Poem of the End
Also by Marina Tsvetaeva from Shearsman Books

*Milestones*
*After Russia (The First Notebook)*
*After Russia (The Second Notebook)*
*Youthful Verses*

(all translated by Christopher Whyte)
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TRANSLATOR’S NOTE

Transplanting poems from one language into another is a notoriously difficult task – in Tsvetaeva’s case bewilderingly so. Tsvetaeva, who practically rebuilt Russian syntax for her own use, nevertheless wrote in rhyme and meter. Russian, an inflected language, is especially well suited to it, and Russian poets have continued writing in rhyme up to the present day, whereas modern English poetry in rhyme is a distinct subcategory. So besides the difficulty of translating a Russian rhymed poem into English rhyme that would create the same effect, there is the additional problem of what rhyme and meter per se suggest to readers in different cultures. Tsvetaeva’s intensity, which in Russian perfectly agrees with her pattern of rhyme and rhythm, is bound to be lost whenever rhyme and meter become a translator’s primary concern. In an earlier book of Tsvetaeva translations, In the Inmost Hour of the Soul, I included a few metrically translated poems. However, I keep only one such poem here. My aim was to carry the energy of the original poem into the English, to create poems that could stand on their own in English as far as possible, without losing either content or rhythm.

But to speak of Tsvetaeva’s poetry only in technical terms would be to do her a great injustice. Though considered an extremely language-conscious poet, Tsvetaeva herself did not see language as a goal: to her it was an obstacle to overcome. In a letter to Rilke she wrote:

Goethe says somewhere that one can’t create anything worthwhile in a foreign language, yet I’ve always thought this was wrong… What is writing poetry but translating, from a native [i.e., inner-N.K.] tongue to a foreign one? – whether French or German doesn’t make any difference… For that reason I don’t understand why people speak of French, Russian, etc., poets. A poet may write in French and yet not be a French poet… I’m not a Russian poet and am always puzzled when I’m seen as one. This is just why one becomes a poet (if it were possible to become one, if one were not born a poet!) – in order not to be French, Russian, etc., in order to be all of them. In other words, one is a poet because one is not French. Nationality-the shutting out and shutting in. Orpheus bursts nationality, or extends its boundaries so far and wide that all (the bygone and the living) are included in it.’

Preoccupation with form for its own sake, was, in Tsvetaeva’s eyes, an offense against “the elements,” and she vehemently resisted being labelled
a formal innovator. She praised Pasternak for bringing “…not a new form but a new essence, and consequently a new form.” She twisted language not because she enjoyed word games for their own sake but because the task she set for herself demanded it: “My difficulty (in writing poems and maybe for others—in understanding them) is in the impossibility of my aim … with words (that is, with meanings) to express a moan: ah-ah-ah.’?

Marina Tsvetaeva was an outsider and a mythmaker, a rebel against every imaginable pretence who addressed herself “above heads — to God.” She is best listened to as a sibyl (sivilla) — one of her favourite personas — and no one has claimed that sibyls are always easy to understand.

She was also a vulnerable human being who lived a terribly difficult, lonely, and, from what we know, uncompromising life:

I am a person skinned alive, while all of you have armour. You all have your art, social issues, friendships, diversions, family, duty. I, deep down, have NOTHING. It all falls off like the skin and under the skin—living flesh or fire: me, Psyche. I do not fit into any form, not even the simplest form of my poems.’

My hope is that these translations will carry through at least some of that living flesh, that fire.

I am indebted to Laura Weeks for her detailed and very useful suggestions for the earlier versions of the five poemas. And, last but not least, to Andrew Newcomb, without whose help and support these translations would not have been what they are.

Nina Kossman

NOTES

1. From Tsvetaeva’s letter to Rilke, July 6, 1926.
2. From Tsvetaeva’s diary, October 8, 1940.
3. From Tsvetaeva’s letter to Alexandr Bakhrakh, September 10, 1923
NARRATIVE POEMS

SAMPLER
НА КРАСНОМ КОНЕ

Не Муза, не Муза
Над бедною люлькой
Мне пела, за ручку водила.
Не Муза холодные руки мне грела,
Горячие веки студила.
Вихор ото лба отводила – не Муза,
В большие поля уводила – не Муза.

Не Муза, не черные косы, не бусы,
Не басни, – всего два крыла светлорусых
– Коротких – над бровью крылатой.
Стан в латах.
Султан.

К устам не клонился,
На сон не крестили.
О сломанной кукле
Со мной не грустил.
Всех птиц моих – на свободу
Пускал – и потом – не жалея шпор,
На красном коне – промеж синих гор
Гремящего ледохода!

§

Пожарные! – Широкий крик!
Как зарево широкий – крик!
Пожарные! – Душа горит!
Не наш ли дом горит?!

Сполошный колокол гремит,
Качай-раскачивай язык,
Сполошный колокол! – Велик
Пожар! – Душа горит!
ON A RED STEED

No Muse, no Muse
Sang over my shabby
Cradle, or took me by the hand.
No muse warmed my cold hands in her own,
Or cooled my burning eyelids:
No Muse brushed the strands from my brow,
And led me into the open fields.

No Muse, no black braids, no beads,
No fables – just two wings of light hair,
Cut short over winged brows:
A man in armour.
A horsehair plume.

He did not bow towards my lips,
He did not bless me at bedtime.
He did not grieve with me
Over a broken doll.
He set all my birds free.
Then – not sparing his spurs,
Rode a red steed – through the blue mountains
Of a thundering ice-flow.

§

Firemen! – A wide-mouthed shout!
A shout wide as a blaze!
Firemen! – A soul on fire!
Is that our house on fire?

The bell tolls ceaselessly.
Swing-toll your tongue,
Ceaseless bell! – The fire is
Vast. – A soul on fire!
Пляша от страшной красоты,  
На красных факелов жгуты  
Рукоплещу, – кричу – свищу –  
Рычу – искры мечу.

Кто вынес? – Кто сквозь гром и чад  
Орлом восхитил? – Не очнусь!  
Рубашка – длинная – до пят  
На мне – и нитка бус.

Вой пламени, стекольный лязг...  
У каждого – заместо глаз –  
Два зарева! – Полет перин!  
Горим! Горим! Горим!

Треши, тысячелетний ларь!  
Пылай, накопленная кладь!  
Мой дом – над всеми государь,  
Мне нечего желать.

– Пожарные! – Крепчай, Петух!  
Грянь в раззолоченные лбы!  
Чтобы пожар не тух, не тух!  
Чтоб рухнули столбы!

Что это – вдруг – рухнуло – вдруг?  
Это не столб – рухнула!  
Бешеный всплеск маленьких рук  
В небо – и крик: – Кукла!

Кто это – вслед – скоком гоня  
Взор мне метнул – властный?  
Кто это – вслед – скоком с коня  
Красного – в дом – красный?!

Крик – и перекричавший всех  
Крик. – Громовой удар.
Dancing from the terrible beauty,
Plaits of flame on red torches…
I clang – blare – clap,
I snarl, I shoot sparks.

Who carried me out? Who, through the rumble and fumes,
Like an eagle, carried me out? I can’t come to!
A long gown hangs on me
And a string of beads.

The roaring fire, the clanging glass…
Instead of eyes, in each face –
Two flames. Featherbeds flying.
Fire! Fire! Fire!

Split open, thousand-year-old coffers!
Burn, hoarded wealth!
My house is lord over all,
I want for nothing.

Firemen! – Spread, red-winged flame!
Shine on gilded foreheads.
Let the fire never die, never die.
Let the pillars crash.

What – suddenly – what collapsed?
That was no pillar crashing.
A wild clasping of small hands
And a shout – up to the sky: “The doll!”

Who was it, from his plunging steed,
Threw after me an imperious glance?
Who, leaping off his red steed,
Entered the red house?

A shout – and louder still
A shout. A thunder-clap.
Вздымая куклу, как доспех,
Встает, как сам Пожар.

Как Царь меж огненных зыбей
Встает, сдвигает бровь.
– Я спас ее тебе, – разбей!
Освободи Любовь!

§

Что это вдруг – рухнуло? – Нет,
Это не мир – рухнуло!
То две руки – конному – вслед
Девочка – без – куклы.

§

Февраль. Кривые дороги.
В полях – метель.
Метет большие дороги
Ветрòв – артель.

То вскачь по хребтам наклонным,   
То снова круть.
За красным, за красным конным   
Всё тот же путь.

То – вот он! рукой достанешь!
Как дразнит: Тронь!
Безумные руки тянешь,
И снегом – конь.

Султан ли – в глазах – косматый,
Аль так – ветла?
Эй, рук не складайте, сваты!
Мети, ветра!
Holding the doll aloft like armour,  
He rises up like the Fire itself.

Kinglike, among fiery ripples,  
He rises up, his brow knit.  
– I’ve saved it for you. Now break it!  
Set your love free.

§

What – suddenly – what collapsed?  
No, it’s not the world collapsing.  
Reaching after the horseman – the empty hands  
Of the little girl with no doll.

§

February. Winding roads.  
A snowstorm in the fields.  
An alliance of winds  
Sweeps the big roads.

Now galloping down the sloping hills,  
Now mounting upwards.  
The same road stretches  
Behind the red horseman.

Here he is! Within reach!  
How he teases: Touch me!  
You stretch your hands wildly,  
But instead of the horse – snow.

Is that his shaggy horsehair plume  
In his eyes – or some branch?  
No rest for you, matchmakers!  
Sweep on, winds.
Мети, громозди пороги –
Превыше скал,
Чтоб конь его крутононый
Как вкопан – стал.

И внемлют ветра – и стоном
В ответ на стон.
Торопится красным гоном
Мой конный сон.

Косматых воскрыли взлеты,
Аль так – ветла?
Вздымаите, вздымайте метлы!
Держись, ветра!

А что ж это там за глыба
Всплывает – там?
Как будто бы вьюгой вздыблен
Стоглавый храм.

Конец и венец погоне!
Уж в лоб, треща,
Мне пламень подков, в ладони –
Уж край плаща!

На помощь, с мечом и громом,
Всех Воинств Царь! –
Но прядет конь – и громом
Взгремел в алтарь!

§

Стремлю, а за мною – сворой
Вся рать ветров.
Еще не остыл – по хорам –
Раскат подков.
Sweep, pile up on the thresholds –
Higher than cliffs.
Let his swift-legged horse
Stop dead.

The winds harken: moan
Echoing moan.
My horseback dream hastens,
Scudding red.

Are those his shaggy, upswept wings?
Or just some branch?
Lift up your brooms, trees!
Hold tight, winds!

Is that a boulder
Looming – or what?
As if the blizzard had built
A thousand-spired church.

At last the chase is crowned.
The fire of his horse’s hooves
Licks at my face; my hands
Touch the edge of his cloak.

Help, with thunder and sword,
Tsar of all armies!
But the steed stirs and like thunder
Bolts at the altar!

§

I spur on; behind me –
The whole horde of winds.
In the choir-loft the thunder of hooves
Has not yet died down.