sorrow
Still untouched and unmoved,
And my heart flames again, and loves –
for what else can it do?

To ----

I remember the marvellous moment
you appeared before me,
like a transient vision,
like pure beauty's spirit.

Lost in hopeless sadness,
lost in the loud world's turmoil,
I heard your voice's echo,
and often dreamed your features.

Years passed. The storm winds scattered,
with turbulent gusts, that dreaming.
I forgot your voice, its tenderness.
I forgot your lovely face.

Remote in my darkened exile,
the days dragged by so slowly,
without grace, without inspiration,
without life, without tears, without love.

Then my spirit woke
and you, you appeared again,
like a transient vision,
like pure beauty's spirit.

And my heart beats with delight,
and ecstasy, inside me,
and grace and inspiration,
and tears, and life, and love.

The Talisman

There in the land where the waves
break, on empty shores, forever,
and where the moonlight makes
a sweet, warm twilight hour,
where the harem's languid days
delight the Mussulman,
there an enchantress caressed me,
and gave me this Talisman.

And, caressingly, she said
'My Talisman will not save you
from sickness or from death
in tempest or in storm,
but in it there is power,
my Beloved, mysterious virtue.
It is the gift of Love,
so take care of my Talisman.'

'It will not bring you riches
out of the shining East.
It will not force the Prophet's horde
to obey you in the least.
It will not transport you
from a dreary, alien land,
from south to north, to your native place,
to your friends, my Talisman.'

‘But when betraying eyes
bewitch you, suddenly,
or lips kiss without love
in the night’s uncertainty,
my Beloved, it will save you
from deceit, from oblivion,
from fresh distress to your wounded heart,
from wrong, my Talisman.’

'I loved you'

I loved you: love may not have died
completely in my soul,
but don't let it disturb you,
I don't wish you any pain.

I loved you without hope or voice,
with diffidence, jealousy,
as tenderly, truly, as God grant
you may be loved again.

'Bound for your distant home'

Bound for your distant home
you were leaving alien lands.
In an hour as sad as I've known
I wept over your hands.
My hands were numb and cold,
still trying to restrain
you, whom my hurt told
never to end this pain.

But you snatched your lips away
from our bitterest kiss.
You invoked another place
than the dismal exile of this.
You said, 'When we meet again,
in the shadow of olive-trees,
we shall kiss, in a love without pain,
under cloudless infinities.'

But there, alas, where the sky
shines with blue radiance,
where olive-tree shadows lie
on the waters glittering dance,
your beauty, your suffering,
are lost in eternity.
But the sweet kiss of our meeting.....
I wait for it: you owe it me.....

It's Time

It's time, my friend: it's time! The heart wants rest –
the days slip by, the hours take away
fragments of our life: and you and I
plan how to live and, – just like that – we die.
No happiness on earth, yet there's freedom, peace.
I've long dreamt of an enviable fate –
I've long thought, a weary slave, to fly
to some far place of labour and true joy.

Fëdor Tyútchev (1803-1873)

Silentium

Silence: hide yourself, conceal
your feelings and your dreams –
let them rise and set once more
in the abyss of your spirit,
silent, white stars in the night –
wonder at them – and be silent.

How can one's own heart speak?
How can another know?
Will they see what you live by?
A thought once spoken is a lie:
troubling the streams, you cloud them –
drink from them – and be silent.

Know how to live deep inside –
there's a universe in your mind
of mysterious thoughts, enchantments:
they'll be drowned by World outside
they'll be driven off by daylight –
hear them singing – and be silent! ...

My Darling

My darling, I love your eyes
with their miraculous flash of fire,
when you lift them for an instant
and, like lightning from the sky,
cast a swift glance around you.

But there's a greater magic still:
your eyes downcast
in a passionate kiss
and through your lowered lashes
the dark, smouldering flame of desire.

I Knew

I knew two eyes – those eyes, oh
how I loved them – God knows.
I couldn't tear my soul
from their intense, bewitching darkness.

Such sorrow, such passion showed
in that deep gaze
that laid life bare,
such depth, such sorrow!

Sad and self-absorbed it trembled,
in the deep shadow of her lashes,
wearied like sensual pleasure,
and deadly like pain.

And in those magic moments
there was never a time
I met it without emotion,
or admired it without tears.

'She sat there on the floor'

She sat there on the floor
and sorted a heap of letters,
scattering them abroad,
like so many chill embers.
Lifted each familiar page
While gazing at it strangely
as a soul above might gaze
on its discarded body...
O what life lay there,
so irrevocably lived!
How many bitter hours,
of love and joy now dead!
And I stood there silently,
Ready to fall to my knees –
It saddened me so deeply,
As if a dear shade stood by me.

Eve of the Anniversary (4th August 1864)

I walk on, down the road,
in the quiet evening light,
my heart is heavy, my legs are weary....
my dearest one, can you see me?

Darker and darker on earth –
the last glint of day is done...
this world where we were together,
my angel, can you see me?

Tomorrow, sadness and prayer,
tomorrow that day's anniversary...
my angel wherever souls may be,
my angel, can you see me?

Mikhaíl Lérmontov (1814-1841)

The Dream

Noon heat, a gorge in Daghestan,
I lay still, a bullet in my chest:
The deep wound was still red-hot,
blood seeped, drop by drop.

I lay lonely on the gorge's sand,
the cliff-ledges towered around,
the sun burned their yellow heights,
and I – I slept like the dead.

And I dreamed of a midnight ball,
in my homeland, gleaming light,
young girls wreathed in flowers
talking about me, with delight.

But one sat there, deep in thought,
not part of the joyful theme,
and her young soul, God knows,
was plunged in the saddest dream.

Her dream, a gorge in Daghestan...
in that gorge a friend lay dead,
a black wound in his chest:
of dark blood a cooling stream...

Alone

Alone, I come to the road.
The stony track gleams in the mist:
the calm night listens to God,
and star is speaking to star.

All's marvellous, grave, in the sky!
Earth sleeps in the radiant blue...
Why such pain then, such weight on the heart?
Do I regret, wait for something new?

I expect no more from this life
and I've no regrets for the past.
I look for freedom and peace:
I want rest and oblivion at last...

But not the chill peace of the grave:
I'd like to sleep for all time
so life's powers slept in my chest,
and it heaved with my gentle breath:

an enchanted voice in my ear
singing, day and night, of love:
and a dark oak to rustle over me,
and bend down from above.

Count Alekséy Tolstoy (1817-1875)

Spring

It was at the dawn of spring,
the grass was barely green,
streams ran, the heat was gentle,
light shone through the trees:

no sound of shepherd's flute
yet, in the morning world,
and the slender forest fern
was still so tightly curled.

It was at the dawn of spring,
in the shadow of the birch-trees,
that you dropped your gaze
before me with a smile...

It was in reply to love, my love,
your glance was lowered –
O life! O leaves! O sunlight!
O youth! O hope!

And I wept before you,
as I gazed at your sweet face –
it was at the dawn of spring,
in the shadow of the birch-trees!

In the morning of our lives –
O happiness! O heartache!
O leaves! O life! O sunlight!
O the fragrance of the trees!

Afanásy Fet (1820-1892)

'When you read these anguished lines'

When you read these anguished lines
Where from heart's roaring blaze the flames issue,
And passion's fatal flood swells and climbs,
Do they speak never a word to you?

How to credit it! In the steppe, that night,
When through midnight's fog premature dawn,
Translucent, lovely, in miraculous light,
For you, out of the darkness, was born,

And beauty to unwilling eyes made plain,
Drawn to those glories that the darkness rive,
How can it be that nothing whispered then:
'There a man was burned alive'?

'How sad! The alley's end'

How sad! The alley's end
Is lost once more in snow,
Once more silver snakes extend
Their trails through its icy glow.

In the sky not a streak of blue,
The steppe is smooth and white,
A single crow struggles through,
Beating against the stormy light.

My soul is like frozen ground.
There's no sign of morning there,
My languid thought sleeps sound,
Over my work that's now laid bare.

Yet in my heart hopes still glow,
That, by chance, once more,
My soul grown young, may know
Its homeland, as before.

The land where storms pass swiftly,
Thought's passionate and pure,
And where the chosen few can see
Spring's beauty flower once more.

Innokenty Annensky (1856-1909)

The Bow and the Strings

‘How deep and dark the delirium!
How clouded the moonlit heights!
To have touched the violin so long
yet not know the strings in the light!

Who wants us now? Who lights
two faded melancholy faces?’.....
And the bow felt someone suddenly
seize them, and bring them together.

‘Oh how long! Tell me the one thing,
in the dark: are you the same, the same?’
And the strings pressed close, caressing
sounding, trembling in that caress.

‘Is it true, yes? Enough separation,
and we’ll not part again?’
And the violin said *yes*
though its heart was gripped with pain.

The bow knew, and was still,
but the note rang in the violin,
and what seemed music to others,
was torment and ruin to them.

And till dawn the player did not quench
the candles...the strings sang on instead...
and the sun, alone, found them,
drained, on the black velvet bed.

Among The Worlds

Among the worlds, one bright sphere,
one star's name alone I utter,
it's not that to me she's dear,
it's that I pine among the others.

And when I'm torn with doubt,
to her alone I pray for insight,
it's not that she shines out,
but that with her I need no light.

The Steel Cicada

I knew she would return
to be with me – Anguish.
With the tinkle and slam
of the watchmaker's lid.

He who clicks the lid open
couples the steel heart's tremor
to the wings' whirring
and uncouples them again.

Impatiently cicadas
beat their eager wings:
are they glad, is happiness near
an end to their suffering?...

They have so much to say,
so far to go...
Ah, our ways, cicada,
separate so!

Our friendship here's a miracle,
you and I, we
are only together a moment
till the lid opens on the sky.

It will tinkle and slam
and you'll be far away...
in a moment she'll silently return
to be with me – Anguish.

Black Spring

(Thaw)

Beneath ringing copper – goes
the coffin on its way,
terribly tilted the nose,
like tallow, on display.

Does it want to draw breath, there,
into that empty chest?...
the last snow, white but sombre,
a muddy road at best.

Only a sprinkling, turbid,
poured in decay, the sigh
of Black Spring, stupid,
gazing into the fish's eye...

Past brown roof-shingles' peeling,
Past plaster walls greening.
Then, over the numb clearing,
Its birds on swollen wing...

Mankind! Your road here's
mud, these ruts your breath,
but nothing is sorrier
than the meeting of two deaths.

Konstantín Bál'mont (1867-1943)

'Sin Miedo'

If you're a poet, and want the power
to live for ever in human minds,
strike hearts with imagination's music
temper your thoughts in passion's fire.

Have you seen old Toledan daggers?
They're the best wherever you go.
The motto on the blade's: 'Sin miedo':
'Be without fear' – tempered by fire.

When they fashion the red-hot steel
they inlay the gold design, with niello,
and the twin mated metals, once separate,
gleam, living beauty, down the years.

So that your dreams will always glow,
so that your soul will live for ever,
inlay the steel in your poems with gold,
pour molten fire into words that echo.

Mikhaíl Kuzmín (1875-1936)

'We were four sisters, four sisters were we,'

We were four sisters, four sisters were we,
all four of us loved, but differently.
One because father and mother said so,
another because her lover had gold,
the third because he wrote poetry,
and I loved, because I loved, you see.

We were four sisters, four sisters were we,
all four of us wished, but differently:
one to raise children, and cook away,
the second to wear a new dress each day,
the third for the world to talk about her,
and I to be loved, and love my lover.

Aleksáandr Blok (1880-1921)

The Stranger

At evening, above the restaurants,
the sultry air is savage, heavy,
and the breath of spring, corruption,
holds the sound of drunken shouting.

Far off, over the dusty streets
the boredom of suburban houses,
the bakery's gilt sign glitters, faintly,
and there's the noise of children, crying.

And every night, beyond the toll,
the expert wits, in bowler hats,
tipped at a rakish angle, stroll
along the ditches with their ladies.

On the lake oars creak,
and somewhere a woman shrieks,
while the moon's orb in the sky
inured, leers mindlessly.

And every night my only friend
is reflected in my wine-glass,
quiet like myself, and stunned
by sour mysterious drink.

While nearby waiters half-asleep
round the neighbouring tables pass,
and drunks with their rabbit eyes
cry out: 'In vino, veritas!'

And each night at the appointed hour
(or is it only in dream I see it?)
the form of a girl, clothed in silk,
moves across the misted pane.

Passing slowly through the drunks,
and always on her own,
sits down by the window
scattering mist and perfume.

And her stiff silk brocades,
and her hat with its dark feather,
and her slender hand, clothed with rings,
breathe the air of ancient stories.

And bewitched by mysterious nearness,
I gaze through a shadowy veil,
and see an enchanted shoreline
and an enchanted distance.

Hidden secrets are given to me,
someone's sun is for me to hold,
and the sour wine has entered
in the labyrinth of my soul.

And the soft ostrich plumes
nod gently in my brain,
and blue unending eyes bloom
in some distant place.

A treasure's buried in my soul,
and the only key to it is mine!
You're right, you drunken fool!
I know: 'There's truth in wine.'

'I'm nailed to the bar-counter,'

I'm nailed to the bar-counter,
I'm drunk – couldn't care less.
Off in the silvery mist – a sleigh
has flown with my happiness...

off with a sleigh, buried deep
in Time's snow, wastes of years...
it merely sifts over my soul,
from hooves, its silvery mist appears.

In the deadening dark, sparks fly,
sparks at night, light the night,
the sleigh bells jingle on and on,
and tell, of happiness, its flight.

And only the gilded harness
shines at night...rings at night...
and you my soul...my deadened soul...
drunk alright...drunk alright.

Do You Recall?

Do you recall? In our sleepy bay
the green waves were sleeping,
when battleships, in line ahead,
entered, soundlessly creeping.

Four – all grey. And for an hour
we were full of questions,
while the sunburnt sailors strolled
along the shore and past us.

The world became more enticing
wider – then they were in motion.
We watched all four of them sliding
into the night and the ocean.

And the sea was dull once more,
and the lighthouse blinked madly
when from the semaphore
the last signal shone sadly...

How little we children need
in this life – you and I.
The heart cheerfully finds joy
in the slightest thing that goes by.

You've only to find a speck of dust
on your knife from some alien land –
and the world will appear miraculous
drenched in bright mist on every hand!

On This Sad Earth

O courage, O achievement, O fame,
I forgot all those on this sad earth,
when, in front of me on the table,
your face shone in a simple frame.

But the hour struck, you left the house.
I flung the dear ring into the dark.
You put your fate in another's hands,
and I forgot your lovely face.

Days went by, circling, a cursed swarm...
Passion and drink tormented my life...
I remembered you before the altar,
I called to you, as if to my youth...

I called but you never looked back,
I wept, but you didn't relent.
You wrapped yourself, sad, in a blue cloak,
from the house, to the wet night, you went.

O dear and gentle one, I don't know
where you found shelter for your pride...
I sleep, I dream of that blue cloak
in which you entered the wet night...

I no longer dream of tenderness, fame,
that's all over, my youth is past!
From the table, with my own hand,
I removed your face in its simple frame.

Night

Night, street, lamp, pharmacy,
A dull meaningless light.
Live another quarter century –
The same. No exit in sight.

You'll die – again, begin it all,
And as before, all will repeat:
Night, icy ripples on the canal,
Pharmacy, lamp, street.

Ravenna

All that is fragile, all that is transient,
you have buried in the centuries.
Like a child you sleep, Ravenna,
in the drowsy arms of eternity.

Slaves no longer bring mosaics
through the arches built by Rome.
On the walls of cool basilicas
golden fire is dying down.

The rough sepulchral vault has softened
to the moisture's lingering kiss,
where a green film coats the graves
of monks and empresses.

The burial vaults are silent,
their doorways dark and cold,
lest black-eyed Galla's holy gaze
wakes, and burns through stone.

The bloodstained track of war and hurt
erased, all memory gone,
lest Placidia's voice, stirred to life,
sings the passion of times long done.

The sea's receded, and the roses
cling round the rampart's stone,
lest Theodoric dream life's storms
as he sleeps soundly in his tomb.

And the vine-set wastes, the houses,
and the people – all are tombs.
Only noble Latin, cut in bronze,
sounds like music from the stones.

Only in the intense quiet gaze
of Ravenna's girls, regret
for the sea that will not return
still shyly flickers on, as yet.

Only at night, bent over the valleys,
taking stock of the centuries to be,
Dante's spirit, with aquiline profile,
sings of the New Life to me.

To The Muse

In your secret music,
are messages of dark disaster.
A curse on all that's holy,
happiness's desecration.

And so seductive a power
I'm ready to repeat
that you drew angels from heaven,
enticing them to your feet.

And when you scorn faith
that grey-blue halo,
I once saw before,
begins to glow above you.

Are you good or evil? – You are – inhuman.
They tell strange tales about you.
For some you are – Muse, miracle.
For me you are – torment, hell.

I don't know why, in dawn's hour,
when I was finally exhausted,
I saw your face, did not die,
and asked you for solace.

I wished us enemies: tell me why
you gave me a meadow's excess
of flowers, and a starry sky –
all the curse of your loveliness?

Crueller than northern nights,
sweeter than golden wine,
brief as a gipsy girl's love,
your fearful hand on mine...

Trampling dear and holy things,
was such a fatal pleasure,
and this passion, so bitter,
was the heart's wild delight!

‘Oh, how desperately I want to live:’

Oh, how desperately I want to live:
all reality – immortalise,
the faceless – personify,
to the non-existent – substance give!

Life’s smothering dream may crush me,
I may suffocate in dream –
yet some happy child, perhaps,
in the future may say of me:

Let’s forgive his sadness – might
It have inspired him, inwardly?
He’s simply – the child of good and light,
He’s simply – freedom’s victory!

'How hard to walk among the crowd'

'There a man was burned alive.'

Afanasy Fet

How hard to walk among the crowd
with existence's pretension,
and speak to posterity, aloud,
of the tragic play of passion.

And peering into darkest night,
find form in a chaos of feeling,
so that by art's anaemic light
they may see life's fatal gleaming!

The Artist

In the heat of summer, and snow-dark winter,
on days of funerals, festival, marriage,
I wait for a faint, inaudible ringing
to relieve my deadly boredom.

It's here – it rises. With cold concentration,
I wait to know it, skewer it, kill it.
And, as I wait, intently,
it spins a finest thread before me.

A wind from the sea? Or miraculous birds
singing in Heaven's leaves? Time still?
White blossom spilt from the May-time
apple trees? An angel goes past?

An hour carries the weight of the earth.
Sound, motion and light expand.
The past sees itself in the future's glass.
There is no Now. And pity? – None.

And at the dawn of a new soul's birth,
of unknown powers, a curse –
that strikes the soul like lightning,
creative reason conquers – and kills.

And I closed in its chilly cage
the ethereal, free, gentle bird,
that wanted to take away death,
and flew down to save the soul.

Here is my cage – solid steel,
gleaming gold with the sunset fire.
Here is the bird – once all happiness,
on its swing now, singing near the glass.

Wings clipped, its songs learnt by heart.
You like to stand under my window?
Pleased with the songs? But, tired of suffering,
I wait for the new – and I feel the boredom.

On The Field of Kulikovo

1

The river spreads wide. Flows sluggish, sad,
and washes at its banks.
Above the yellow cliff's barren clay,
hayricks stand sadly in the steppe.

O, Russia! My wife! Our long road lies
painfully clear ahead!
The road has pierced our breast like an arrow
fired with ancient Tartar power.

Our road – lies through the steppe – and endless
anguish, your anguish, Russia!
And I no longer even fear, the dark of night
that lies beyond the border.

Let night fall. We'll gallop on, light with fire
The steppe stretching into distance.
In smoky light the holy banner, the Khan's
steel-bladed sabre will gleam...

The fight is endless! We can only dream of peace
in blood and dust...
The mare of the steppe flies on and on,
trampling down the feather-grass.

Without end! The miles, the slopes, flash by...
Halt there!
Nearer, nearer, the fearful clouds,
the sunset bleeds!

The sunset bleeds! Blood streams from the heart!
Weep, heart, weep...
No peace! The mare of the steppe
Gallops on!

2

At midnight, You and I, halted in the steppe:
No returning, no looking back.
The swans, beyond the Nepryadva, cried,
and again and again, they cry...

On our road – the white burning stone.
beyond the river – the pagan horde.
Over our host the shining banner
will never again flutter brightly.

And, bending her head towards the ground,
my friend speaks: ‘Sharpen your sword,
So you will not fight the Tartars in vain,
and lay down your life for the holy cause!’

I – I am not the first warrior, nor the last,
the Motherland’s illness will be long.
So pray for your beloved in the dawn
O my wife, fair and bright!

That night, when Mamai went to ground
on the steppe, by the bridges,
we were in the dark plain together, You and I –
Did you know this?

Before the Don, ominous and shadowed,
my prophetic heart
heard your voice in the plain at night
in the crying of the swans.

At midnight the prince's host rose
like a cloud,
while far, far the mother wailed
and beat the stirrup.

And night birds were circling,
far away,
while, over Russia, summer's silent lightning
guards the prince.

The eagles' cries above the Tartar camp
foretold disaster,
while the Nepryadva veiled herself
a princess in the mist.

And in the mist that lay above
the sleeping Nepryadva,
You came to me, in a radiant garment,
not even startling my horse.

Like a ripple of silver You flashed
along Your friend's steel sword,
You lightened the dust-drenched armour
on my shoulders.

And when, at dawn, the horde moved in
like a darkened cloud,
Your image, no human hand ever made,
shone brightly on my shield.

4

Again with age-old anguish
the grass bends to the earth.
Again beyond the misty river
You summon me from afar.

The herd of mares fled the steppe
and vanished without trace,
Wild passions are unleashed
beneath a waning moon.

And I, with age-old anguish
A wolf beneath the waning moon,
know nothing of what to do,
where to fly in your wake!

I hear the roar of battle,
trumpet calls and Tartar cries,
and raging over Russia
a vast and silent fire.

Gripped by immense anguish
I roam on my white horse...
I meet the wandering clouds
high in the misty night.

In my wounded heart
Radiant thoughts arise,
And burning thoughts descend,
Consumed by a darkened flame...

‘Appear, my miraculous miracle!
Teach me how to be radiant!’
The horse’s mane rises...
the swords cry loud on the wind...

5

*And dawn was clouded with darkness
Of ineluctable misfortune.*

Soloview.

Again, on the field of Kulikovo
the mist rose and spread,
and veiled the dawn of day
like a lowering cloud.

Behind the utter silence,
Behind the spreading mist
You can’t hear the battle’s thunder
Nor the lightning of the fight.

But I know you, Dawn
of exalted, turbulent days!
Over the enemy camp, again,
Swan-cries, and the beat of wings.

The heart cannot rest in peace,
clouds gather and not in vain.
Armour weighs heavy for the fight,
Now your hour is striking. – Pray!

'I've a presentiment of You'

I've a presentiment of You. Years pass,
Yet I've this one presentiment of You,

All the horizon on fire – impossibly bright,
And mutely I wait – in love and longing.

All the horizon on fire – your shape is near,
And yet I fear: You'll change your form,

excite, at last, a bold suspicion
by altering your familiar lines.

Oh, how low I'll fall, how bitterly,
Vanquished by my fatal dreams!

How bright the horizon! Radiance is near.
And yet I fear: You'll change your form.

‘Those born in uneventful days,’

Those born in uneventful days,
fail to recall the track.
We – born of Russia’s fearful years –
cannot forget a single thing.

The incinerating age of ashes!
Do you bring news of hope or madness?
The days of war, the days of freedom
have left a blood-red sheen on our faces.

There’s dumbness: the tocsin bell
has forced us to seal our lips.
In our hearts, once full of fire,
extends a fateful emptiness.

Let the croaking ravens soar
on high, above our death-bed –
May those who are worthier,
Behold, O Lord, Your Kingdom!

Nikolay Gumilev (1886-1921)

Sixth Sense

Wholly in love with our wine;
The goodness of bread from the oven;
The woman, who's granted to us
After long-torment; we take our pleasure.

But what can we do with a rose-red dawn,
A sky above drowned with cold,
Where there's silence and unearthly quiet,
What to do with immortal verse?

Not eat them, or drink, or kiss.
The unstoppable instant goes by;
We wring our hands, but again
All's condemned to go past; go by.

As a boy, forgetting his games,
Will watch girls bathe in the river,
Knowing nothing of love,
Yet tormented by a mysterious fever;

As once, in its bursting pupa,
Conscious of impotence,
On its back, the damp creature,
Felt its wings, still unformed as yet;

So, age after age – How long, O Lord, how long? –
The spirit cries out under the knife
Of nature and art, exhausts the flesh,
To give birth to a sixth sense.

1921

Anna Akhmátova (1889-1966)

Intimacy

In human intimacy there's a secret border:
love's being, love's passion, cannot pass –
though lips are sealed together in sacred silence,
though the heart breaks in two with longing.

And friendship too is powerless, and years
of sublime flame-filled happiness
when the soul itself is free, and has no
knowledge of slow languid sensuality.

Those who try to reach that boundary are mad,
and those who have – are filled with anguish.
Now you know why it is my heart
does not beat beneath your hand.

Immortal Love

Desolate the victories
of mysterious non-meeting,
phrases unspoken,
voiceless words.
Un-meeting glances
not knowing where to rest:
and tears alone are glad
to go on flowing.
Wild roses, ah, near Moscow
are in it! Who knows why...
and all this will be called
immortal love.

Lot's Wife

The just man followed God's messenger,
vast and bright against the black hill,
but care spoke in the woman's ear:
'There is time, you can look back still,

at Sodom's red towers where you were born,
the square where you sang, where you'd spin,
the high windows of that dark home,
where your childrens' life came in.

She looked, and was transfixed by pain,
uncertain whether she could still see,
and her body turned to translucent salt,
her quick feet rooted there, like a tree.

A loss, but who still mourns the breath
of one woman, or laments one wife?
Though my heart never can forget,
how, for one look, she gave up her life.

Everything

Everything's looted, betrayed and traded,
black death's wing's overhead.
Everything's eaten by hunger, unsated,
so why does a light shine ahead?

By day, a mysterious wood, near the town,
breathes out cherry, a cherry perfume.
By night, on July's sky, deep, and transparent,
new constellations are thrown.

And something miraculous will come
close to the darkness and ruin,
something no-one, no-one, has known,
though we've longed for it since we were children.

Celebrate

Celebrate our anniversary – can't you see
tonight the snowy night of our first winter
comes back again in every road and tree -
that winter night of diamantine splendour.

Steam is pouring out of yellow stables,
the Moika river's sinking under snow,
the moonlight's misted as it is in fables,
and where we are heading – I don't know.

There are icebergs on the Marsovo Pole.
The Lebyazh'ya's crazed with crystal art.....
Whose soul can compare with my soul,
if joy and fear are in my heart? -

And if your voice, a marvellous bird's,
quivers at my shoulder, in the night,
and the snow shines with a silver light,
warmed by a sudden ray, by your words?

Voronezh

For Osip Mandelshtam

And the town is frozen solid in a vice,
Trees, walls, snow, beneath a glass.
Over crystal, on slippery tracks of ice,
the painted sleighs and I, together, pass.
And over St Peter's there are poplars, crows
there's a pale green dome there that glows,
dim in the sun-shrouded dust.
The field of heroes lingers in my thought,
Kulikovo's barbarian battleground.
The frozen poplars, like glasses for a toast,
clash now, more noisily, overhead.
As though it was our wedding, and the crowd
were drinking to our health and happiness.
But Fear and the Muse take turns to guard
the room where the exiled poet is banished,
and the night, marching at full pace,
of the coming dawn, has no knowledge.

Shade

*'What does a certain woman know
of the hour of her death?' - Mandelshtam*

Tallest, suavest of us, why Memory,
forcing you to appear from the past, pass
down a train, swaying, to find me
clear profiled through the window-glass?
Angel or bird? How we debated!
The poet thought you like translucent straw.
Through dark lashes, your eyes, Georgian,
looking, with gentleness, on it all.
Shade, forgive. Blue skies, Flaubert,
Insomnia, late-blooming lilac flower,
bring you, and the magnificence of the year,
nineteen-thirteen, to mind, and your
unclouded temperate afternoon, memory
difficult for me now – Oh, shade!

Thunder

There will be thunder then. Remember me.
Say: ' She asked for storms.' The entire
world will turn the colour of crimson stone,
and your heart, as then, will turn to fire.

That day, in Moscow, a true prophecy,
when for the last time I say goodbye,
soaring to the heavens that I longed to see,
leaving my shadow here in the sky.

Borís Pasternák (1890-1960)

The Wind

(Four fragments concerning Blok)

1

Who'll be honoured and praised,
who'll be dead, and abused,
that's only known these days
to power's sycophantic crew.

To honour Pushkin or not:
perhaps no one would know,
were it not for their dissertations
that shed light on our darkness so.

But Blok, happily, isn't like that,
his case is a different one.
He didn't come down from Sinai
or adopt us as his sons.

Eternal, owned by no programme,
beyond systems and schools,
he's not been manufactured
or thrust down our throats by fools.

2

As the wind: like the wind. Like the wind
that shrieked on the estate in those days,
when Fil'ka, the postilion still galloped
at the head of a team of six bays.

And grandfather was still alive
crystal-pure Jacobin, radical soul,
his gusty grandson close behind
by a fingerbreadth, and as bold.

That wind, that penetrated
under his ribs, into his spirit,
entered his verse, and was praised,
in good times and in evil.

That wind's everywhere. The house,
trees, country, and rain,
in his third book of poetry,
in *The Twelve*, in death – the same.

3

Wide, wide, wide,
river and field stretch away.
It's haymaking time
it's communal work today.
And the mowers at the bend
have no time to stand and gaze.
The mowing made Blok wild,
the young squire grasped a scythe,
missed a hedgehog at a swipe,
then two adders were sliced.

But his lessons weren't complete.
'You idler, you slacker', they cried.
Ah, childhood! Ah, school, so dry!
Oh, the songs of the makers of hay!

At twilight, clouds from the east,
north and south are overcast.
Wind, unseasonable and fierce,
suddenly blows in, and hacks
at mower's scythes, at the reeds,
hacks at the prickly copse,
where the river bends, runs deep.

Ah, childhood! Ah, school, so dry!
Oh, the songs of the makers of hay!
Wide, wide, wide,
river and field stretch away.

4

The horizon's sinister, sudden,
and dawn is streaked with blood,
like unhealed lacerations
on a reaper's legs, dark blood.

No counting the gaps in the sky,
tempests and storms, the omen,
and the air of the marsh is high
with water that's rust and iron.

Over woods, gullies, and roads
over villages and farms,
the lightning in the clouds
prophesies earth's harm.

When the rim of the city sky
is purple like that, and rusty
the State's shaken, by and by,
a hurricane strikes our country.

Blok read the writing above.
To him the heavens were set,
on foul weather, presages of
whirlwind, cyclone, tempest.

Blok foresaw that storm and stress.
It etched, with its fiery features,
fear and longing for that excess,
on his life, and his verses.

In Everything I Want to Touch

In everything I want to touch
the very essence.
In work, in seeking the path,
in heart's turbulence.

For the meaning of days past,
for their cause,
for foundations, roots,
and their inner cores.

I want to grasp the threads,
of events and histories,
live, think, feel, love,
make discoveries.

If I only could
after a fashion,
I'd compose eight lines,
on the properties of passion.

On transgressions, sins,
pursuits, alarms,
inadvertent hastiness,
on elbows, palms.

I would reveal its laws,
its source proclaim,
repeating the initials
of its every name.

I'd plant out my poems.
In them, blossoming limes
Quivering in every vein,
Would flower in lines.

I'd include a breath of rose,
Mint breathing there –
Meadows, sedge, haymaking,
Thunderous air.

So Chopin all
the wonder includes
of groves, estates, parks, graves,
in his *Etudes*.

The pain and delight
of triumph won so
tightening the string,
bending the bow.

August

The sun entered at dawn,
As promised, free of deception,
A slanting shaft of saffron
Touching couch and curtain,

The houses and wood nearby,
It covered with burning ochre,
Bed, wet pillow, and behind,
The wall at the bookshelf's corner.

And I remembered the reason
For the dampness on my pillow,,
I'd dreamed you walked, one by one,
To my grave through the wood's glow.

Among the trees, a crowd, you filed,
And suddenly someone recalled,
It was August the Sixth old style,
The Transfiguration of Our Lord.

On that day a flameless light,
Rises from Mount Tabor,
And Autumn, like an omen bright,
Compels all eyes to adore.

You walked through the beggarly,
Bare, scant, trembling alder grove,
Into the graveyard's scorched-red trees,
Like gingerbread glazed from the stove.

And the solemn sky drew near
To their silent high-crowned rows,
And the distance cried out clear,
In long drawn-out cock-crows.

Death stood in the leafy space,
By the stones, like a surveyor,
Gazing hard at my dead face,
As if to determine my measure.

And everyone heard the echo
Of a calm voice, in broad day,
My prophetic voice of old,
Speaking, untouched by decay:

‘Farewell, azure of Transfiguration,
And the gold of the Second Coming:
With a woman’s touch of consolation,
Soothe the bitter grief of my passing.

Farewell, years without destination!
We part, woman, who defied
Those abysses of humiliation!
Your battlefield am I.

Farewell to you, far wing unfurled
To free and enduring flight,
The word-caught image of the world,
To Creation’s miraculous light.’

1953

Osip Mandel'shtám (1891-1938)

Tristia

I have studied the Science of departures,
in night's sorrows, when a woman's hair falls down.
The oxen chew, there's the waiting, pure,
in the last hours of vigil in the town,
and I reverence night's ritual cock-crowing,
when reddened eyes lift sorrow's load and choose
to stare at distance, and a woman's crying
is mingled with the singing of the Muse.

Who knows, when the word 'departure' is spoken
what kind of separation is at hand,
or of what that cock-crow is a token,
when a fire on the Acropolis lights the ground,
and why at the dawning of a new life,
when the ox chews lazily in its stall,
the cock, the herald of the new life,
flaps his wings on the city wall?

I like the monotony of spinning,
the shuttle moves to and fro,
the spindle hums. Look, barefoot Delia's running
to meet you, like swansdown on the road!
How threadbare the language of joy's game,
how meagre the foundation of our life!
Everything was, and is repeated again:
it's the flash of recognition brings delight.

So be it: on a dish of clean earthenware,
like a flattened squirrel's pelt, a shape,
forms a small, transparent figure, where
a girl's face bends to gaze at the wax's fate.
Not for us to prophesy, Erebus, Brother of Night:
Wax is for women: Bronze is for men.
Our fate is only given in fight,
to die by divination is given to them.

Sisters

Sisters - Heaviness and Tenderness- you look the same.
Wasps and bees both suck the heavy rose.
Man dies, and the hot sand cools again.
Carried off on a black stretcher, yesterday's sun goes.

Oh, honeycombs' heaviness, nets' tenderness,
it's easier to lift a stone than to say your name!
I have one purpose left, a golden purpose,
how, from time's weight, to free myself again.

I drink the turbid air like a dark water.
The rose was earth; time, ploughed from underneath.
Woven, the heavy, tender roses, in a slow vortex,
the roses, heaviness and tenderness, in a double-wreath.

This

This is what I most want
un-pursued, alone
to reach beyond the light
that I am furthest from.

And for you to shine there -
no other happiness -
and learn, from starlight,
what its fire might suggest.

A star burns as a star,
light becomes light,
because our murmuring
strengthens us, and warms the night.

And I want to say to you
my little one, whispering,
I can only lift you towards the light
by means of this babbling.

Petropolis

From a fearful height, a wandering light,
but does a star glitter like this, crying?
Transparent star, wandering light,
your brother, Petropolis, is dying.

From a fearful height, earthly dreams are alight,
and a green star is crying.
Oh star, if you are the brother of water and light
your brother, Petropolis, is dying.

A monstrous ship, from a fearful height
is rushing on, spreading its wings, flying -
Green star, in beautiful poverty,
your brother, Petropolis, is dying.

Transparent spring breaks, above the black Neva's hiss,
the wax of immortality is liquefying.
Oh if you are star – your city, Petropolis,
your brother, Petropolis, is dying.

Leningrad

I've returned to my city, known like tears,
like veins, like the swollen glands of childhood.

You've returned here, so swallow at once,
the cod-liver oil of Leningrad's streetlamps,

Recognise, now, the brief December light,
egg-yolk mixed together with ominous tar.

Petersburgh! I'm not yet ready for death!
You still hold all my telephone numbers.

Petersburgh! I have the addresses still,
Where I can summon the speech of the dead.

I live on the back stairs, and the bell's clapper
Yanked at, hits me on the temple with flesh.

And all night long I wait for the precious guests,
Rattling the chains on the doors like shackles.

St. Petersburg

We shall meet again in Petersburg,
as if it were there we buried the sun,
and speak as if for the first time
the sacred meaningless word.
In the dark velvet of the soviet night,
the velvet of the earth's emptiness,
women, blessed, sing with beloved eyes,
flowers still flower everlastingly.

The city arches like a lynx,
there's a patrol on the bridge,
an angry engine speeds through the murk
and sounds out with a cuckoo's sound.
I need no pass tonight,
I'm not afraid of the guards:
for the sacred meaningless word
I pray in the soviet night.

Amongst the theatre's soft rustling
I hear a girl's startled: 'Ah!'
And Cypris holds everlasting
roses, clasped in her soft arms.
We warm ourselves, bored, by a fire,
perhaps centuries will pass,
and women, blessed, with beloved hands,
will gather the weightless ash.

Somewhere Orphean choirs sound,
dark the beloved pupils of their eyes,
and programmes, fluttering from above,
fall to the rows of stalls, like doves.
You might as well blow out our candles then:
in the dark velvet of the world's emptiness
rounded shoulders of women, blessed, still sing,
but you'll no longer see the black sun.

Marína Tsvetáeva (1892-1941)

From 'Verses About Sonechka'

The rain beats at the window,
the workman's lathe creaks on,
I was a street singer, oh,
and you were the prince's son.

I sang about fate – so cruel,
over the gilded rail, while
you flung me never a rouble,
yet you threw me a smile.

But the old prince heard about it:
tore off his son's bronze star,
and ordered the servants out –
to drive the wench from the yard.

How I drank that night, not water!
In that blissful world, I lingered.
And I was the prince's daughter,
and you were the street-singer!

You who loved me with the falsity

You who loved me with the falsity
of truth – and the truth of lies,
You who loved me – beyond the extremity
of wherever! – Beyond the skies!
You who loved me longer
than Time. – Right hand: wave goodbye!
You love me no longer:
truth in five words, no lie!

'Go, find yourself naïve lovers, they'

Go, find yourself naïve lovers: they
won't correct marvels by number.
I know that Venus was – hand made,
a craftsman, with craft I labour.
From the highest solemnity, dumb,
to the soul almost trampled to death,
here's the whole celestial stair – from
my breathing – to: not one breath!

Attempted Jealousy

What's it like with another woman –
Simpler? – a flash of the oar! –
Did the memory of me
soon fade off-shore,

like the beach of a floating island,
(in the sky – not in the sea!)
Souls, souls! You'll be sisters,
not lovers – that's what you'll be!

What's life like with an *ordinary*
woman? Now that you've dethroned
your idol (renounced the throne).
Without the divinity?

What's your life like – occupation –
shrivelled? Getting up – what's it like?
What do you pay, poor man,
for endless triviality – the price?

'I'm through with hysteria, convulsions!
I'll rent a place, have done!'
What's it like with a common
woman, my chosen one?

More suitable and edible –
the food? Boring? – Don't complain...
What's it like with an imitation –
you who climbed the holy Mount? A strain?

What's your life like with a stranger,
a worldly soul. Well? – Is it love?
Like the god's whip, does shame
not lash your head from above?

What's it like – your health –
how is it? How do you sing?
How do you cope, poor man,
with the festering sore of endless conscience?

What's life like with a marketable
purchase? The price – terrible?
What's it like with crumbling plaster of Paris
after the finest Carrara marble?

(The Goddess made from stone –
and smashed to bits!)
What's your life like with one of millions,
you, who've known Lilith?

Does the marketable purchase meet
your needs? Now magic's dead,
what's your life like with a mortal
woman, neither using the sixth sense?

Well, swear, are you happy, then?
No? What's your life like in a pit
with no depth, my love? Harder,
or just like mine with another man?

‘What shall I do, a stepchild and blind,’

What shall I do, a stepchild and blind,
in a world where all have fathers and eyes?
where to anathemas, as along embankments –
passion flies! Where it’s a cold,
–when one cries?

What shall I do, by rib and by trade,
a singer? Like a wire! Sunburn! Siberia!
On my delusions, as on a bridge!
Here with them, weightless,
in a world so much heavier.

What shall I do? Firstborn, and a singer,
in a world where darkness is – grey!
Where inspiration’s stored – in a thermos!
My immeasurability,
in this measured day?

‘Walking, you’re just like me,’

Walking, you’re just like me,
your eyes are on the ground.
I used to lower mine, you see.
Stop passer-by, at this mound!

When you’ve picked a cluster
of buttercups, poppies, a few—
read, I was named Marina,
and how old I was, too.

Don’t think, this is – a grave,
that I’ll appear – too scary!...
I myself when I shouldn’t have,
loved to laugh much too loudly!

And the blood rushed to my face,
and my hair was curly...
Passer-by I was in your place!
Passer-by, stop, and read me!

Break a bramble, and after
pluck from it a berry,
no strawberry’s larger, sweeter
than one from a cemetery.

But don't stand there gloomy,
your head on your chest!
Think about me lightly,
think of me, and forget.

Ah, how the sun shines on you!
golden dust around...
– Don't let it upset you,
my voice from underground.

Koktebel 3 May 1913

'For my poems, written so young.'

For my poems, written so young,
I'd not dreamed I was a poet,
like drops from the fountain flung,
like sparks from a rocket,

that burst into the realm of true
sleep, and incense, like tiny demons,
for my poems about death and youth,
– for my unread sermons! –

scattered in dusty stores, in line,
where, un-purchased, they are dumb,
for my poems, like precious wine,
a time will come.

