

Goddamnitalltohell

Katherine Anne said, in a gravelly voice. Cat, everyone called her, friend of my mother, mother of my friend who told me those were her mother's favorite words. Cat said them when she called long distance and the operator answered *Sir*, said them when she stood in line to vote and was denied, because records showed—*deceased. Goddamnitalltohell, that's my husband.*

I'm his Goddamned widow and I'm here to cast my Goddamned ballot. She threw Bloody Mary parties after church and when we opened the front door and the dachshund slipped out, she said those words, shouting, *Shut the Goddamned door before Jimmy Dean gets caught in the street sweeper again.* Jimmy D., with knotty rivulets braiding his shiny back

and a corkscrew tail, zigzagged across the yard. Our parents drank Cat's bloodies, tall glasses black with cracked peppercorns, swirling with lemons, vodka and a little tomato juice, while we played jacks on the screen porch or rolled marbles down the sandy drive. If we kicked volley balls into her exquisite garden—*Goddamnitalltohell, keep those Goddamned balls out of my iris and the Goddamned roses.*

Few understood the rollercoaster that took Cat from high anger to the deepest wells. No meds then, only *Goddamnitalltohell.* But she didn't curse when she drove children to the Veteran's Home to visit, and to pick mushrooms under the old oak. And all she could do was weep when I called to tell her my mother was dying. After clearing the sparse apartment, I took

Mother's crystal bowl to Cat as no words could thank her enough. I stood on the front porch, breathing in the fragrance of jasmine, remembering the last time I heard her say those favorite words and Mother said, *Hush, Cat. Hush, and eat your salad,* that shrimp and avocado lunch Cat had brought, along with narcissus bulbs she would kneel and plant beside my mother's back door.

Diana Pinckney

My Brother Sings

when the dogwoods are blooming as I drive him and his wife along the highway from Asheville, away from a hospital where we waited in the doctor's office, sitting in gray chairs, joking about my allergies to their six cats, how I can't sleep in their house

and still breathe. I watched my brother move his fingers over swollen knuckles that he used to crack when I was little just to tease me. We were waiting to hear the results of the lung biopsy. Now we know.

We travel through Blue Ridge Mountains—cherry trees, dogwoods, redbuds—heavy with April's abundance. When my brother begins the song, his wife in the back seat on her cell interrupts, *Dabney, will you please stop singing while I'm telling Sis you have cancer? Oh, sorry,* he says.

He glances at me while petals drift with us down the mountain. Our laughter's almost soundless.

Diana Pinckney

Intruder

Death intrudes, sure of his lease
and steals Norman a little each day.
Still he laughs whenever I tease

and with that seems quite pleased
with nothing negative to say
though death intrudes despite my pleas.

The years move on, sighs in the trees.
Winter summer we keep sorrow at bay
and Norman laughs whenever I tease.

He laughs at trees losing their leaves
at every joke that comes his way
while death strolls around, taking his ease.

China, Kenya, we gulped life to the lees.
Now that is over. We live for today
because Norman laughs whenever I tease.

No one to blame and no one to please.
However it goes—we can't get away
because death pushes in, taking his ease.
Still Norman laughs when I find strength to tease.

Marilynn Talal

W Word

*Married poets don't write about their wives.
It's like the W word.*

—Billy Collins

My wife has trouble standing. It's the spine,
and it can't be fixed by surgery. Lifting herself
off the couch, she tries to straighten her back,
hands forward as if contemplating
notes she wants to play on a piano keyboard,
eyes shut against the pain, rocking a little
on the balls of her feet, till finally, triumphantly,
she comes fully erect and lowers her hands.
It's just two days after her hysterectomy,
done to remove a fibroid the size of Montana,
and she's not supposed to move from the couch.
She's supposed to rest and be waited on. For once.
But it's been two days since my eyes had drops,
the medicine I need to keep the pressures down
and beat back my glaucoma. and, predictably,
I cannot put the drops in myself. I've tried;
spilling my practice bottle of saline solution
down my cheeks like a phony's flop sweat.
Without me, she'd get shut-eye. Without her,
I'd go blind. So now she's waddling to where I sit,
tiny bottle in hand, and I lean my seat back
like I'm in a planetarium about to see
stars swirl overhead, but instead it's her,
her face a sun to make all the far stars vanish.
How do you capture something like that in a poem?
War? Sure. World peace? Why not? But her?
Eyes shed medicinal tears, mouth mumbles.
Wife, woman, wonderful: one of those W words.

James Valvis

Sophie and the German Girls

We were coming out of a castle in Germany,
of all places, having just seen the battle armor
used for war and the hole in the middle
of the room people used for a desperation toilet,
when a group of young uniformed girls
approached my wife and me and asked
if they could kiss our baby.
Sophie was eighteen months old.
Already the old people at the rest home
where her great-grandmother lived
wanted to take up a collection to buy her.
Already the waitresses at our local Denny's
fawned over her while child-star Spencer Breslin
sat in a nearby booth with his cup, unattended.
Now these little girls who spoke in German
wanted to kiss our baby just because
to do so would make them happy.
I didn't see anything wrong with it,
and so one by one they lined up,
approached, lifted Sophie, kissed her,
and then turned to us and thanked us.
There were maybe fourteen of them,
but each waited their turn and when
they finished they thanked us and left,
all except one little girl, who asked,
after the others left, if she could kiss Sophie
one more time. She seemed embarrassed,
this need she had for beauty, for innocence,
keeping us from the things we wanted to do,
but little did she know the reason we had Sophie
was for this reason, to offer the world more beauty,
to give a world full of armor and holes someone to kiss.

James Valvis

First Kiss

I was fourteen, and he the same.
Beneath the flickering shop lamp
we stood, in the garage behind
my house, a serenade of wind
and rain holding us captive.

He was darkly handsome. I wondered
if he thought me pretty. I could not tell,
so shy were we then, standing beneath
the flickering shop lamp in the garage
behind my house, a serenade of wind
and rain holding us captive.

Just back from a movie, *King Kong*.
Oddly romantic. He took my hand, and
in his gentle squeeze I heard the words
he could not speak, as we stood beneath
the flickering shop lamp, in the garage
behind my house, a serenade of wind
and rain holding us captive.

A tingle arose from my toes to my scalp
when with uncertain boldness, he put his
arms around me. I thought my heart would
stop, at the leathery squeak of his jacket,
and the feel of his lips on my own.

A simple kiss—my first—
soft and sweet,
enclosed within the scent of
leather and Dentyne.
I wished the rain would never end.

Roseann Ranieri

Gone Missing

I hear children's voices chattering
from the playground, ghostly
already as they filter through trees.

I have seen their books, satchels,
their crayoned alphabets of wonder,
the rain on their vinyl boots, coats glistening
as if even weather wept for them,
their last fragile smiles on the other side of mystery.

Autumn heaps its bags of fallen leaves,
branches crook sunlight over the lawn.
I mow as the shadows lengthen across it,
vanishing at last into the greater darkness.

Ann Robinson

Hangman

you play hangman
on the orphanage steps

in turn guessing words
with children who wear

broken flip-flops
and crush together

at your hip, eager to hold
your hand or impress you

with their small english.
across the hills a storm

moves. across the page
the charcoaled hangman

is closing in. but still
there is hope, still the sun

as you slowly make sense
of each small emptiness,

every letter bringing
you closer to an answer

and then it's there
i l o v e r w a n d a

a small boy lays down
his pencil. the hangman

lays down his noose.

Heidi Wallis

Not Much Different

*Freedom Riders' bus burned in Anniston, Alabama.
May 14, 1961*

Roger Couch and Goober Lewallyn
weren't much different than your neighbors,
fresh-faced young men
that said *Yesum* and bowed their heads in church.
They wanted to be heroes, just like all young men,
saw their chances as the mob pushed forward.
Goober had gathered a fistful of rags
Couch had the can of kerosene
Oh my God, they're going to burn us up
screams from inside the bus.
Sounds far off, caught in clouds.
When he threw the fisted knot of flames
it felt like a football tossed down field;
within seconds it exploded
sending gray smoke throughout the bus.
Later, they were carried aloft
as if in a wild tumult of victory.

Lee Varon

Chicken

Could I ever be like the blond girl
who lugged water
to those choking beside their fire-bombed bus
as her neighbors cheered the Klansmen on:
Let them burn!

Or was I too chicken to have my family
threatened, run out of town
like Janie Miller's?

Her mother, father, and sisters and brothers
left everything behind.
Janie changed schools
hid the picture of herself
showing an act of kindness,
the heart's voice buried
for how many more generations?

Lee Varon

Letter from the Desert Museum

Tucson, Arizona

On the coldest day in two decades,
Chicago's snow is heaped mid-thigh,
schools have dispensed with children,
and cars creep into a creamsickle dawn.

Tomorrow I'll fly there, if the plane
doesn't splinter into icy shards
mid-air over Oklahoma. But today,
I wander the Sonora to view the flight
of raptors over cacti, their wings
outlined black on pink hills.

From a safe distance I catch the eye
of a coyote, consider the pig-like coati
rummaging through the saguaro.
A ranger points out a Stellar jay,
brilliant blue, pecking near my feet,
which will soon be snow-shod.

Hummingbirds hover and dart
in the aviary, and when I emerge
under the sun's scalding visage,
I try to imagine my house back home
sunk low in frozen dunes.

Tomorrow night, as the snow plow
rumbles past, scooping hope
from crystal streets, I'll dream of
javelinas rooting among the prickly pear.

Donna Pucciani

This Damn Magnolia

is taking over my backyard,
in point of fact, my whole life,
forcing me to abandon the dogs
to their bone pursuits,
dishes to their grey swill,
lingerie to its soapy basin,
bills to their unopened envelopes
while I stand like a sentry on the wet deck
watching blossoms edge out sky.

This flowering arborscape is taking
over my backyard, my entire life.
I want nothing—not the warm sun
on my forehead, not those forsythia
flanking the drive, not even daffodils
bowing over their green, sateen leggings.

Who can concentrate on books, TV,
even this translucent trout on my plate?
No, give me instead hundreds
of roseate hands waving, offering
their fullness to light and rain.

Doris Lynch

Spring Evening

These are the hours when all things return—
blossoms to gardens, buds to the branch,
the odors of daffodil, lilac and phlox.

The neighbors again are out on the porch,
gossiping, smoking. Somewhere a girl
is playing guitar—*Oh, how I want to go home.*

Now we step out of our winter-dark rooms
to walk under lavender sky—
a star to the west, the chattering swifts;

far off, the laughter of children.
Past love revives in a flowering dogwood.
A Harley rumbles a dream of adventure.

So these desires again sweep our veins.
Hope is remembered; all the mind's ghosts,
all of the buried now rising again—

how miraculous to be alive.
We drink scented air and embrace the warm night.
We, too, have been gone too long.

Tom Raithel

International Feature Section

RUSSIA

Edited by

Alex Cigale

Introduction

Above all else, what I would like our readers uninitiated into the current state of poetry affairs in Russia to know is that it is every bit as lively and diverse as the situation in America. Russia has not experienced a phenomenon equivalent to our explosion in writing programs. The only training available to poets is the Gorky Literature Institute established in Soviet times, and the regional "workshops" of established writers or critics that have earned the name of "school." Thus, serious poets are for the most part employed either in teaching other disciplines, or as journalists, or in "literary work": editing, translating, criticism.

But a similar expansion has taken place in the last two decades in "names worth noting." Whereas in the nineties a specialist could rest easy in her familiarity with the work of some two hundred poets, this number may well extend now to a thousand "names." Though I have made every effort to be broad and inclusive, what I have managed to present here is only a representative selection of the best work being done today.

Regarding the demographic landscape, it is necessary to reiterate here the oft-noted, traditionally dominant place held by the two cultural capitals, Moscow and St. Petersburg, and the eternal division if not open enmity between them. The latter, though perhaps just as traditional for the most part, has been historically more open to outside influence, more westward looking.

The periphery (Siberia, Central Asia, the Caucasus) has developed in greater isolation and cultural neglect, and so, at least until very recently, drew for the most part on tradition, the local oral ones and the Russian classics, so that even Modernism had hardly made any inroads. One must recall that, during Soviet times, Modernist "formalism," and any independent or individualistic activity for that matter, was not only discouraged but punished.

There had been a number of spectacular exclusions to this rule of party line, Writers' Union enforced discipline. Outstanding among them was the Russian Chuvash poet Gennady Aygi, who exerted a seminal influence on other "unofficial poets" through his synthesis of the traditional Chuvash song lyric and the influence of post-war French poets he translated into Chuvash, a Turkic language. In our present mini-anthology, I would draw attention to the work of Shamshad Abdullaev, a leading

representative of the "Fergana School" (Uzbekistan) that opens the issue and, more recently, the anaphora-charged work of the Russian Buryat Amarsana Ulzhytuev. (Of several other examples one might cite, there is also a lively Russian-language poetry scene in Riga, Latvia.)

A final demographic note that can't fail to draw attention to itself is the relative shortage of women poets. While I can't, due to space limitations, discuss the roots of this inequality, I would note that I was very aware of this lack of proportion and, while exact numbers are not available, have made an effort, certainly without sacrificing quality, to be approximately fair.

During the so-called Silver Age (roughly the first quarter of the 20th century), notable women poets were the Symbolist Zinaida Gippius, Futurist Elena Guro, Satirist Teffi, and the "unaligned" Sophia Parnok. Two of the top figures were Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Akhmatova. And, one of the major poets of the ironically named Bronze Age (the 60s) was a woman, Bella Akhmadulina (1937-2010). While other major figures of the older generation are not represented here (Olga Sedakova, b. 1949; Nina Iskrenko, 1941-1995), this issue, I hope, manages to communicate something of the veritable and quite recent boom in writing by women.

In the grand scheme of things, one must recall that practically the entire generation of the first half of the century was either repressed or exterminated or committed suicide. The last of the avant-garde generation of Russian Futurists, the so-called Russian Absurdist, died in the Gulag camps (like Alexander Vvedensky), were interned for ten or even twenty years (like Nikolay Zabolotsky), or starved during the Siege of Leningrad (like Daniil Kharms). Much of their writing did not become available in Russia until the 80s.

Thus, a brief note is in order here about the flowering of Russian poetry post-war, after the death of Stalin in 1953 and Khrushchev's "thaw," the partial and temporary opening to the West in 1957. Among these were the Moscow Conceptualists (Dmitri Prigov, Lev Rubinstein), the Lianozovo group (Genrikh Sapgir [1928-1999], Jan Satunovsky, Igor Kholin, Vsevolod Nekrasov [1934-2009], Yevgeny Kropivnitsky), St. Petersburg's "philological school" (Eremin, Loseff, Vladimir Uflyand [1937-2007], Sergey Kulle), and the hundreds of other independent spirits (for example, Alexei Khvostenko [1940-2004] and Henri Volokhonsky) whose only prospects of publication were *samizdat* and *tamizdat* (underground, typed and mimeographed self-publication at

home and illegal, smuggled-out publication abroad).

Only after Gorbachev's perestroika in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 were practically all of the unofficial poets published, a heady time indeed for all of us. Prior to the 90s, this was literally an underground, shadow cultural process in parallel to the officially accepted structure of the Writers' Union.

Notable exceptions were the survivors Pasternak and Akhmatova and, in the war generation, Arseny Tarkovsky (the filmmaker's father), who worked in the literary field but simply wrote "for the desk." Also the 60s icon Andrei Voznesensky (1933-2010), who managed to bridge the official and unofficial worlds through his acquaintance with Allen Ginsberg, and by assuming the mantle of the lionized Mayakovsky. Many of the unofficial poets, like their Absurdist predecessors, managed to make a living within the official structures by writing children's poetry and publishing translations: Sapgir, Satunovsky, etc.

A note, for further reading, about existing anthologies. First and foremost, the indispensable, immensely personal, entertaining work (available online but in Russian only) of the St. Petersburg poet Konstantin Kuzminsky (<http://kkk-bluelagoon.ru>.) And the anthologies in English translation, in order of appearance: *Third Wave* (1992), *Contemporary Russian Poetry* (by Gerald S. Smith, 1993), *In the Grip of Strange Thoughts* (2000), and *Crossing Centuries: the New Generation in Russian Poetry* (2000). There is also an *Anthology of Contemporary Russian Women Poets* published by Modern Poetry in Translation and in the U.S. by Zephyr Press (eds. Daniel Weissbort [1935-2013], Valentina Polukhina; <http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/issue.asp?id=462>).

I was part of the group effort in the mid-90s that resulted in *Crossing Centuries*, and highly recommend this collection of over 80 poets and substantial critical materials as a background to the present work. An attempt to sum up the last quarter of the 20th century, it was already clear that it was impossible to be fully inclusive. More recently, Larissa Shmailo has headed an incipient online project to begin sketching out in English translation a *Russian Poetry for the 21st century* (<http://bigbridge.org/BB17>).

Though I have made every effort, due to the short-term nature of the current project, I was unable to find new, previously unpublished translations of the following poets who had passed away since 2000 and whom I very much wanted to include: Arkadii Dragomoshchenko

(1946-2012), Natalia Gorbanevskaya (1936-2013), Viktor Krivulin (1944-2001), Alexei Parshchikov (1954-2009), and Dmitry Prigov (1940-2007), as well as some still living poets of the older generation, for example Viktor Sosnora (b. 1936).

One of the aims I have fulfilled was my desire to pay tribute to the recently departed members of the community: Gregory Dashevsky (1964-2013), Regina Derieva (1949-2013), Lev Loseff (1937-2009), and Dennis Novikov (1967-2004), as well as to such legendary translators as F. D. Reeve (1928-2013) and the living classics James E. Falen and Gerald Smith.

Lastly, very late in the editorial process, a decision was taken together with *Atlanta Review* editor-in-chief Dan Veach (whose input has been invaluable) to represent the relatively recent phenomena of bilingual poets, i.e., Russians writing in English: Tsvetkov, Gritsman, Temkina, Halberstadt, and Kaminsky. Others would include Eugene Dubnov, Eugene Ostashevsky, Matvei Yankilevich, Genya Turovskaya, and those who, like Mashinsky, Kapovich, and Nikolayev, are represented here either as translators or as Russian language poets.

Thus, the present collection contains a good deal of Russian poetry being produced in the West (particularly in America, but also Germany, Israel, etc.). This highlights the fact that Russian has become an international language and the Russian immigration has made a substantial contribution to world, and particularly American, culture.

On the eve of what may yet become a new Cold War, with the increasing international isolation of Russia, and of many Russian intellectuals as a potential "fifth column" within Russia, I find it necessary to emphasize what has been part of my design all along. One critical service of a translator, and of poets generally, is being a cultural ambassador.

More than anything, the following selection represents a slice of life: the poets that the primarily American translators of Russian are working on today. The issue has an historical conclusion: a selection of the poetry of three "lost" second-generation Russian Absurdist produced during the Siege of Leningrad, and the closing words of Tarkovsky and Joseph Brodsky.

Three final notes: literary life extending far beyond poetry, as it does for so many poets, it is worth paying particular attention to the bios: among our contributors are editors and publishers of some of Russia's

leading presses and journals: Argo-Risk, OGI, NLO, Russkii Gulliver, Cardinal Points, Gvideon, Vozdukh, and Zvezda. Secondly, I apologize for any oversights or omissions on my part, and promise to one day remedy these.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the consistently excellent work of each of the translators, many of whom are accomplished poets in their own right. I'm a fervent believer that poets must translate other poets. Now it is up to you, dear reader: please help us spread the word, that these poems may lead a second life, as English poems in their own right.

Alex Cigale

Two Pictures

A prayer rug under the Judas tree,
but we read aloud in a remote room.
A Mantuan song on the radio, a namaz,
and a man who sold horse meat
blended in the window for hours.
A small cut in a clay fence—
like a squint of a wolf nursed by the plains,
a veinless brown halo coiled between
water in a cement pit
and a curtain of the hundred-year-old house.
You, same as before, squat
as if searching on the ground, in the September heat, for a dead bee—
in that spot where the acid music had shimmered, now
inaudible. Nearby something has grown smaller, trickier than emptiness,
here, and away into an adobe chiseling—
an appendage to a monochrome ring bought in the old quarters.
He no longer read in the remote room—
Foscolo on Death—instead he was squeezing
a woman's fingers that, without initial coldness, slid into his hand
as into their own case, and only nails
smaller than nostrils searched the air
as if preparing to drum on a red tambourine
against the Sunnite heat. Remember:
father, so life-loving, even he sometimes withdrew, in front of an abyss
in his beautiful study, glugged by the trivial darkness,
and the son thought, what wisdom: a gift of faithlessness before the gray road.
Time. Lukewarm tea in a long dining hall.
Smoke, without crumbling, sculpts a male figure on the white-hot road.

Without Title

An eye huge as the sky on his forehead
A mountain can hardly balance
under the burden of his colossal flesh
It is deep night
His sleep is sweet in a dark spacious cave
In a few minutes the wise Ulysses
will blind him and again we'll throw our hands up in dismay
astonished at the powerlessness of gods.

from *To See Things with Clarity*

1
Of our plain things—whisper, whisper—not
touching the ear of another—
believe—in another's—eardrum.
So February stalks us, opens—
the time
in a straw—whistles—
as if a child sips from a glass of sparkling water.
Mouth opens,
opens and stalks
each word.
And the "o" of the mouth
is quiet
is not quiet
with want. Open, and restrained, want.

3
And the snow comes as if no one knows about us
and no one needs our bodies
and there was no
breath,
no mouth, and no earth that takes us inside.

9
Of simple things—in a whisper, whisper.
So gives us to our bodies, time.
So the hands are held in hands, the bodies
drop into us. So, the flame—
which comes from this evening
which is in our stomachs.
Our stomach, a city where we
are not yet persons. And no longer a breath, us.
And we—we want to go back to that breath, us.
We remember, us.

12
Of simple things whisper, whisper,
whisper us, time.

After Stevenson

Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
and the hunter home from the hill.
They leave the burden of earthly cares
and find a home where they will.

Their graves lie sunken under the lea
and under the grazing herd.
The open field will keep what it has,
and not surrender its dead.

And this is a land we will not buy,
nor take from the low-lying green.
Depleted and weakened, it gives off a sound,
stretched like a tambourine.

In a dark, vaulted chapel
on Romanesque capitals
a lion caresses a man.
In the pit of a bed of stone
a prince lies at ease in death.
All the smiling animals
reward him for his faith,
blood and anger forgotten.

The Temple with an Arcade

At the Genoese Fortress in Sudak, if you enter
the Main Gate, at the left, and approach the wall's elbow,
then head up from a post—it doesn't strike
the random rubbernecker as much—protruding
like a codger's last tooth, there is a cupola
plopped on a stub-necked octahedron

that glows, a hemisphere's bowl;
this is the Lord's house, where a sequence
of people, lips parted in peaceful prayer,
washes like waves through the door:
see the law-abiding Mahommedans,
flooding in from the wild steppe

to sing *La ilaha illa Allah* in a slow monotone;
see the foreigners hauling their alien art
along the rippled path from the Ligurian Gulf—
they chant their gruff
Pater Noster in a language now dead;
or see a distant land's exiles

with their *Sh'ma Israel*, who learn
by heart the scroll's trusted marks;
see the conquerors of panoramas
and oceans, who proclaim *Otche Nash* all around,
vesting all hope in hammer and banner;
see the direct heirs of dire Martin

spreading his simple writ, *Vater Unser*;
see the fertile vale's natives embracing
Noah's ancient haven, Monophysites
honoring the Most High, each one
ardently affirming *Hayr Mer*, each cherishing
a grief sadder than low intellect can know...

all of them once traveled here, but now—
a free museum that's open eight to eight,
where polyglot inscriptions intermix
with frescoes and the mihrab, where God
hears, with equal heed, entreaties
from all the fractured hosts of Man.

"Homer's Been Shredded to Quotes"

Homer's been shredded to quotes for the billboards:
his scrolls unfurl and spread
to paper the walls, his hexameters bobbing—balloons
we tied to silk threads—

the lines drop down a vale, then hop a mountain.
Still the guttural "h," cued
by a curl, proves the song's provenance:
the Golden Age. The lyre's still true.

Swords aren't rusting from gore, hearths keep smoking,
and the ox bathing in sun's
azure still stomps the black earth with its hooves.
But the ancient cup

of suffering was drunk and emptied for all time.
Its burning, bitter dregs
of grief and woe will be sweet and cool to me,
the Iron Age's worthy stepson.

In August the Stars Shoot through the Night Air

In August the stars shoot through the night air
to earth, one after the other.

Heaven's cloisters are crowded.
The oceans' mirrors lure stars, each beckoned
by those open spaces, or by the golden
soil still virgin—the earth's

pull stuffs them into its full purse.
In August the flies go buzzerk—
surely they're fearful
of the nearly-here freezes.
In August the dawdlers finally increase
their pace and make haste; they gird

themselves for death, obsolescence, or oblivion—
recalling, in day-long portions,
adolescence, adulthood, and dotage—
to which each age is equally
subject. Their lips are laden with this entreaty,
their eyes with this vision:

What's that I see there? An oak or a maple?
My body is wearied; my soul crippled.
Reason was split up for spare parts.
Its pieces can't be rendered whole.
The old notebook's not yet full,
the new one not yet begun.

In central Russia tornadoes are so rare
That old men can't recall a single one.
But the people have their own kind of sign
despite what the calendar indicates:
"Whenever Alipio's linden blossoms,
Sysoy's roof will be blown away."

Alipio was a celebrated icon-maker.
He carved a reliquary on linden board.
Prayer lights of Orthodox truths
at his disposal, laying out on prepared board.
So he overcame relentlessly, in mind and spirit
the quasi-chaos of the universe.

Centered on Sukhanikhe on the Klyazma,
a tornado suddenly swept hundreds of pines.
It caught careless campers from the resort
off guard and injured seven of them.
One woman with a girl hid in a car.
The car was crushed—they perished there.

The research of Lorenz and Mandelbrot
is so astonishing it's hard to take in.
However, there is one simple proverb
from time immemorial current in Russia:
"Butterflies happily flutter their wings—
while angels are ready to raise a storm!"

Sysoi never tired of asperging the desert
of fire-breathing passions with the dew of humility—
he dispelled the demons of despair
by walking barefoot across the burning sand.
Unwittingly—with the slightest of efforts—
he suddenly resurrected a dying girl.

Weeds have long since grown in the corn.
Summer half whitens in the chaff.
Meanwhile the clever clover takes heart
In fields left fallow and gone brown.

You, crackerjack identical frogs,
multiply fruitfully in a quantum fog,
as if all of this is your own playground—
ontologs over the meadowland.

Overhead, stiffening into a flat dance are
pine trees stars pine trees stars pine trees,
and below wandering around are phlox,
asters roses phlox roses asters.

They are all brothers and sisters to one another—
asters pine trees roses stars phlox.
In the sight of God are we really such monsters?—
Nothing but sheep, goats, goats, sheep.

Sweetness of the sweetest slumber
Sweet is sweet is sweet is dream.
Brimming tumbler, brambled tundra
Landscape virginal, serene,
Self and self no more asunder—
Sleeper, you are spun of steam.
In your tender, mortal peace,
In your unpolluted languor,
House-like, I would gladly shelter,
Far from dour, devouring seas,
Far from surreptitious beasts,
Far from every human hunger,
Save your mortal tenderness.
This is how a pearl might linger
Twined within its taut flesh-folds,
How a tongue twister might tingle,
Snakelike, as its trail unfurled,
If you let slip out a riddle
Without answer, shorn of light:
To the world it is not given
To ascend that ringing height.
I alone may catch a glimmer
Of your subtle world of sleep;
Why the brackish bottom shimmers
Vastly darkling, broad but steep,
I alone know why green crabs
Hide behind a stone in horror,
And why you, with clenching hands—
Dearest slave—lie here before me,
Forehead bowed to take the wound
Of despair's perseverance,
And the calm of separation
Looms as surely as a flood,
And the sounds of passage hasten—
Lion's roar and stallion's thud.

The Snowman *translated by the Chicago Translation Workshop*

Two of them building a snowman.
They hug the lump, sliding on the ice.
Their fingers stiff, the snow turning dark.
Can't leave him headless like this.

One of us has a fever of 104, the other
Is OK. A true friend, he keeps calling me.
"Ask him for homework, and also please
Ask him why he keeps telling the snowman

Not to melt, but instead come into my room."
He's enormous, I don't need him around.
First he is headless, then he has a head.
The pools he leaves on the floor are dark.

Quarantine *translated by Margo Shohl Rosen*

Only a man more brave than Sly Stallone
or his picture over the bedstead
could look in the gray of the nurses' eyes
without pleas and fright,

but we search those pupils for diagnosis
not believing the starched robe hides
next to nothing at all, no more at most
than bra and panties.

The quiet hour, o boys, has worn you out,
at quiet hour you gnaw your sheets,
at quiet hour we scrutinize
the windows' grates.

From Far Off

You shudder again: desert, heat,
the wind writes the Qur'an on the sand,
and the turbaned camel drover reads it
with his two camels, his wife and godfather.
They stand as long as seven hours
and leave their souls far behind,
beyond the dune, along a creaking path,
carrying the horizon on their backs.

translated by J. Kates

Life cannot be parted from the sea—
hurrying headlong in tears into tears,
to mix it with blood, human speech,
entering, *Sesame*, that underwater altar.

The pearls' sunrise, rippling, enslaved,
the damp allure of the speckled stone
and the sodden singing of the sirens—
all for the sake of dreams, instead of words.

And the teardrop, flaring, says,
how everything, unchanging, flows.
And the sea, a sight for sore eyes,
that death hath tended in its scope.

translated by Alex Cigale

The beetle, raised up by the ghostly waves,
Seaweed's innards on the laps of boulders,
The tundra, untouched by footpaths,
Emerging just the other side of the porch,
Languid perch and Crucian carp swim there,
In the aquarium-like constructions of icons,
A beautiful youth carries in his palms,
As though an oil lamp, a window into the house.

1960

To A. Eremin

To return to the Creator his gifts
Wrapped in retinal transparency
And the net of deadwood in which
The caught imprisoned void trembles,
And the anti-cupola of the liquid sky,
And the anti-chalice of the anthill
With its swarming squirming surface,
Corpuscularly wave-beset.

1972

Hiring freeze, takeover, foretaste of profits—
Half-game half-lesson for the benefit of the populace.
Offset and futures, spot and forward—
Half-game half-accounting, as they say,
The capital was put to work. Half-game half-treachery,
Half-vice half-deviousness—this list is incomplete,
That it at times be selfless, if nothing else,
This half-game half-play of indenture to the muses.

2013

Historian

I bear witness: a clear gaze is granted
not to man, alas, but only to the sky.
And only in the morning. But now—just haze.
The doomed, unfathomable city's been blown up.

It lies, extinct, in ruins and in ashes.
The doors to History have opened in its place.
(Those doors of which there is no trace, just hinges.)
What are you tempesting about, ever hungry?

The prophets, who have made it out (of their minds),
rejoice: "It's come to pass!" And limping slightly
in one of our sunny provinces, I take no heed
of the triumphant chorus.

The day, upon a time, will write about its wards
the way one makes up a list for the market.
Let the flames of prophecy envelop the banal.
Blessed be the humdrum word.

Historian! Describe it to the world
before it happens otherwise. While on the trail,
do not complain of having a hard time.
For what is man?—Narcissus staring in the River Lethe.

Sigh not. Composed and unperturbed,
keep up your work. Amidst the dying nations,
amidst the cities which the wars have craved,
you are a midwife at childbirth.

The ninth month of the year two thousand one.
I testify: I have accepted, Clio,
your matchless gift—a loyal chronicler,
a sleepless sentinel tormented by his gout.

September 11, 2001

* * *

O the river grows wild grows black grows night,
beats a hasty retreat, its banks are in pain,
autumn grabbed by the throat, gripped tight by the hand;
the coat check is empty, nothing is checked.

O the platform grows dark grows damp, dropping ash
round the trash bins, briefly coughing up storms,
the girl grabs her ticket, catching the night's only train,
streets shed their names and get numbered instead.

In the world's other half, I'm fumbling for change
in the chasms of my coat, deep as boredom can be,
this country isn't my size, like a hand-me-down rag,
though in the heat of the moment I couldn't care less.

Perhaps on the surface it's cleaner, but the lining's the same,
the same railroad hysterics, but I am not blind;
better to simply not be, than be not with you.
Life is the death of philosophy. Forever and all.

Either an old man nods off in an autumn day's breach,
bent in the window, about to sink like a ship,
or a boy's forced to play scales late into the night,
or a door has slammed shut, and I ceased to exist.

You say it creaks? Well, take the paper,
Fold it into a diligent square,
Adjust it well so that this door here
Won't open up when it so cares.

Unprepossessing urban snowflakes
Flutter about in the stone well
And that is all, it seems, but wait—
There is one little debt left still.

For man has still another chore:
To recollect all that he didn't,
On the way, say, to the drugstore,
In silence's pulsating rhythms.

And, from under the drugstore's cobra,
To look at evil's joyous hour
Without evil, not out of kindness,
But because life is over.

A Text of Appalling Strength

it's not proper to talk about how how much you love someone

it's not proper to talk about how a good man did you wrong
since he has to go on living among other good people

go on living

it's not proper to say you feel bad
and maybe it's not even proper to feel bad at all
after all, somebody out there feels fine
and somebody else feels a lot worse

perhaps it's best to say *mimimi*

or something about global tragedies, injustice, our victories

it's not proper to say there's half a carton of kefir
and a half pack of cigarettes left, but look
on the bright side—it's alright if you can't afford cigarettes
listen to that cough
it is high time, brothers and sisters, to think of your health

on the bright side, the world is overflowing with love
sometimes it's awkward to slip out from under respectable fingers
hearts get overloaded, switch to safety mode

mimimi

cups runneth over, poison drips
the earth shudders

(and how was it for him? how was it for her?)

this text of appalling strength turned out very weak
and consequently not proper

you must not confuse poetic and epic heroes
this one's epic
he descends into hell
he believes that he is an explorer
he descends into hell and he doesn't look back
wow

colonies of coral, building up their framework,
almost always die out as they hit twenty-five, leaving
behind them something like a skeleton, where later
invisible weavers ceaselessly patch fabrics
right up to the moment when they're drawn in
by the damp rot, and I'll finally cease to be.

packers of brain into the skull boxes
at first coil the rope, yielding and mobile,
then lay out paths within its curvatures,
set down on the bottom, adjust it as needed,
and pull the shutters to from above.

glass-blowers of the lungs let out their breath bit by bit,
gardeners of intestinal cavities set out seedlings,
spinners of nerves moisten their threads
with saliva, tear them off and draw them out again,
and all of them once were earth, but became me,
and when they cease to be me, they'll be earth once more.

They used to kill the kikes, burn them, bury them in the woods, in gulches,
in moats, empty wells, cesspits, cattle burial
grounds, sink them in rivers and lakes.

Blood stagnated in the murderers' tracks,
dogs would taste the
pinkish ice in the morning.

The first consequences were in evidence by the next summer:
the souls of the dead crowded out the spirits of the place in nearly
every habitat.

Mermaids and sprites were gone. The Treasurers vanished. Will-
o'-the-wisps went out. Empty fields, baths, mudrooms. Sheep
unattended.

Nature had become a synagogue:
rustling and whispers.
A shtetl in every cloud.

As soon as a star would appear, the Jordan in the sky, chariots fording,
then the trumpets, fiddles, hats, skirts, sweet bread.

*Take the sword away from the Iranian Lion,
hand him a book*

—Boris Khersonsky

Mani the prophet was starved.
Mazdak was buried alive.
St. Matthew was burned at the stake.
Hassan and Hussein were killed.
Sayyid Ali Muhammad, called the Bab,
was shot in Tebriz.
In other words, Iran did more
for the nonproliferation of world religions
than all the United States put together
for the nonproliferation of nuclear arms.

A handgun in your throat, blitzkriegs in your head, lips folded into the barrel, six-shooter mechanism, trigger under your left knee, good morning, my angel. Good morning, and here's a book of martyrs for you, write in my name with slender fingers, carefully, between Olga and Yaroslavna, and leave the date open—for now, we've yet to see how long I have to die here in your bright chamber on Vernardsky Road, House Number Four. Peek in the fridge, see—winter, see—ice on the Yauza, snow on the shelves, children play a game of Karbyshev*, three of the figures came out especially well, but that girl with outstretched hands trying to stop the icy streams by far the best. Peek in the oven, see—summer, see—the fires of Gehenna have lined up in two rows and wave at me and beckon with their even flames, "We wait for you," they say, "come here, we miss you," see—the greasy blackness of Ukranian black soil, the prickly crumbles of the old Inturist hotel, the smell of sour cabbage from "At Schweik's" vats, the summer veranda, umbrellas, a handsome lad in tight clothes barfing out meat pies and beer in the backyard, twenty-four hours till the plague, and he's the first to go. I feel that I'm no longer scared, I feel that I'm not yet in pain. Peek into the book of martyrs—see, autumn, see, Stallone's on the third line and Schwarzenegger on the sixth, and see, there's my name too, you wrote it in this morning in between Olga and Yaroslavna, and now I'm no longer afraid of getting lost or losing my mind, yes, can I, my angel, can I just forget myself, while blood trickles in a tiny stream and my head only just begins to spin, a butterfly grows in my throat, a brass band plays inside my head, like fingers do with bedsheets my lips seize the air and rip it to shreds, take that heavy-loaded mechanism, triggers on both wrists, and ratchet it tighter.

*Dmitry Karbyshev, the translator's great-great grandfather, was a Russian general killed by the Germans at a POW camp by having water poured on him in the middle of winter. He was regarded a national hero during Soviet times.

Sarin, Soman, Tobun.

Sarin, Soman, Tobun.

It was fun

times,

despite the fact

that Brian Jones just drowned.

But the Stones got Ronnie instead,

got slicker, tighter, more

eternal and marketable.

I heard of Brian

at the Chemical Defense class

at my med school

where Coronel Butov

taught us of Sarin, Soman, and Tobun, and

the acetylcholinesterase effect.

We, young and happy and aware

that even the Vermacht

abstained from using gas

on the counterattacks

by Vyazma and Bryansk.

Now when it is all over,

the Cold War and the Star Wars,

the Berlin Wall,

and the Coronel,

decorated for Kursk,

lies at the Vvedensky Old German

Cemetery, where Coronel Gritsman

also lies, I feel shame.

Shame, as I order Chinese from the corner

of 91st and Amsterdam,

tickets to Crimea,

and remember our 1995

lovely Venice vacation,

a few hours' drive from Sarajevo.

I look at today's *Times* front page,
an *Izvestiya* interview with President Assad
and see the plastic bags with children,
froth diagnostically stuck
to their lips,
in the suburbs of Damascus.
Plastic bags, like in the supermarket
frozen foods department, only bigger.
And I think there is no progress in the arts,
which is natural.
And it's coming back to me
what Colonel Butov taught us
about Sarin, Soman, and Tobun
in Moscow; us
and officers of the Syrian Baath
the same age we were.

Anna Halberstadt

Walking Through the Old Arbat Alone

Chrysler-like rust and gray-colored
symmetrical marble fans
meant to be parachutes
on the walls of the Aeroport metro station
are elegant.
In Moscow, Art Deco
is always underground.
Teenagers with sallow complexions
in skin-tight pants on spaghetti-thin legs
are giggling.
A plump woman with dark stripes
showing raccoonlike
among bleached blond strands
is looking hopefully into the eyes
of her gangster boyfriend:
shaved head,
large red hands clutching her waist
possessively.
Moscow had changed irrevocably
inexplicably
in the last twenty years.
Roomy halls of the new Sheremetevo airport
cave-like cafés serving "dabl kapuchinos"
ads of plastic surgery clinics for the elites
on walls.
Foreign cars are framing every side street
in the Old Arbat.
A street sculpture of Okudzhava walking
through the gate
looks larger than life
and he is less ethnic looking
favorite bard who had proclaimed Arbat
as his fatherland.

Chansonnier of modest and intimate tunes
 drops of spring water in the parched landscape
 of the Soviet sixties and seventies.
 I remember the May day
 us browsing through used books
 on a street counter
 stopping to look at exotic turtles and fish
 in aquariums stacked on top of one another
 in the windows of the zoological store
 sitting down for a smoke
 on a bench in a courtyard
 you breaking down and saying
 I would never love you
 like I loved Kolia
 my first boyfriend
 (it turned out to be true).
 Back then I was clutching your hand
 I wanted to love you back
 your tears a gift
 like the nightingale's song
 for the dying Chinese emperor
 in my favorite fairy tale.
 Now I am back
 we are both in this city again
 on opposite sides of it
 like two ships saluting each other
 and passing
 once again
 in the dark.

Old Arbat pedestrian shopping street in Moscow
Okudzhava Russian poet and singer-songwriter

Igor Irtenev

translated by J. Kates

In the central terminal
 Amid the classic architecture
 Stood a man, a beau ideal
 Drinking some disgusting tincture.

Unprepossessing in his stature,
 A visage rough and hard as flint,
 His clothing of a simple nature:

Galoshes

Belt

And underpants.

He positively reeked with meaning
 I'd never thought about before,
 And somewhere little ones were dreaming,
 and somewhere music ruled the floor.

Masculine gender, he stood out,
 First person singular, indeed.
 Radiating from his brow
 Unimaginable freedom.

Observation

A sound mind
 In a sound bod.
 One out of two
 Ain't too bad.

from **Venetian Triptych**

1.

The longer I've abstained from Venice,
the closer it beckons, more distinctly.
Memory, let off its chain to track it,
brings back a wine cork in its teeth.

Quercus suber, no great rarity—
smells of violets, water music carted:
I recall Chianti, ingathering grape....
Though this year's was a bad harvest.

The blend of smalto, stone, and metal,
grown dull from the thirst of terracotta,
the Venice all-night party slumbered,
kept out of habit opening her mouth.

At night, the wooly moths went
crashing into the dusty wine glasses
because from Piedmont and Tuscany
the better vintage is yet to arrive.

I've never been there but recall
Piazza San Marco, the long way home,
my love and her long flowing tresses,
and the woman I had made pregnant.

2.

Black Death singing *Oh, Sole*,
oh, Sole mio... midnight swims past—
misshapen, like a fava stringbean,
and the bridge sucking in its stomach
fears, more than pain, being tickled.

The pier's floorboards creak and whistle,
and the yawning maws of the coffee ewers,
and you, my friend, so devilishly gorgeous,
but daylight's fast approaching and the hoards
of Boschs and Medicis reveal the new Gehenna....

You'll turn an old gramophone on—
and will need neither whores nor pets;
play with its spyglass and then
you'll be charmed by the one-eyed black sun.

You don't know yet on which side
of the disc—the played or the clean one:
the Mongol goes out for a drinking spree
and slaughters the pianist for an encore.

You'll turn the gramophone on quietly
again—and the Martian wonder will wheeze:
"I don't care if you break my heart,
for the household needs dishware more."

A coachman freezes to death but soufflé is
chilled while the raven is turning its rounds,
and the disc is getting higher than high
with a buzz, with a booze, with a wheeze.

This goblin, tubercular light
changing into sound—
violet, sweet, tearless, like
a Yalta onion.

On the Tele-box, as in a Telegrave,
on some other shores,
pushkin and gogol invaded Crimea,
while Shevchenko is still on the run.

And a second squadron underground
won't leave its barracks,
and they serve macaroni
in a prison near Bakhchysarai.

The sound doubles like a bell's
entering under the skin; it's good that
no one can tell
me from an enemy yet.

Route (A Ballad-Parable)

...And at the wheel the dead man sat.
 (We left behind the buoys and bunks,
 the trestles of the camp, drove up
 the mountain pass....) The dead man hummed.

Gargantua, lion, man of might,
 this bold and fine Armenian,
 a braggart, true, but a decent sort:
 philanderer and family man.

"Am I for real a terrible guy?"
 Like a beast, the car's brakes howl....
 Death by ulcer will seal up
 Grigor's eyes six months from now.

...I know a half-year's more, he
 knows more than any living being—
 toward death, not knowing the road, the car
 drags like an oxcart, unseeing.

The Armenian fractures his tongue
 trying to turn me around: "Give it up!"
 His Russian's poor but he understands
 and pants, native-style, at "perhaps."

And I, six months after divorce,
 no man's, look out the window, see
 nature in clouds: it's all the same
 to her. It's all the same to me....

And roots are lifting up in humps,
 the world-jungle with its crowds
 of gorillas.... And I, dead-lipped:
 "Stop the car. I'm ready now...."

Step one—throw off your clothes. Or just
 hike up your skirt. Butterflies (read:

the tap dance of skin) and after-
 thought: "so paradise must be

an everlasting orgasm...."
 Grigor, Grigory, Grishenka!
 God-beautiful, a human demon,
 dirt-poor. One of the mountains thrust

its heights into me (a trait of all
 things that live—inflicting pain).
 I'm not beneath a man—we're one,
 the same: and poverty is our name.

If only I could live among
 mountains standing erect, resembling....
 Among them, draining me, drained, you
 were more alive than anyone living.

But, daughter of Eve, carrion,
 having bitten my lip from pain,
 I waited for your climax there
 inside your coffin-car, O man.

Sinful! More sinful than Magdalene
 I prayed, beseeching: "Lord! Faster!"
 And—that was it. I left the car,
 the man asleep—king of the beasts.

O, that precipitous mountain road!
 I stood transfixed there on the edge.
 "It's only half a step, proud woman,
 and you're in hell. Or else in heaven.

Half a torment is all it takes,
 as you yourself will come to find,
 since science isn't enough for the soul,
 and God isn't enough for the mind.

Go on!" But I was still alive
 and not wholly alone when I heard
 the dead man shout, "Let's go!" from the depths
 of the car where he yawned and stirred.

And the coffin shook: below, potholes;
above, the sky; to the left, the cliff;
there, where we're neither womenfolk
nor menfolk, where there's no difference.

Everything grew higher, closer—
and suddenly a pass was open
before us, ridge on ridge crested
in snow: chain that none had broken.

But people love to stir up trouble
and toasted us with good home brew,
and I felt in my bones: I must
drink this cup to the bottom now.

And so I slipped away from the table,
and climbed up to the highest peak
and shrieked to the sky: "What am I?
And with whom, if—a human being?"

I knew: knowledge itself is torment
but also sweetness unsurpassed....
And from the sky came not a sound,
and I stood there. Centuries passed.

More exactly, they stood still.
The clouds about my feet shone
as radiant as snow. And every
one of us was all alone.

Our Creator, His creation:
we're all solitary together.
That loneliness is absolute
and holds sway over everything,

I understood there on that crag.
I drained that cup to the bitter end.
And with that torment I trudged back
toward a man who was still living.

Ilya Kaminsky

Mother Throws Milk Bottles at Soldiers

Momma Galya Armolinskaya, 63, is having more sex than you and I.
When she walks across her balcony

when the soldier "Oh" stands up
another stands,
then the whole battalion—

we try not to look at her breasts
but they are everywhere
nipples like bullets.

Fat Momma in a small town, queen of bullshit!
Whiskey keeps her conscience clean.

She aims the milk bottles at security checkpoints—
on a yellow bicycle

she flies over the country like
a tardy milkman,
a rim of ice on her bottle caps.

Galya Armolinskaya, you are the luckiest Momma in the nation!
Your iron bicycle
tears with bright whiskey courage
through an advancing rank of soldiers into daylight. You pedal barefoot
wearing just shorts.

And let the law go whistle.