SAMPLER

The Voronezh Workbooks
Also by Alistair Noon

Collections
Earth Records
The Kerosene Singing

Chapbooks
At the Emptying of Dustbins
In People’s Park
Animals and Places
Some Questions on the Cultural Revolution
Out of the Cave
Across the Water
Swamp Area
Long & Other Short Poems
Surveyors’ Riddles (with Giles Goodland)
QUAD
Neptune All Night
Two Verse Essays

As Translator
Alexander Pushkin, The Bronze Horseman
Monika Rinck, Sixteen Poems
August Stramm, The Last Drop
Osip Mandelstam, Concert at a Railway Station: Selected Poems
Osip Mandelstam, Occasional and Joke Poems
Ilia Kitup, various pamphlets
Osip Mandelstam

The Voronezh Workbooks

translated from Russian
by Alistair Noon

Shearsman Books
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So what now? I got lost in the sky
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Oh somebody’s wife is off after her hubby
I raise these leaves to my lips
Once a mother warned her daughter
The pear and the cherry take aim and I’m hit
[verses to Natasha Shtempel]

Appendix: Exclusions, Variants, Companions, Fragments

It looks as if we’ll need to moot
The early world was vast and dangerous
You’re duty-bound to stay my suzerain
The day hung round five heads. The train would lunch on a hill
Once upon a time, Voronezh
These forces of iron march on, the years
This earth needs treating rougher
My fractured arm performs its semaphore
Suffer them now to knock on my door
The Birth of the Smile
It smiles and chews the choicest seed
Inside the mountain, the idol sits idly
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It isn't cheap, this yeast
Hearing how the early ice
Moving off, the people's heads are hillocks
Should I take charcoal for the highest praises
So if our enemies took me captive
Oh let me fly
Laid out like a fan, the battens
People like you, with eyes hammered into their skulls
There is a square in Paris called the Star
Mycenae's lion-cubs have swung the gates enough

An Afterword as Such
Notes
Translator’s note

The translations of the poems largely follow Alexander Mets’s edition *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy i pisem v tryokh tomakh*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress-Pleyada, 2009) while also making reference to the earlier *Sochineniya v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1990), compiled by Pavel Nerler, with notes by the latter and A.D. Mikhailov. I also referred to the recent strictly chronological edition by Oleg Lekmanov and Maksim Amelin, *Sobraniye stikhotvoreniy 1906–1937* (Moscow: Ruteniya, 2017), which I recommend to fellow Mandelstam translators as a useful adjunct to the editions mentioned, not least for some helpful illustrations in the notes, neat if not comprehensive presentation of variants, and the edition’s invaluable detailing of secondary literature poem by poem. Extracts from Mandelstam’s prose and letters were translated from vol. 2 of the Nerler edition and vol. 3 of the Mets edition respectively. For full translations of these texts, the reader is referred to *The Collected Critical Prose and Letters*, translated by Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link (London: Collins Harvill, 1991, among other editions).

Most of the translations here that were first published in book form in *Concert at a Railway Station* are reprinted unchanged. But like dogs taking after their owners, some of them have begun to vary their text (see Afterword, V, on the textual uncertainty of the originals). Minor changes have been made to ‘Black Earth’, “You took away my seas, the run and the running jump”, “The full-weight ingots of Roman nights”, ‘The Birth of the Smile’, “Inside the mountain, the idol sits idly”, “The goldfinch goes into shudders”, “It isn’t cheap, this yeast” and ‘Verses on the Unknown Soldier’. More substantial ones have been made to ‘[The River Kama]’, ‘[Reims – Laon]’ and “Core of an ocean, this region” (its first line now “With its depths of bread and pail of storms”), in the case of the latter poem-draft not least to facilitate comparison with the variants it self-propagated. Some minor amendments have also been made to the Notes. All translations within the Afterword and Notes, of poems, prose or letters either by Mandelstam or others, are either excerpted from *Concert at a Railway Station* or have been newly translated for this volume. Earlier Mandelstam poems are likewise referred to by the translation of their title or first line in *Concert at a Railway Station*, except where otherwise stated.
For my translations appearing here in book form for the first time, I’d like to acknowledge the critical work of scholars including Clare Cavanagh, Gregory Freidin, Isaak Gurvich, V.S. Krivonos, Thomas Langerak, Oleg Lekmanov, Yuri Leving, Darya Makogonenko, Maria Medvid, M.S. Pavlov, Boris Paramonov, Nancy Pollak, Eleonora Shorina, Vladislav Svitelsky, Fyodor Uspensky, Leonid Vidgof, O.B. Zaslavsky and Alexander Zholkovsky. I owe a particular debt to Vladimir Musatov’s *Lirika Osipa Mandel’shtama* (Kiev: Nika-Tsentr, 2000), with its thorough and perceptive survey of Mandelstam’s poetry poem by poem. I am also grateful for Pyotr Poletaev’s useful dictionary of Mandelstam’s neologisms at stihi.ru, building on the earlier work of Sergei Tolstoy. And again to Ralph Dutli’s biography of Mandelstam in German, which really, really must be translated into English. All websites referenced in the Notes were last accessed on 19 April 2021.

Like scholarship, translating poems previously translated is a group expedition to the same overgrown ruins, even if the pith-helmeted participants may disagree over the best route or on how to interpret the inscriptions they find. I’d also like to re-acknowledge earlier and co-current translations of the poems translated here, including but not limited to Richard and Elizabeth McKane’s *The Moscow & Voronezh Notebooks* (Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 2003), Keith Sands’s *17 Voronezh Poems* and *Unknown Soldier* (Cambridge: Equipage, 2012, 2019), and Andrew Davis’s *Voronezh Notebooks* (New York: NYRB Poets, 2016). In the case of the first mentioned volume, I am conscious of one phrasing that was too useful not to half-inch (in slightly modified form), the “rustle answered” in the poem translated here as “Once a mother warned her daughter”.

In addition to all those acknowledged in *Concert at a Railway Station*, for this volume I’m extremely grateful for assistance and insights once again from Ilia Kitup and Andrew Reynolds as well as from Ksenya Kumm, Jennifer Nelson, Lucas Brockenshire, John Clegg, Nina Kossman and Anton Romanenko, for Kelvin Corcoran’s invaluable guidance, feedback and support, and for Justin Quinn’s generous comments and attentiveness. Sabine Heurs needs to be re-thanked for putting up with the daily “Just need to do some Mandelstam first.” As with the *Concert*, all missed cues and wrong notes remain my own.
The Voronezh Workbooks

First Workbook

SAMPLER
SAMPLER
I live in key kitchen gardens
where Ivan the Steward could’ve strolled.¹
The wind volunteers in the mills;
a path of logs absconds ever farther.

Numb in the lights as tiny as beads,
the Black Earth night on the rim of the steppe.
Right through the wall, a stranger stomps
his bad mood off, in his Russian boots:

I don’t sleep well to the sound of our host.
That rented floorboard is all crooked,
a coffin’s plank in this vessel’s deck,
where death and the kiosk are all that’s close.

April 1935
Hey there, Earphones, Earphones you snitch!  
I’ll keep these Voronezh nights in mind.  
The voice’s vin d’Ay continues to fizz,²  
at twelve I can hear the Red Square chimes.

What’s the Metro like? Well keep that to yourself,  
but don’t ask how far the spring buds have got.  
Kremlin clock, up there, your bells  
are the speech of the cosmos shrunk to a full stop.

April 1935
Voronezh, Crow-Town, permit me to go:
you run me to the verge, but preserve my knowledge,
you rent me a niche as I veer near the edge,
random Voronezh, ruining town of crows.

Give me back and let me go,
you’ll let me fall or else you’ll fumble,
you’ll give me up or drop me, dump me,
town whose name’s a knife and crow.³

April 1935
It’s twice I’ve died, but I have to live now: this town’s in high spirits, high-cheeked and pretty, though water has left its mind unstable…
How well that rich layer lies on the plough, how well the steppe sits on a crankshaft in April.
The heavens out here are your Buonarotti.  

April 1935
What street are we on?
Mandelstam Street.
Damned if I know what that name means.
Try to unscrew it it still sounds wrong,
all twisted and not very clean.

The way he did things could have been straighter,
his self-control a little greater,
and that’s why this street –
just a gutter really –
down by the rails
has a sign on which stands
the name of that Mandelstam.

_April 1935_
Black Earth

Hallowed and black, it’s all under nurture,
all horse’s shoulder, all air and care,
all of it crumbling, one huge choir –
my land and liberty’s clods of damp turf.5

The black turns blue as they plough at dawn;
foundation of unarmed labour, a thousand
hills whose murmurs succumbed to the foreshare:
the district doesn’t fit with the land that surrounds us.

It’s a sledgehammer though, a *faux pas*, this earth:
it allows no appeals as you thud down your head,
with its mouldering flutes, puts your ears on alert,
will till them for spring with its morning clarinet.

How well that rich layer lies on the plough,
how well the steppe sits on a crankshaft in April!
So I greet you, Black Earth: be round-eyed and stout…
The black-tongued silence that’s found in labour.

*April 1935*
You took away my seas, the run and the running jump, and brought my feet to rest on the earth now violated, achieving what? Yes, brilliant how you settled up: lips that won't stop twitching can't be amputated.

*May 1935*
Twitching my lips, I lie underground, 
but my words will be words that pupils recite.

Red Square: no ground on this earth is as round, 
a curve that the steely camber connives in.

Red Square: no ground on this earth is as round. 
No plan said the camber must spread out that wide 
as it tilts to the rice fields, all the way down, 
for as long as the planet’s last slave stays alive.

*May 1935*