

Marina Tsvetaeva

Twenty-Four Poems

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In Paris

Starlit houses, and sky below,
Earth dazed in the nearness.
The same secret longing though
In Paris, so vast and joyous.

The evening boulevards noisy,
The last ray of light dies,
Couples, paired round me,
Fierce lips, insolent eyes.

I'm alone. It's sweet to rest
My head on a chestnut tree.
As in far Moscow, my breast
Throbs to Rostand's poetry.

Paris at night, painful strangeness,
Dear the heart's ancient folly!
I'm going back to violets, sadness,
A portrait of someone kind to me.

There that gaze, pensive, a brother,
There that mild profile, on the wall.
Rostand, *L'Aiglon* that martyr,
And Sarah – in dream I find them all!

In Paris, so vast and joyous,
I dream of clouds and grass,
Laughter, shadows, ominous,
And the pain that will not pass.

Paris, June 1909.

Note: Rostand's play *L'Aiglon* concerns the unhappy life of the Duke of Reichstadt, the son of Napoleon I and Marie Louise, lived under the surveillance of Metternich at the Schönbrunn Palace. The drama was produced, on the 15th March 1900, by Sarah Bernhardt, at her own theatre, she herself playing the part of the Duke.

'I know the truth! Renounce all others!'

I know the truth! Renounce all others!
There's no need for anyone to fight.
For what? – Poets, generals, lovers?
Look: it's evening, look: almost night.

Ah, the wind drops, earth is wet with dew,
Ah, the snow will freeze the stars that move.
And soon, under the earth, we'll sleep too,
Who never would let each other sleep above.

3rd October 1915

‘Two suns grow cool – Oh Lord, give rest!’

Two suns grow cool – Oh Lord, give rest!
One – in the sky, one – in my breast.

How those two suns – can conscience free me? –
How those two suns scorched me madly!

Both grow cool – neither pains the eye!
And the hotter one is the first to die.

6th October 1915

‘Why such tenderness?’

Why such tenderness?
Not the first – these curls
I stroke, I’ve known, yes,
Lips much darker than yours.

As stars fade and rise,
– Why such tenderness?
Eyes have risen
And faded to my eyes.

Yet with no such song
Have I heard night darker
Crowned – O tenderness –
In the breast of the singer.

Why such tenderness,
And what to do with it, singer
So young, simply passing by?
And could eyelashes – be longer?

18th February 1916

'Here, in my Moscow – cupolas gleaming!'

Here, in my Moscow – cupolas gleaming!
Here, in my Moscow – great bells ringing!
And the tombs here, facing,
Of Tsarinas, and the Tsars.

You'll not know, at dawn in the Kremlin,
It's easiest to breathe – in this world, I mean!
You'll not know, at dawn in the Kremlin
I pray for you – till it's dark!

And you stroll beside your Neva;
At that time, beside the Moskva,
Here I stand, with head bowed lower,
In the bright streetlight's arc.

With my weight of insomnia, I love you,
With my weight of insomnia, I hear you,
At that time, in the Kremlin, too,
The bell-ringers start.

But my river, with your river,
My hand, with your hand never
May meet, my joy, while ever
Dawn and dusk are apart.

7th May 1916

Insomnia (4)

After a night of insomnia, the body slows:
Dear, but not his, not anyone's – to have.
In sluggish veins the moan of arrows,
You smile at everyone, like a seraph.

After a night of insomnia, arms hang low,
You're indifferent to friend or enemy,
In every random sound there's a rainbow,
There's a scent of Florence, sudden and icy.

Lips shine softly, and the shadows bright
Round hollow eyes. The midnight skies
Light this face – and out of dark of night,
One thing alone grows darker – our eyes.

19th July 1916

'To kiss the brow – eases anxiety.'

To kiss the brow – eases all anxiety.
I kiss the brow.

To kiss the eyes – cures insomnia's misery.
I kiss the eyes.

To kiss the lips – one's no longer thirsty.
I kiss the lips.

To kiss the brow – erases memory.
I kiss the brow.

5th June 1917.

Psyche

I'm no impostor – I'm home.
I'm no servant – I brought no leaven.
I'm – your passion, your Sunday rest,
Your seventh day, your seventh heaven.

They hung millstones round my neck,
On earth, they flung me a penny.
– Lover! – Surely you know?
I am your swallow – Psyche!

April 1918

Note: Mandelstam's poems 'Psyche' and 'The Swallow' in 'Tristia'.

Dying, I'll not say: 'I was'.

Dying, I'll not say: 'I was'.
No regrets, I'll not cast blame.
There are greater things in this world
Than love's storm, and passion's game.

But you – wing-beat against my chest,
Fresh, guilty cause of my inspiration –
You I command to: – Be!
My obedience – knows no evasion.

30th June 1918

'Enraptured, and enraptured,'

Enraptured, and enraptured,
In broad daylight, dreaming,
No one could see me sleeping,
They saw I was – exhausted.

And because in daylight brightness,
There were dreams before my eyes,
Oh, Night, now I lie here – restless.
And like a sad shade, breathless,
Over sleeping friends I rise.

17th-19th May 1920

'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,
I'm a craftsman, with craft encumbered.
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!

18th June 1922

Wires (1)

*Heart's wave would not have foamed
So high, and turned to Spirit,
If it were not that the ancient mute
Rock of Fate, so opposed it.*

Hölderlin

A singing line of posts,
Holding up the sky,
Sending you my share
Of earthly dust.

The alley

Sighs – wire to pole –
Telegraph: love – you – ou –ou...

Beg you... (No printed form,
Can hold it! Simpler by wire!)
These – pillars, Atlases, that
Send celestial tracts
Racing...

Across telegraph

Posts: Fa – are – well...

Do you hear? The last severance,
Of ruined mouths: fo – or – give...
This – rigging, on seas of fields,
A calm Atlantic voyage:

Further, further – and fu – use...
With Ariadne: Re – ee – eturn

Turn back! Hospitals, gifts,
Doleful: don't go!
These – wires of steel,
Wires – Aida singing

Receding...far off,
I conjure: Re – egret...

Pity! (In this chorus, how
Distinguish?) In the fading cry,
Reluctant passion –
Eurydice's breath:

Over the thresh – h – hold
Evriliki: al – a – as,

Not – a –

17th March 1923

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

(Poets: 3)

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

What shall I do, by rib and by trade,
A singer? A wire! Sunburn! Siberia!
On my delusions, as on a bridge!
Across 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!
With immeasurability,
In this measured day?

April 1923

Dialogue between Hamlet and his Conscience

She's in the river-bed, covered in algae
And weeds...she went there to sleep,
Though there's no peace there, either!
Yet I loved her,
More than forty thousand brothers
Have ever loved yet!

– Hamlet!

She's in the river-bed, covered in algae,
Algae!and her last wreath
Floats by the shore among branches...
Yet I loved her,
More than forty thousand....

Though still

Less than a single lover.
She's in the river-bed, covered
In algae – yet her –

I loved?

5th June 1923

'You who loved me with the falsity'

You who loved me with falsity
Of truth – and the truth of lies,
You who loved me – beyond 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!

12th December 1923

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?

19th November 1924

To Boris Pasternak

Dis-tances: miles, versts...
We're dis-severed, dis-persed,
They've rendered us silent, terse,
At the far ends of the earth.

Distances: tracts, versts...
We're disjointed, and disbursed,
Displayed, splayed, un-destroyed,
They don't know we're...an alloy

Of inspirations, and tendons,
Not disjointed – though dis-joined,
We're divided...

By ditch and wall,
Disconnected, conspiratorial

Eagles: tracts, versts...
Not disunited – oh, no worse
Than disengaged, in the wastes
Of earth, like orphans displaced.

How many, how many days...of March?
Since they scattered us like a pack of cards?

24th March 1925

Conversation with a Genius

A weight, on my brow
The laurel of praise.
'I can't sing, anyhow,'
'But you will.' 'The way,

Sound (Transform me
To sawdust, at best!)
Like milk, you see is –
Gone from my breast.

Dry and empty,
At spring's height:
Feeling's dead twig.'
'– An ancient cry!

Hush, don't babble!'
'I'd be better at –
Pounding gravel!'
'Sing, even that!'

'Am I a bullfinch,
Day in day out
To sing?'
'And if you can't,
Even then, my bird, sing!

To spite the enemy!'
'If I can't make one
Line come to me?'
'When could, anyone?

'It's torment' – 'Then suffer!'
'A field of dry chaff –
My throat.' – 'Then splutter:
That's sound too – cough!

'It's a lion's task, not for
A woman' – 'A child's no doubt:
Though dismembered –
Orpheus still sang out!'

'Even at death?'
– 'Under a stone.'
'I can't sing a breath!'
– 'Then make that your moan.'

Meudon (near Paris), 4th June 1928

'Cut veins: irrecoverably'

Cut veins: irrecoverably
Irreplaceably, life whips out.
Bring out basins and bowls!
Though the bowl's – too low,
The basin's – too shallow.

Over the lip, watch it flow,
To black earth, to feed the reeds.
Irreplaceably, verse will go,
Irrevocably, irrecoverably.

6th January 1934

Homesickness

Homesickness! That long
Exposure to misery!
It's all the same to me –
Where I'm utterly lonely

Or what stoves I wander
Home by, with my sacks,
Home that's no more mine
Than a hospital, a barracks.

It's all the same to me, what
Faces I bristle among, a lion
Captive, what human crowd
– as it must do – thrusts me on,

Into myself, individual feeling,
From the pole, a Kamchatka bear;
Where I fail to fit (and won't try!),
Where I'm debased: I don't care.

I won't let the milky call
Of my native language tempt me.
It's all the same to me in what
Tongue they misunderstand me!

(By what readers swallowing
Newsprint tonnage, gossip's grime...)
They belong to the twentieth century
While I'm – before my time,

Petrified, like a log left
From an avenue, let fall.
They're all the same – it's all
The same – perhaps most of all –

What was native to me – of all.
All the signs and tokens, there,
All the dates – a hand erased:
The soul once born – somewhere.

My land cares so little for me
That even the keenest sleuth
Could traverse my whole – spirit!
And find no birthmark, in truth!

Houses alien, churches empty,
All – one and the same – to me:
Yet if by the side of the road
A particular bush shows – rowanberry...

3rd May 1934

Elderberry

Elderberry fills the scene!
Elderberry, green and green.
Greener than mould on the vat!
Summer's birth, greener than that!
Elderberry, till the light dies!
Elderberry, green as my eyes.

And later – at night – with the fires
Of Rostov! – redness in the eyes,
From the bubbling trill of elderberry,
Redder than measles on the body,
In all your days of azure,
Measles sprinkled abroad.

Elderberry, till winter, winter.
What colours, deeper, run
In small berries' sweet poison!
With red cotton, sealing wax, Hades,
Mix, tiny bright coral beads, baste
With baked blood, just a taste.

Elderberry, fresh killed, killed!
Elderberry – the whole garden filled
With blood, pure and young,
With blood, blazing branches hung –
With the happiest blood, so fine:
Heart's blood – yours, and mine...

Later – oatmeal in excess
Later – elderberry blackness:
Of stickiness, and of plum,
Over the gate, a violin moan,
Near the house, that is empty,
A lone bush of elderberry.

Elderberry – crazy, so crazy,
I too am one of your berries,
Huns to the Steppe, Georgians to Caucasus, so
I to my elder-bush, by the window,
Grant no palace of art now, for me,
Grant me this bush of elderberry.

Newcomers, to my country!
From the berries – elderberry,
Crimson, my childhood thirst,
From the tree and from the word:
Elder (to this day...at night)
Poison – absorbed by sight...

Elder, crimson, crimson!
Elder, clutched the whole land
In its claw. My childhood in its power.
Almost a crime of passion, from that hour,
Elder, between you and me.
A disease of the age – elderberry,
You, I might name...

September 11, 1931, Meudon – 21 May 1935, Van, Armenia

‘Thinking of something, carelessly,’

Thinking of something, carelessly,
Something invisible, buried treasure,
Step by step, poppy by poppy,
I beheaded the flowers, at leisure.

So someday, in the dry breath
Of summer, at the edge of the sown,
Absent-mindedly, Death
Will gather a flower – my own!

5th-6th September 1936

‘When I watch the flight of leaves,’

When I watch the flight of leaves,
To the cobblestones at my feet,
Swept up – as if by an artist,
Whose picture’s at last complete,

I think how (already no one likes
My figure, face deep in thought)
A strongly yellow, decidedly rusty,
Leaf, there at the crown’s – forgot.

20th September 1936

‘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 held 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 all round...
– 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.

Kotbel, Crimea, May 1913

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