

SAMPLER

*Kamchatkan Bear
with No Ice Floe*

Also by Marina Tsvetaeva in Christopher Whyte's translations

Moscow in the Plague Year (Archipelago)

Milestones (Shearsman Books)

After Russia (The First Notebook) (Shearsman Books)

After Russia (The Second Notebook) (Shearsman Books)

Youthful Verses (Shearsman Books)

Head on a Gleaming Plate (Shearsman Books)

The Scale By Which You Measure Me (Shearsman Books)

Roland's Horn (Shearsman Books)

SAMPLE

Marina Tsvetaeva

*Kamchatkan Bear
with No Ice Floe*

Poems 1926–1936

*translated from the Russian by
Christopher Whyte*

Shearsman Books

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INTRODUCTION

In the decade that followed her move from Prague to Paris at the end of October 1925, Marina Tsvetaeva produced far less poetry than when she was based in the Czech lands from August 1922 onwards, or in the momentous, cataclysmic years spent in Moscow in the wake of the Bolshevik takeover at the end of October 1917. She herself came up with a variety of reasons why prose became at least as important as poetry in her output during this period – for example, in this letter to Anna Tesková in Prague (dated November 24th 1933):

I've practically stopped writing poems, and the reason is: I can't limit myself to one poem – they come to me in families, cycles, like funnels or even whirlpools, into which I *fall*, consequently – it's a matter of *time*. I can't write prose and poetry turn and turn about, I couldn't even if I were free. I am – *concentric*. And, forgetting I'm a poet, they take my poems nowhere, no-one accepts even a line. [...]

The *énigmes* are making a prose writer of me. The prose, of course, is mine, and the best thing in the world next to poems is lyrical prose, but nonetheless – next to poems!

So I do write from time to time, or rather, I note lines down as they arrive, but more often I *don't* write them down – I release them back “ins Blau” (sometimes “Graue”, especially in Paris in November).

Sequences take on a particular importance during the Paris years, often as reactions to a specific event, such as the suicide of Vladimir Mayakovsky in April 1930. Writing to Vera Bunin, the wife of the Nobel prizewinner, from the resort on the Mediterranean coast where she and her son Georgy (nicknamed Murr after E.T.A. Hoffmann's cat) spent the summer of 1935, Tsvetaeva expanded on the change (letter dated August 20th):

Now for something else. In recent years I've written very little poetry. The people who turned poems down set me writing prose. As long as *Freedom of Russia* was still going, I could calmly write a long poem, knowing they would take it. (They took – *everything*, for which I'll be grateful to them till the day I die – and afterwards, if there is an afterwards.) But when it came to a stop – only Rudnev was left, and he immediately said: We won't publish long poems. For 12 pages, we need 15 poets.

Where was I to take my bigger things? That meant the end of my *Perekop* – seven months' work and twelve years' love – that's why the *Poem of the Tsar's Family* was never (and most likely never will be) finished. That meant the end of my French *Molodets* – *Le Gary* – for the same reason: *no use for long poems*. And I had to earn money – to justify my existence *for the outside world*. So I started writing – prose. I honestly *love* it, I have no regrets. But all the same, somewhat forced, being sentenced to write in prose.

Naturally, verses would come, but – like in a dream. Sometimes – most of the time – they went. After all, poems don't write themselves. And the little free time I had (taking Mur to and from school, housekeeping, attending to the stove, the whole untrustworthy mess of everyday life) went on prose, seeing that *physically* prose requires more time – as it does more paper – it has a different *physics*.

Bits and pieces found their way into my exercise book. Sometimes 8 lines, sometimes 4, sometimes just 2. Now and again lines would break through, or else I fell into the stream. That meant sequences, but nonetheless – never completed, gaps everywhere: here just one line, here a whole quatrain i.e. in the last analysis – a draft.

Perekop is a long poem about an attempt by the retreating White forces towards the end of 1920 to block access to the Crimean peninsula for their communist opponents, by whom they were

vastly outnumbered. Tsvetaeva's husband Sergey Efron fought on the losers' side and was subsequently evacuated to Istanbul with his comrades. As he progressively transferred his sympathies to Stalin's regime, his wife was no longer allowed to consult the diaries he had kept at that time. The poem concerning the fate of the last Tsar's family, from which she would read extracts in the homes of friends, has survived only in parts.

If some items featured here have dates spanning a period of as long as four years, that is because they emerged in the wake of a determined effort on Tsvetaeva's part to at last make something of the scattered notes and jottings which were all she had. She continues, in the same letter to Vera Bunin:

In the end I took fright. What happens if I – die? What will remain of these years? (Why was I alive?) And – a different fear: what if I've forgotten how it's done? If I'm no longer, that is, capable of writing a *whole* piece: *completing* it. What if, till the end of my days, I'm doomed to – fragments?

So, this summer, I began finishing things off. I just took my exercise book, and started with the first page. Something got done: completed. In other words, a series of poems now *exist*. But I also noted that in these last years I've become more demanding: in terms of both sound and sense. Vera! For a whole *day* (at the table, with *no* table, by the sea, while washing the dishes – or my hair – and so on) I seek an adjective, i.e. ONE word: a *day* – and sometimes I *don't* find it.

She had already referred to these manic hunts for the right word in a letter to Pasternak (July 15th 1927):

So what's the point of so much work? Copying out list upon list upon list – in search of *one* word, often not even a rhyme, a word in the middle of a verse, because I can't find it, it absolutely must sound thus –, and mean this –.

Tsvetaeva shared her resolve to 'finish things off' with Anna Tesková (letter dated 18th–20th February 1935). *After Russia* was the title of the last collection she would ever publish, brought out by subscription in Paris in 1928. It contained nothing written after her departure from the Czech lands:

The first thing would be, in answer to your letter, setting in order all my poems since *After Russia* – there are lots, but almost all lack the finishing touches: I never managed. But now – Alya has left (CLEANING UP), Murr and S[erгей] Ya[kovlevich] get sick.

But – it makes no difference: I'll do my best. It has to be done, so that something remains of these ~~years~~ besides Alya's orange-tinted cheeks and the turquoise buttons in her ears.

I'll get it done.

Since – none of us can know – *when*.

In her correspondence with Pasternak, who had remained in the Soviet Union, Tsvetaeva offered a more intimate and perhaps more troubling explanation for the reduction in her output of poetry. The change in the nature of her inspiration, perhaps even its progressive drying up, was the inevitable consequence of a lack of emotional involvement – of the passionate attachments, with or without physical realisation, which had fuelled her lyrical production in the past (letter from the middle of February 1928):

I want to confess to you some terrible <VARIANT: horrific> things, in which, as in everything we didn't bring about, we are innocent. There are three horrific things, and they add up to one: for the first time in my life – *I can't be bothered*, for the first time in my life I try to get out of writing, precisely what others experience when they are pregnant – indifference, lack of motivation, living at a level that sinks till it becomes generalised nausea – a state I only know of from being told about it, for I lived all of my (3 x 9 = 27) twenty-

seven months as I had always done (NB! don't kid yourself that this is impossible, because 99 times out of 100 it's impossible, my case is the hundredth – I'm not included in the figures, <VARIANT: I break the rules> this has been going on for about 4 years now). So, I can't be bothered with my notebook, more and more often I escape, looking for reasons and, quite simply, finding more than I need. It's not Russia, Boris, but maybe love. When things didn't work out in love (invariably), I got revenge, my writing took revenge on that person (if you knew how it was with *The Tsar-Maiden* and *On a Red Horse* – with everything!) The last thing I've done – *Attempt at a Room* – is practically lifeless. The people surrounding me declare naively: 'I liked *The Poem of the End* (or *of the Mountain*) better'... as if it hadn't been written upon bones (not only mine). As Asya used to say when we were children, I've simply "lost heart". Since 1924, Boris – four years – not one single daybreak, not one single expectation, no farewells. Yes, there was Rilke – and your arrival, but all of that was still to happen, or had already happened in the Heavenly Realm, it was all beneath my skull. Don't take me for something I am not, I need *very little*, to know, for example, that I will *set eyes on you* within a certain number of months. But to know. To be waiting. And right now I am waiting for no-one. That's what's at the bottom of it. The second thing – the absence of interlocutors, always in an alien circle, stewing in my own juice. It rises from me, falls back into me, collapses. A fountain. When I am – a river. I need banks, *past* which, and a perhaps inexistent sea, *into which*. I need something bending over to look into me, branches moving differently (with me!) and houses standing differently: *not* standing. In my shoulders, in my ribs, in my head I feel I am a river, which is nothing other than a SWIMMER, carrying other swimmers along. There are no rivers in Meudon, and in Meudon I'm not a river, I've been *blocked*.

Meudon was the Paris suburb where Tsvetaeva and her family lived from spring 1927 to spring 1932. She returned to the topic in her next letter to Pasternak (March 4th 1928);

Boris, I have always lived from love. That was my sole mover. Every single one, all of them named, though they were more often dogs than fathers. Now – it's been going on for a long time – for fully four years I have loved nobody, given nobody a kiss – 4 years. To begin with (*The Poem of the End, the Mountain, The Ratcatcher, Theseus*) I lived off old gunpowder. *A Letter from the Sea* was a game (with the sea!) [...] By the time I wrote *Phaedra*, I was in an absolute dead end, totally indifferent to her fate / to everything about her, just that. The drought had started. I broke out of it with the *Letter to Rilke*, the only thing apart from *The Ratcatcher* which I *had to write* in these last years. If Rilke were still living, you would have come.

Since 1925, not one single line of verse. Boris, I'm drying out: not as a poet, but as a person, love was the source. The poet will serve me till my dying moment, someone living at the service of someone dead, oh, the poet won't give up, he cries out and weeps, *but I will know*. Living like this simply isn't right for me, in Bohemia there was a well, and a bucket, and trees, and *poverty*, and *everything* you know and don't know about, I really loved Bohemia through and through, everything comes from there. Now there's a yearning with no object: everything shoots past, a day cheated of song. I chase them, I chase them away, if I'm called, I go, if to the museum, then to the museum, if to a lecture, then to a lecture, but I need none of this, I need the physical beating of someone else's heart in my ear, sometimes I envy doctors.

I need my own soul on someone else's breath, to drink myself. The arid stretch, which initially caused me such joy, is ruining me.

The phrase about ‘not one single line of verse’ is not quite accurate. With her daughter Ariadne (known as Alya), who was thirteen years old, and her son Georgy, aged barely nine months, Tsvetaeva arrived in Paris on November 1st 1925. They were joined by Sergey on Christmas Eve. Their quarters were one of altogether three rooms in a fourth floor flat at 8 Rue Rouvet in the 19th arrondissement where Olga Kolbasina-Chernova, a friend from Prague days, lived with her three daughters. Tsvetaeva sent Tesková the following grim description (letter dated December 7th):

The neighbourhood where we are living is horrendous – like something out of a penny dreadful called *The Slums of London*. A rotting canal, factory chimneys blocking out the sky, soot and noise everywhere (loaded trucks). *Nowhere* you can walk – not so much as a little bush. There is a park, but it’s forty minutes on foot, and too cold to go. Therefore we walk along the rotting canal. [...] I go nowhere, as I don’t have anything to wear, or money to buy something. [...] I’m invited to a whole range of places, but cannot show myself because I have neither a silk dress, nor stockings, nor polished shoes (which are the “uniform” here). And so I sit at home being accused of “pride” on every side.

Living in such a cramped space, Tsvetaeva had nowhere to write and practically no time to herself. This predicament accounts for ‘Cut the commotion, fame!’, her personal version of the celebrated essay *A Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf (who can appear so privileged in comparison):

Heaven to me’s a place
where no-one ever speaks!

Casanova, rotter,
shopkeeper – mere details!
God to me’s whoever’s
able to provide –

time's running out – my days
are counted! – what I need
so that I can get peace:
four walls, all to myself!

In March 1926 she spent more a fortnight in London with Prince Dmitry Svyatopolk-Mirsky (1890–1939), author of an authoritative history in English of Russian literature, and a vital source of information about Russian culture for the Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid. Starting at the end of April, Tsvetaeva passed the summer in St Gilles-sur-Vie in the Breton Vendée, where she wrote several of the stupendous letters she contributed to the three way correspondence, in two languages, Russian and German, between herself, Pasternak and Rilke (they have appeared in English as *Letters Summer 1926*). From early October the family moved to another Paris suburb, Boulevard Verd de Saint-Julien in Bellevue, where Tsvetaeva composed a letter in verse to Rilke, 'Happy New Year!' on receiving news of his death at the very end of December. Starting in April 1927 they lived for five years in Avenue de Jeanne d'Arc (Tsvetaeva must have relished the name!) in the suburb of Meudon, which was where, in 1905, Rilke had worked as the secretary of the sculptor Rodin.

Accounts of the penury and indigence which beset the poet's family in the early 1930s make for painful reading. In his memoir of Tsvetaeva, Mark Slonim (1894–1976), one of the editors of *Freedom of Russia*, who would later recall with pride his willingness to publish even the most challenging of Tsvetaeva's poems, has this to say:

In 1931 M[arina] I[vanovna]'s situation grew much worse in every respect. She got sick, anemia and a poor diet meant her hair fell out, she had absolutely no money, and wrote to Tesková: "This is my life – living on credit in the shop, often lacking one franc and fifteen centimes to go to Paris – while working ceaselessly, it's so unfair. What ruined me was putting up with things, my indomitable pride, as though I could cope with everything: picking up,

throwing out, carrying, bearing it all.” Things got even worse in 1932: to save money they moved from Meudon to another suburb, Clamart, changing flat twice before they settled in the working-class neighbourhood of Issy les Moulineaux. *Freedom of Russia* shut down, in Prague a reduction of the “pro-Russian campaign” terminated her monthly subsidy of 500 crowns (about 400 francs). There were months when the only income the family could rely on was 5 francs a day which Alya earned by knitting caps. “We are slowly dying of hunger”, M. I. said. They could not have survived without the assistance of friends, in particular of Salomeya Nikolaevna Halpern.

Having to come up with rent in advance every three months at the ‘terme’ became a nightmare. For Tsvetaeva the word acquired a positively Dantesque ring. She wrote to Teskova (letter dated April 8th 1932):

A new address, as you can see, which means the end of one life and the start of another. We moved out and in on March 31st – we were moving, or rather, lugging things around, till yesterday. The reason for the move was the impossibility of paying the previous rent, our new flat is 1200 francs a year cheaper, the cheapest of all those we saw in Meudon and in Clamart – minus one room (mine), without a bath, in other words 2½ rooms and a kitchen. The half is where I put my table and my books but there’s no room for a bed, so I sleep in the kitchen which is big and bright [...] We lived for five years in Meudon. In Meudon Murr grew up. In Meudon the forest was three minutes away, and the station too. In Meudon out of ten houses nine were old. In Meudon the king sometimes hunted.

Clamart is new, flat, boring. There are trams. And important stores. Maybe *in time* I can learn to love it, but –

The family switched flats in Clamart in the middle of January 1933 then, in the middle of July 1934, moved to Rue Jean Baptiste Potin in Vanves, which Tsvetaeva and her son were not to leave until summer 1938. She told Tesková (letter dated May 26th) that

mentally we're already perched on the sixth floor, but in compensation with two balconies and central heating – in other words, clean air and warmth.

*

Karlinsky emphasises the extent to which Tsvetaeva was fêted and celebrated as a foremost representative of Russian literature in exile on her arrival in Paris. The first reading she gave, on February 6th 1926, was a major event for the émigré community. This initially positive response was to change rapidly. In April Tsvetaeva's essay 'A Poet on Criticism', with a 'florilegium' or selection of quotations attached, was published. She made no secret of her hostility to figures such as Zinaida Gippius, Ivan Bunin (whose wife Vera would become a close friend) and the young Georgy Adamovich, soon to acquire considerable influence as poet and critic. Another factor leading to her breach with the Russian literary establishment in Paris was her attitude to the Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1890–1934).

It is probable that Tsvetaeva and Mayakovsky first became acquainted in Moscow in 1918. She was present, along with Bely, Balmont, Pasternak and Khodasevich at a private event held late that January in the home of Mikhail Tsetlin, which Mayakovsky galvanised by reading out a new poem in seven sections called 'The Man'). With uncanny prefiguring, it envisages the poet returning long after his death to the address at which he shot himself. Tsvetaeva might have been forgiven for bearing a grudge given that, in a 1926 article entitled 'Let's Wait Before We Accuse Poets', Mayakovsky described a young woman entering a bookstore in search of something by Tsvetaeva, only to have the assistant at the counter, who does not approve of her weakness for what he calls

gypsy lyrics, direct her attention elsewhere. When the two poets met again in Paris in autumn 1928, Tsvetaeva gave Mayakovsky a copy of *After Russia* with the dedication 'To somebody who walks as fast as I do.' It remained behind when he departed, without any indication he had read it. Tsvetaeva subsequently published an open letter in the journal *Eurasia* which provoked widespread wrath among members of the émigré community:

On April 28th 1922, the day before leaving Russia, I bumped into Mayakovsky on a totally deserted Kuznetsky Most early in the morning: 'So, Mayakovsky, what should I tell them from you in Europe?' 'That truth is – here.' On November 7th 1928, coming out of the Café Voltaire late in the evening someone asks me: 'What do you say about Russia after Mayakovsky's reading?' Without pausing to think, I answered: 'That strength is – there.'

As a result the journal *Latest News*, representing the Constitutional Democrats and edited by Pavel Milyukov, interrupted plans to publish *Where Swans Are Camped*, Tsvetaeva's collection of poems in praise of the White counter-revolutionary forces in the Russian Civil Wars. No further contributions from her were accepted.

Tsvetaeva's immediate reaction to the news that Mayakovsky had killed himself was a mixture of compassion and admiration. She wrote to Tesková (letter dated April 21st):

Poor Mayakovsky! (Your "sphinx"). A *clean* death.
That's all that matters in the end – it being clean.

The publication of seven poems entitled 'To Mayakovsky' in *Freedom of Russia* (the English version of the journal's name is Karlinsky's) did nothing to help matters. Beginning and ending provocatively with echoes of the Orthodox liturgy, respectively for a christening and a funeral, Tsvetaeva sets up an intriguing dynamic between three poets – herself, Mayakovsky and Sergey Esenin. The very first poem Tsvetaeva produced in Paris had been

a response to the news of Esenin's suicide in December 1925. It has a shocking close:

At least it means there's a good use
for ceiling hooks you come upon.

Having discharged himself from a psychiatric clinic in Moscow, Esenin travelled to Leningrad and, after cutting his wrists, hanged himself in a room in the Hôtel Angleterre. Tsvetaeva echoes a poem Esenin wrote, supposedly because he had no ink, in his own blood, found in the room after his death, which says: 'Dying in this life is nothing new,/ but living in the end is hardly newer'. In the poem he published in response to Esenin's death, rather than condemning the act, Mayakovsky expressed sympathy, along with impatience at the other poetic tributes being paid him. Nonetheless he sounds an upbeat note – 'Life must be remade from the start,/ once that's done then you can sing about it', concluding with another echo of Esenin: 'In this life dying isn't hard,/ making a life is far harder'.

Tsvetaeva refers closely to Mayakovsky's tribute, quoting or paraphrasing from it at several points. Where he had asserted that 'better /to die from vodka/ than from boredom', Tsvetaeva has him observe that dying for the sake of a skirt is preferable to drinking yourself to death. The tone of Tsvetaeva's cycle is awkward, even embarrassing throughout, verging on bad taste when she quips that Mayakovsky, who habitually chose right-wing targets, had in this case made a direct hit to the left, at his own heart. And yet her eulogy of the hobnailed boots he used for climbing the 'mountain where he dictated law,/ the proletarian Sinai' is convincing enough. It can be disconcerting to observe how skilfully she adopts and exploits the language of macho posturing, not least in the startling sixth poem, devoted to a posthumous encounter where Mayakovsky tells Esenin 'we can still plant a grenade/ under *this* empire too!' Such a shocking conflation of the tsarist and the Soviet regimes meant that, when at last the cycle appeared in print in Moscow in 1965, this item had to be omitted. Esenin enquires about the fate of Alexander Blok (1880–1921), who died

aged only 40, his health undermined by the dramatically difficult living conditions in Leningrad. Two days earlier permission had finally been secured from the Soviet authorities for him to seek treatment abroad accompanied by his wife. Blok is referred to, with insolent familiarity, as 'Lsan Aleksanych' (here rendered 'Blokkié') rather than with his full patronymic, 'Alexander Alexandrovich'. The 'search for red cheeks' 'along the canal banks' is a heartless reference to Fyodor Sologub (1863–1927), whose wife had thrown herself from the Tuchkov Bridge in Leningrad in 1921. The poet Nikolay Gumilyov (1886–1921), a specialist in Oriental studies, had already split up with his wife the poet Anna Akhmatova when executed together with sixty others on factitious charges of involvement in a monarchist conspiracy.

Notwithstanding its boisterous humour and laddish approach, this item can be read as an indictment of the havoc the new regime wreaked amongst Russian writers who remained in the Soviet Union. Mayakovsky himself left a last poem, included in a letter 'To Everyone' dated April 12th 1930, so two days before his death. This is where Tsvetaeva sourced the phrase 'Love's boat got shipwrecked on real life' which provides the epigraph for her fourth poem. She satirises Mayakovsky's action in a manner that is ironical yet also deeply affectionate, alleging that similar behaviour would have been better suited to someone from an aristocratic family like the Shakovskys who had fallen desperately in love with an opera "diva", than a poet who claimed to be speaking on behalf of the revolutionary masses in '150,000' (originally published without the author's name). She was well acquainted with a contemporary representative of the family, Dmitry Shakhovskoy, who before deciding to become a monk included her work in two issues of the review *With Good Intentions* (one possible translation of the title). In the 1960s he would serve as the Russian Orthodox Archbishop of San Francisco.

Indifferent to boundaries of gender identification in a manner which is frequent with Tsvetaeva, the Mayakovsky cycle offers a bittersweet homage which succeeds in negotiating the alarming divergence of political affiliation between the two poets. One would be well-advised, however, to bear in mind her words to

Pasternak at a time when Mayakovsky was still alive (letter dated February 9th 1927):

Comparing Rilke and Mayakovsky for me, despite all (?) my love (?) for the latter, amounts to blasphemy. The blasphemy – I decided this long ago – consists in the lack of hierarchical correspondence.

For all her tremendous generosity of spirit, Tsveltaeva could not bring herself to see Rilke and Mayakovsky as belonging in the same category.

*

The awkwardness of tone cropping up in the cycle Tsveltaeva dedicated to Pushkin has a different basis. Though she had told Tesková that poems generally arrived in cycles, these were rarely assembled till long after her death. The first four poems to Pushkin, but not the remainder, appeared in two successive issues of *Contemporary Annals*. Tsveltaeva describes them as follows (letter to Tesková dated January 26th 1937).

Appallingly harsh, appallingly free, nothing in common with the canonised Pushkin and everything with what – goes against the canon. *Dangerous* poems. To put my conscience at rest, I took them to the office of *Contemporary Annals*, but I don't expect them to be accepted – they *cannot* be. They are revolutionary *on the inside* – in a way they never dreamed about in Russia. [...]

One poet's revenge – for another poet. For if Nicholas I hadn't kept Pushkin on a tether – right next to him – if he'd let him go abroad – set him absolutely free – then d'Anthès would not have killed him. He was the actual assassin.

But besides being *the way they are*, the poems are mutinous, without regard for the events of Pushkin's life, mutinous on the inside, every line a challenge. Reading

them out in Prague would be a mistake, given they are the challenge I, as a poet, personally deliver to the hypocrites *then and now*. And the responsibility for them must lie with – one person. (After them, I may simply be expelled from *Contemporary Annals* – and from the emigration altogether.) They were written in Meudon, in summer 1931 – I had just read Shchegolev's *Pushkin's Duel and Death* and was choking with indignation.

Tsvetaeva refers to accounts of a famed, or infamous, audience with the Tsar in the Kremlin on September 8th 1826, when Pushkin was said to have warmed his chilled feet at the fire, then leant so comfortably against the table he practically sat upon it. The tsar's remark about having spoken to 'the cleverest man anywhere in Russia' concludes the sixth poem. Indifferent to good taste or convention, Tsvetaeva gets considerable mileage from the poet's mixed race status ('Black stays black, however much/white paint you use – no righting that!', 'no barber could sort out his hair'). Pushkin's maternal great-grandfather, known as 'Peter the Great's Arab', was believed to be the son of an Ethiopian commander, though more recent researches indicate a possible origin in Cameroon. Kidnapped by the Turks, he was brought when a teenager to St Petersburg, a gift to the tsar from the Russian ambassador in Constantinople. Subsequently he adopted the surname Gannibal (the Russian version of Hannibal, just as Shakespeare's drama is spoken of as *Gamlet*). The second poem in the sequence casts Peter in an overwhelmingly positive light, contrasting his behaviour, or the way Tsvetaeva imagines he might have behaved towards Pushkin, with that of his descendant Nicholas 1. Her shift in attitude is interesting. In *Where Swans Are Camped* she had effectively accused Peter of prefiguring the Bolsheviks:

You, who acted great as great can be,
laying on a multitude of dreams,

not working in the interest of your sons,
instead preparing a triumph of demons! [...]

Down with the *Internationale*! Long live the palace!
Down with Tsar Peter, and long live Sofia!

Sofia was Peter's half-sister, involved in a conspiracy against him. The word rendered here as 'palace', 'terem', carries a feminine connotation, denoting the specific chambers in which the female elite resided, as if a gender alternative to the masculine authority of Peter could exist. A friend who had helped convey Pushkin to his tomb remarked on the poet's admirable physique, which Tsvetaeva celebrates in the fourth poem. Perhaps most moving of all, however, is the third, where their common activity as poets bespeaks an inalienable kinship: 'I know the way he'd grind/ those negro teeth of his!// Quills with tapering points –/ know how he sharpened them!' The last but one details the circumstances of Pushkin's burial. Alarmed at the outpouring of public sympathy and respect provoked by the poet's death, the authorities forbade university professors and students to attend the funeral, changing the venue at the last moment from St Isaac's to the smaller Church of the Saviour and ordering his coffin to be brought there not, as was usual, on the morning of the service, but at midnight. Binyon, in his biography, explains how gendarmes and police entered the apartment where the poet's body lay, while troops were posted along the streets the procession was to follow. Perhaps rather incongruously for a modern reader, Tsvetaeva begins the relevant poem by quoting the Irish clergyman Charles Wolfe's 1817 'The Burial of Sir John Moore after Corunna', well known in a Russian translation of 1825 by Ivan Ivanovich Kozlov:

Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,
as his corse to the rampart we hurried;
not a soldier discharged his farewell shot
o'er the grave where our hero we buried.

SAMPLE

Brother in song's calamity –
envy is what I feel towards you.
No matter if that's where it leads –
dying in a single room! –
for how long – for one hundred years? –
I've dreamed about it every day.

=====

Why mourn over a life cut short?
Be bitter that he wrote so little?
Whatever life, lived in our days,
is long – a poet gives it *all*.

Life running counter to the veins
(no newer, in the end, than death!)
At least it means there's a good use
for ceiling hooks you come upon.

start of January 1926

Cut the commotion, fame!
No call for slamming doors!
A table, elbow on
a corner – that's enough.

An end to the kerfuffle!
You have to calm down, heart!
Forehead, elbow – all
that's needed – plus some thought.

Young folk are meant to love
and old folk to keep warm:
I cannot ever *be*,
for me there's no escape.

I'd settle for a cranny,
provided no-one's in it!
Taps are always dripping,
chairs will always scrape,

lips are made for talking;
pottage in their mouths,
telling you they're grateful
"for the beauty" you've made.

If you could only know,
relatives, unrelated,
what a victim my
own head is in my eyes –

a god amidst a horde!
The steppes – cramped living space!
Heaven to me's a place
where no-one ever speaks!

Casanova, rotter,
shopkeeper – mere details!
God to me's whoever's
able to provide –

time's running out – my days
are counted! – what I need
so that I can get peace:
four walls, all to myself!

Paris, January 26th 1926

Want to know who we are? That land
was overrun with bears and sledges.
Not being the sort that people drive
around, we had to take the reins –

coach drivers! Wounds still scalding hot,
knocked for good grace into the mud.

As for our luck? We crossed the Don
on bare ice. Cartridges ran out
everywhere, as did bread. No salt
for our rations! Talk about luck!

Bearing all Russia used to be
on stooping shoulders, barrels pointing.

No transport! Trusting to our heels,
at night, people coughing us up!
Who we are? See the train stations,
the factories, all filled with us,

all those putrid dancing halls,
with us, who rose up for a village,
or for a tree...

Skilled with six horses as with women.
Upper crust students, us? Right-wingers?
Mokhnova Street toffs, Bronnaya
paupers – Tsar's officers, like pawns?

Gravediggers, chasing bed bugs, we
survived some way, no matter how!
However bad things got, not one
word of complaint escaped our lips!

Kitchen scullions and ratcatchers,
home – a fish trap, thunder pealing,

words of praise were all we uttered:
Splendid, our old Russia, splendid!

Painters working next to heaven,
messing frenziedly with grease?
We were the lads who, back in '05,
built barricades.

All history now.

Barricades then, thrones today.
Callouses still bright on our hands.
Not enough room in every Paris
madhouse for our Russian pain –

death-dealing, and we die beneath
our tattered greatcoats, pointing guns
deliriously. Rebuild your Bedlams:
not enough room for Russia's woes!

A crutch dreams it's a spur – get sharpening! –
an empty cuff, a machine gun.
Hearts opened up in autopsies –
look, traces of an icebound trek,

still clear to see despite the torments!
And so the news can reach them – *there*:
doctors in morgues can tell us by
hearts disproportionately big.

St Gilles-sur-Vie (Vendée) April 1926