

ABSTRACT

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This collection of poems examines themes of love, disillusionment, betrayal, and personal redemption. Set in locations ranging from Tomsk, Siberia, to a baseball stadium in Washington, D.C., these poems employ both traditional poetic form and free verse to explore the promise and peril of human connections across eras, borders, and cultures. The poems draw on the author's many years of living, working, and studying poetry in Russia and the former Soviet Union: in content and style, they are indebted to the traditions of Russian as well as English poetry. The thesis also includes six translations of poems from the Russian-language originals by award-winning poet Inna Kabysh, whose work is largely unavailable to English-language readers.

DAY OF THE BORDER GUARDS

by

Katherine Elizabeth Young

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Geometry and Other Calculations

Phantom Limb

First, the doctors peel my flesh,
expose the bone, saw it smooth.
Working in layers, they mold muscle,
snug up tissue to cushion the stump,
snip skin in overlapping flaps
exactly the way you'd wrap a present,
pleating sudden ridges and angles.
And then, prosthesis: liner, socket,
foot. I'll walk, all right: you'll notice
nothing amiss, unless you're watching
in the evening hour, when shapes
branch off in doorways, two by two –
you'll see me stumble on the side
he always took, while in the houses,
doors bang shut, lights flick on.

Calculus

And they're picking at sushi and talking like two people who don't know each other well, but mean to, and aren't sure of the rules anymore

because the old rules covered things like a girl not talking dirty and backseat kissing and all the places she shouldn't let him put his hands

but this new talk needs new rules, now he's quoting his therapist, and she's saying he should leave his wife *now*, she's saying staying's worse

and both of them are mounding napkins, flicking chopsticks, draining glasses so as not to accidentally glimpse slits ghosting across wrists

because here, in this talk, the husbands are shouting, they're slapping not-so-secret lovers, while the wives are screaming

and the children have been stayed together for and their savage, selfish eyes let no one forget it, while their fathers are screaming

as their mothers take lovers whom they're kissing in cars, hands bruising in motion, while breath stutters, sobs, approaches infinity

Plane Angle
after Euclid

We have the angle: you, me. We haven't yet
determined its inclination: acute? Obtuse?
We know there are other angles – husbands, wives,
the woman in Boston you see twice a year on
business – our configuration's multidimensional.
From our single point of intersection, lines
radiate out: children, parents, neighbors, friends.
In bars, auditoriums, malls, we masquerade
as ordinary folk whose shoes need polishing.
There we meet others like ourselves, each, like us,
trailing lines of intersection, angles and triangles
constructing halos and starbursts that clink along
tile corridors, concrete walkways, as we hasten
toward parking lots, street corners crisscrossed
with shadow, where we hold one another as if
hearts *could* break, and our hopelessness impresses
fingermarks on flesh that will not fade for weeks.

Bluebeard

Your beard was blue, but not so very blue.
And when you handed me your keys and warned me
not to try the littlest one, I fingered
the scrolls that curled along its bow, shaft,
nape, teeth, then hung the tiny key
from a silk ribbon above my heart. I tidied
your rooms, oiling the locks, the other keys
while you were gone. So what if I tripped over
objects in the gloom, sent them spinning
toward dim corners? Of course they weren't bones!
As for the flower-sweet aroma of blood
scenting the air – it must've been my own.
Besides, a woman needn't fear blood or bones,
those familiar instruments she reckons by.
When you came roaring through the door, I sat
reading fairy tales next to the fire,
the unused key nestled between my breasts.
You demanded the key, examined it closely.
Caressed it in your hands. Oddly arousing:
your pouting, disappointed mouth.

Still Life with Narcissus

Ruffled, Elizabethan, a narcissus
gasps on its stalk, stiff-necked bulb
expiring amid spring's disordered
progress. Rain: limbs plucked bare,
first pink petals fringing the mirrored
puddles that unspool themselves

in mud. All winter, he's pictured himself
enshrined among the finest narcissi
as sunlight and frilled flowers mirror
each other's warmth. Other bulbs,
tulips and hyacinths, their bare
shoots long hidden in the disordered

tangle of the spring garden – disorder
now, at last, resolving itself –
unfurl their fans. Outdoors, through barren
months when earth things sleep, narcissi
gorge underground, build up their bulbs.
Indoors, the walls – maze-like, mirrored –

twist and roil like the mirrors of
a funhouse, while his mind's disorder,
too, balloons – grotesque, bulbous –
sprouting roots to nourish itself.
He admires himself, Narcissus;
he echoes his own perfection. Barely

aware of what he's made them bear –
his frightened sons, the frozen mirror
of his wife – he dozes, Narcissus
rich in his own flesh. Disordered,
waking abruptly, he finds himself
heaved up, exposed, a blighted bulb

in blighted soil. Now, too, his bulb's
depleted, its emptiness laid bare.
Soon, he's collapsing on himself,
familiar cracking of the mirror
as he's harrowed, gleaned, re-ordered:
how he loathes himself, Narcissus.

Enough

Light bends off her bowed head – moon through the trees, streetlight down the block, incandescent glow from a rowhouse bulb – and he bends, too, to hear her plead: *Please, don't hurt me any more....* *I never meant to hurt you* – his words float there, smelling of fresh asphalt and someone's trashcan and honeysuckle sweet in a nearby yard. Headlights journey up the street, briefly silhouette her as she places both palms, open, on his chest: as if she might read his heart with just her fingertips. She weighs the silence, measuring yet again the length and breadth of what is, what's not articulable. As if in answer, he places both hands on her back, gripping tight and tighter as she accepts his lips, so that when she undresses, later, for the mirror, she discovers ten new bruises, pink-purple whorls inking her skin.

Soul Food

That first time, when you hit me,
I marveled at the *crack*

your hand made as it struck
flat against my face.

I should've known, right then:
we were on the road to this soul food joint

where I'm picking at turnip greens,
sweet potato pie,

listening to you beg me
to take my inconvenient heart

and *just go away*.
You tell me how it's my own fault:

I ask too much, love too deep.
Don't make me do it again, you say.

I know you mean it.
Like you mean this next thing:

when we've split the last crumb of cornbread,
made our exit past the catfish

lugubrious in his tank, when we're standing
in the parking lot, your arms around me,

your hand – same hand – traces
the bone of my cheek, soft, longingly,

as if I'd never been there,
as if you would never leave.

Ex Machina

Through the screen, a woman watches
her young son bounce his ball beneath
the hoop, hoping to hit his shot.
She hears the boy berate himself
with every miss, exactly as
she blames herself on his behalf.
She thinks about the world he knows –
the free throw line he's scuffed between
the beds, adjustable plastic hoop,
chicken wire strung up to save
the neighbors' roses – a child-sized stage.
Her own, wider world's adjustable
too, though she doesn't know it yet
as she exits to the lover
waiting in the wings, who'll beat
her black and blue, then shove her back
before the lights, where her husband
collects himself, bemused, fingers
her bruises, disconnects again.
Not much time is left before
she'll drift offstage for good, dispatch
the awful messenger to speak
his lines to the boy, who's bare-chested
now, screaming, as shot after
infuriating shot ricochets
into the phlox, the black-eyed susans.

Mrs. B.F. Pinkerton

He told me on the ship, of course. He said
he'd never loved her, simply taken her
in passing, lovely blossom for his pleasure.
"Real marriage," he said, smiling, "is when like
marries like." All voyage he was speaking
of his future: he burned to be a captain.
How he'd fill his house with narwhal tusks,
gold ingots, giant mollusks. Ambergris.
How his sons would follow him to sea.
I gloried in his vision, loved to hear
the sailors call me "Mrs. Pinkerton."
I never thought of her at all, not
the days I lay sick in the cabin, not
the nights I masked my soreness, my nausea,
as he taught me how to be a woman.
And when we anchored ship in Nagasaki,
first flush of spring veiling the trees, myself
unveiling – bride, wife – it seemed to me
as if no other woman walked the earth.
Even as I waited in her garden,
watched my husband striding towards her door,
it seemed to me so simple: like shedding skin.
By then, they'd told us of the child, of how
the woman had named him the Japanese word
for "Trouble." My husband said we owed it to
the boy to take him with us, make of him
an American child, with an American name.
I told myself: *how right, how right and good.*
I felt how fine a man my husband was,
vowed I'd love his son just like my own.
The sun was climbing, now, over the port –
off in the distance, I could just make out
the *Abraham Lincoln* berthed among the rest.
Here, in the garden, the bushes had been clipped,
shorn of their bloom, as if some fairy queen
had had a whim to decorate her bower.
The shell of a blue, speckled egg crunched
beneath my heel. Looking up, I saw
my husband in the doorway, his face flushed,
hat askew. I stepped forward, relieved,
thinking he would meet me – but he brushed past
without a word, hurrying down the pathway
back towards town. I waited in the garden.

Potete perdonarmi, Butterfly?

kneeling now before you
head bowed body blanched
robed in silk the heft
and texture of atonement
hair of silvery gold
lacquered back to display
my shameful face
circles of my eyes
powdered to disguise
the black-purple stains –
how could i bear your pity? –
surely there's no woman
so wretched as one who
has wronged another

Right Angle
after Euclid

From the upper promenade – my son
charting balls and strikes back there in
the seats – I watch shapes coalesce and
dissolve across the river, where you might
or might not be, just as you are and are
not here, where I'm staring at this angle
in the railing, just the idea of an angle,
really, this slim opening where ornamental
grilles don't fully meet. I'm imagining
our perpendicular lines, the way you stand
on top, pinning me down, I'm watching
this passage through the angle open up
before me, seeing how a human torso might
just wriggle free. Six stories below,
new concrete gleams, no one's moving
down there, everyone's inside, enjoying
the game – like my son with his pencil and
scorecard, his father polishing off a chili dog
with onions, no doubt saying something
sensible about designated hitters. What
happens when a body strikes concrete
from six stories up? Is the damage neat,
internal, like the blows you've learned
to land, or do streams erupt from broken
surfaces, entrails painting the pavement?
Who cleans up after? It seems fantastically
selfish to spoil this lovely April day, spoil
everything for one heartbeat's brief release.
Safe across the river, all the universe flowing
between us, you wouldn't even know
until you saw it in the paper, I doubt
you'd come to the funeral.

Translations from the Poems of Inna Kabysh

This is life

This is life, which means summer and the dacha,
rain and sun, work and more work.
I wake up for a second before the baby's cry,
before the baby, before grass and water.

This is a chalice full to the brim,
and trough, and tub, and chamberpot,
stove-bench, kasha-malasha,
hell's bells, root and branch.

This is going for walks, twitter and babble,
laughter and tears, halloo and cooee,
and the swallow building its own nest
by day, doublequick, on the run.

This is the view, nothing simpler,
with an anthill near a stump,
field, cutting, apiary, grove:
life – the divine bustle and fuss.

And grass grows between the slabs,
and between washloads the poet writes.
This is a line, a needle, a pin,
this is happiness, which doesn't exist.

And September ended

And September ended – the cigarette butts remained, the leftovers
and drifts of leaves. Growing accustomed to unwelcome news,
I lived. And love always left in English
and trudged with a royal step along Russian paths.

I followed it with my eyes. And lived. Expecting cold,
expecting hunger, plague, and civil war,
and Judgment, amid collapse, on the doorstep of hell
I lived, never once hoping to make it till spring.

I wrote words, I read words, I wrote:
I escaped in words, but, as in a child's game:
One, two, three! –
rang out in me – and then nothing saved me:
after each ...*three!* I exploded from within.

And later collected: another self from what had been.
And what came after later – two words saying: *I lived...*
For life is greater than autumn, motherland, greater than love,
greater than words....
Life envelops everything: that's why it's so hard.

Children's Sunday

I don't want to go into that hell, I cried,
but the lady in white said
it was necessary, not a person, but a Ukie,
and you can never understand these Ukies,
although all their words are like ours,
and led me into a big room
where there were many little beds
and it was quiet time.
But it wasn't entirely quiet,
because as soon as the lady in white left
from the neighboring bed they said in a whisper
that at afternoon snack here there are always *bubliki*,
and at night they don't take us home:
not because it's a boarding school,
but because they'd killed us,
and to lie down here again at night,
and let's be friends,
one has to live somehow
if they've killed you,
because the caretaker Fedorov says
that soon it's Sunday.
And when after snack we went for a stroll,
we found a *bublik* on the porch –
and although it was very hard
we hid it in a pocket,
but later decided to hide it a little more
so it couldn't be found by the director,
who leaned out of the window
and shouted at the caretaker Fedorov
to nail up the missing letter *g*
in the word *Kindergarten* by the entrance door
because inspectors will come,
and this isn't a children's institution
but the devil knows what.
And the caretaker Fedorov swept the fallen leaves from the porch
and grumbled what was he supposed to nail,
it's autumn, anyway,
and that letter had vanished into thin air,
although all the time it was rolling around underfoot....
And we went into the far corner of the courtyard
where a cat lived in a pipe,
and the cat's bowl was so empty
that we gave her our *bublik*,

but she didn't take it:
she sniffed it and didn't take it,
and we thought it would be better to keep it for ourselves, anyway,
and buried it by the fence.
And when we returned
and walked through the corridor near the director's office,
we heard her talking on the phone,
that she had to fire that Fedorov
because he was utterly insolent
and not only that, he doesn't fulfill his responsibilities
and expects Sunday off
and, really, it had been explained to him in plain Russian
that Sunday is a parental day,
but our contingent are the victims of abortion:
if we have Sunday here
no one will come for them anyway –
that we work without a day off
and, yes, of course, I simply don't have any other way out
except the gate,
and I'll lock them in with a lock
so no Fedorov can open it....
Choking with insult
and smearing the tears with our fists,
we flew to the caretaker's lodge
and from the threshold cried
we know why the director cancelled
the day off:
her husband had left her –
who wants to go home to an empty apartment –
and now there wouldn't be a Sunday
because the director had the key....
But the caretaker Fedorov listened to us
and said calmly,
let her sleep with her key
if she's got no one else to sleep with
and that we should come after lights out.
And we ran to the cafeteria
where, like always, it smelled of slightly burned *kasha*,
and later to the dressing room
over the entrance to which, we knew,
was written:
Leave all clothing
and although we didn't know what was meant by *all*,
we left it there
because the director stood in the doorway with the key,
and darted under the blankets.

And when the director with the key fell asleep,
we crawled out and on tiptoe went down to the caretaker's lodge.
Is it okay that we didn't bring anything? we asked,
but the caretaker Fedorov answered that it's okay
because Sunday is very close
and if not with a key, then by digging,
and took the big shovel
and gave us dustpans –
and we went out into the yard.
And there the caretaker Fedorov observed
that, although we're close,
it wouldn't upset anything to take a few provisions,
and we cried, we have provisions,
and ran to the fence,
and the caretaker Fedorov came after us,
and when we dug up our *bublik*
he said, aha, and therefore
let this mark the *start*,
and began to dig.
And the cat looked at us from the pipe
and her eyes burned like two flashlights.
But soon it became entirely dark,
clearly, the cat had left to go to sleep,
and the caretaker Fedorov said
that we shouldn't be frightened,
to repeat after him:

*We're a line, long and true,
we're looking for the bird of blue,
pam-para-pam,
pam-para-pam –*

and dug further.
And we repeated:

*Pam-para-pam,
pam-para-pam –*

and weren't afraid.
And later he hit the shovel on something iron,
covered his head
and, pulling himself up by his hands, crawled out –
and pulled us out.

The blue birds,
rose-colored elephants

and red horses looked at us as if we were their kin.
The sun shone.
And the caretaker Fedorov said this is Children's World
and we can take all that we want.
And we took the most beautiful doll
and the biggest car.
We sat the doll in the car
and gave her our *bublik*.
And the doll sat in the car,
nibbling the *bublik* and smiling.
And we carried the car across the barrier
and no one interfered
because, as the caretaker Fedorov explained,
it was Sunday, resurrection day,
and Sunday is not at all a parents' day,
but a day when children meet their own
childhood,
because resurrection
is not when a person meets others,
but when one meets oneself.

Yuri Gagarin was a great Russian poet

Yuri Gagarin was a great Russian poet:
Russia shoved him out of herself into the sky,
as if into exile,
as if to the Caucasus,
and he boarded a carriage, that is, a rocket –
for the path of a rocket – that’s the path of poets –
said: “Let’s go!” –
and smiled his Gagarin smile.
And in that smile was the whole Earth,
the very best that’s here,
“Earth in blue radiance,”
news – to the sky from humanity –
because a poet – is the one who speaks with the sky,
overcoming gravity
as if it were the language barrier.

With you, I forgot home and time

With you, I forgot home and time.
And poems. Poems! – what trifles.
I looked at you, up there,
and my hand did not lift to write.

So the centuries go: every woman
on earth always tracks down God
in order to believe, to drink her fill
of heaven and falling. I absolutely

don't judge: I spare the one I love.
...Beneath our feet, unswept gold.
I walk. I'm simply leaving
because you're deadly for me.

If the train's already gone
to Yuri Ryashentsev

If the train's already gone, we have to somehow live at the station:
in the toilet, the snackbar, under the dusty ficus, by the cashier's,
for the heavens foisted this place and time on us,
as is the custom of those on high: not having asked us.

It's necessary to put patches on dresses and pitch tents,
not throw up our hands, but cultivate chickens, chrysanthemums, fires,
and read Scripture, and keep one's soul in order,
and want to leave for all three of us, which means, like three sisters.

And to walk in circles, like in prison,
along the transparent platform –
and understand, and curse, and resign oneself, and want nothing,
and without white envy look on the scatterbrained crow,
who might have flown to Verona on her own two wings.

And on this strip of the planet to live till dawn,
and find a place for oneself under the roof and sun in view
of the urn for cigarette butts, and live till spring and till summer,
and write in a notebook, and not go crazy in this hell.

And to stand on one's own, and start a mash of roots,
and grow, and later break into blossom and ripen with fruit,
for the train left for the heavens and the whistles of its horn,
but the station remains on which is written *HOME*.

Day of the Border Guards

Driving the M8
for John

There are bandits on this road, the kind who might once have lurked on horseback beneath the forest's eave right here, where the highway narrows obligingly at the edge of Vladimir *oblast'*: good spot for an ambush. I'm driving in this dream, although in real life you usually drive the second-hand car with empty screwholes in the hood and trunk where someone filched the BMW emblems from right under the gaze of the *dvorniki* who loiter all day in the parking lot keeping an eye on us foreigners (Whose eye? Why?). Our car's muscular, smooth, but nothing like what most bandits drive, tint-windowed Mercedes that purrs down the road stiff-arming Soviet models that run on rubber bands and spit, for which ordinary schmucks wait years on a list.... Every Russian fixes cars. Once in a while the BMW breaks down: I pop the hood, make a show of feminine helplessness for ten, fifteen seconds, until the screech of tires, sometimes two or three sets, when the drivers of Ladas or Zhigulis or – once – a Chaika, spring from their seats, screwdrivers in hand, itching to get a closer look under that hood. They always manage to get it going again.... Out this way, bandits broker the trade in oversized beach towels – a thousand miles from any ocean, Mickey Mouse waves his mitts from every clothesline an hour's drive on either side of Sergeyev Posad – we ask ourselves what the profit is in that, but can't come up with a satisfactory answer. Oh, you're here: funny, I'd swear I set out alone.... Look, there's a bandit parked half in a ditch. Cigarette dangling, Ray Bans cocked, he's young, smooth-shaven, with something vulpine about his cheek and nascent jowl. The kind of man who rarely looks at me, which is best, because one glance in those ferocious, needy eyes and I'm a goner, I'm mom and whore and

Little Red Riding Hood all rolled into one.
The bandit bends to flick mud from his shoe
as he shakes down the owners of beat-up
cars parked by the roadside, impromptu
market in enamel pans, patterned curtains,
crystal chandeliers: opportunity knocking....
I take it back: you're not in this dream, after all.
You're never in my dreams anymore.
Twenty-five years of tuna melts, nylon sheers,
utility bills, and suddenly you've vanished,
poof! As if you'd never been. As if you hadn't
dragged the mattress across the apartment on
our wedding night, although it was 110 in
the shade and the tiny window a/c might as well
have been broken. As if you hadn't shed tears
next morning when I posed you among bouquets
and empty champagne bottles to take the photo
still propped by my bed: proof that joy exists,
despite all our dreary evidence to the contrary.
Because I'm following the wolf pack now,
I'm on the scent of danger, I know full well
there's a dumpster in my future, only, god,
not today, oh, not today. Today I'm driving
this car on what passes for a highway in Russia
and, instead of you, maybe my passenger's
a modern-day highwayman: yes. Maybe
I'm driving him along his regular rounds.
"You're beautiful," he says in that soulful
Russian way, stroking my cheek and blowing
smoke out the window, or maybe I'm the one
saying it, because it's true, he's beautiful as
wild, beautiful as feral, beautiful as fear.
Soon we're stopping at a hamlet composed
of a dozen or so knock-kneed cottages,
where my bandit's all business counting out
his cut from jars of fresh pickles, pails of
potatoes, buckets of cut daisies clustering
at the feet of an empty stool that leans against
a half-hinged gate. I'm tasting one of those
pickles, feather-frond of dill still clinging
to its rind, swallowing the brine and gall of
being ornamental. Serviceable. I've decided
there's no such thing as essential: we're –
all of us – intimate strangers who'll disappear
some morning, tomorrow, or next month, or
maybe twenty-five years down the line, joy

becoming theoretical again as it vanishes, unbelief
chafing fingers where rings once held sway.
With bandits, at least, I know what I'm getting.
My passenger's eyes already stray to the gate,
where a blonde, lipsticked siren accidentally
hooks her miniskirt as she hastens to meet us.
Underwear flashes pink: pattern of hearts.
This village lies at the end of the universe.
I know what's coming next: my tongue
is torn out. I change myself to a nightingale.
Too late, you come looking for me. You
recognize the place at once: storks nesting
in chimneys, scrollwork edging the windows,
scent of onions and mushrooms infusing the air.
All the cottages sag in unison towards a church,
whose star-speckled dome has split in two.

For My Beloved...

...I was a banquet, a thousand and one dishes –
scent rose from my fingers, stained my hands.
Flavors dusted my pillow: coriander,
anise, cumin. Each night, a thousand wishes
bloomed: with my beloved, I roamed the city
smoky with charcoal braziers, scaled the Palace
of Universal Happiness. I'd fall
asleep in his arms, pepper wind gritty
on my skin.... My beloved is gone.
I bind stars in my hair, listening
for footsteps at the gate: the moon grows old.
I brush cumin from my fingers, fold
my heart in paper lanterns, glistening
in darkness till I flicker out, alone.

Leaving Home

Leaving home – my husband’s house –
I lose myself, baffled by streets
bearing names I no longer know,
their curves and contours crouched in shadow –
Evergreen, Eden, Eternity – each
street sign signaling simply *exit*.
Slipping beneath the city’s skin,
I discover bluegrass, blues, jazz bars,
burr of Scotch, whiskey with soda,
I meet a man – many men –
feel fingers flense my face, smell
the way flesh melts into midnight
in temporary rooms. Recently,
I dreamed of home, my husband’s back
still partitioning the bed: unbreached,
unbreachable. Here, when it rains,
the skylight weeps; the sink gnaws
its own enamel. Near the window,
an amaryllis arrays itself
anxiously. *So much need*,
my husband once said, in disbelief
– so much needless grief.

Anemone

He dug up the rogue holly, the dahlias
parched and wizened on the stem, threw out
mums that had managed somehow to overwinter.
It had rained that morning, not too much,
but enough to harden his resolve
to pull the weeds run wild once she'd gone.
He lopped brown branches from the pouting rose,
re-contoured the beds, flattened out the curve
where the mower always thwacked into rocks.
The curve had been her idea, the rocks unearthed
when she double-dug the squares of dirt
abandoned by the previous owner, who'd also
left in a hurry. She'd wheedled him into
edging the walk with miniature boxwood –
forty-two precisely positioned holes –
in full June sun. They planted rosemary, chives,
alpine strawberries the birds always ate.
She added laurels, rhododendron, bulbs,
transplanted aucuba from the house where
she'd been born. In winter, she pored over
garden catalogs, attaching yellow
sticky notes to pictures of plants she thought
might be the crowning touch. She always knew
when to dig, to prune, when things bloomed;
she always knew when to give up on things.
He'd never had much faith in his own judgment,
never seemed able to make up his mind.
What, for example, to do with this tiered,
leggy thing, its short, scrubby leaves
clearly spreading among the better-behaved
plants, tiny white nubs now threatening
to burst into full, riotous flower?

The Golden Fish

Some men say I'm a fish, some
a mermaid; women say I'm worse.
What's important: that I enthrall
the fishermen, arrest their knives
at the point of entry. Chinese, English
Russian, all the common tongues:
it isn't hard to learn the words
to ask these men, *What's your desire?*
Each thinks I speak to him alone.
Each says the same thing: peace at home,
the wife's forgotten how much
he loves her, what she wants is stuff
(funny – these men just want to fish).
Once I give him what he wants,
the clever wife gets what she wants:
granite counters, induction burners –
she's lady, tsarina, queen of hearts.
(Does she ever deign to thank me?
Ever imagine *her* life with fins?)
After a while, a squall blows up –
he's sorry, the man tells me, his wife's
gone crazy, she wants to be – God.
Could I, please, just one last time – ?
Some things even enchantment
can't do. *Go home, now*, I sigh
(I always sigh). *She's sitting in
the hut once more*. He's gone, just
like that. They never come back.

City of Bells

*How can it matter in what tongue I
Am misunderstood by whomever I meet...*

— Marina Tsvetayeva

The songs of my life are gathered in trams
smelling of cabbage and stale smoke and
last evening's night out, tin melodies
orbiting the city, resonating in half-lives:
murmurs, grunts, the thin whine of excuse,
all the sounds that surround me in this city
of churches, where – even now – Kremlin
chimes toll, electric, evil, to tell what time it is.
Nothing assaults the wandering soul like
music unlooked-for: milky voice of English
spilling from a doorway in Arbat, careless peal
of long-tongueless bells, swirling cries of blue-
hooded crows that fall and rise like a heartbeat.
I know just what you mean, Marina:
it doesn't matter *where* I'm altogether lonely.
Your beloved rowanberry blossoms still in
Moscow, Marina; now, at last, your city
summons you home. As for me, my exile's
voluntary – what I call home is neither here
nor there. I drift from hand to hand, tongue
to tongue, tuning my ear to the one false note,
the too-regular breath, the broken spell....
My lover's gone, Marina; his words scatter
like birch leaves in the snow. Now he lives
with an ordinary woman. He chose to remain
among the timid souls who count their fortunes
in the dark night as the black cars speed by.
No one now will pause to recall the rhymes
of their lives or the sounds of their singing,
droning like flies on the face of dank earth.

Fig

...*tumi jeno dumurer phool hoe gele...*
...you've become (invisible) like the dumur flower...
— Bengali idiom

i.

I've become like the dumur flower,
inflorescence of fig-in-bloom
embroidering my inner walls.
Fleshy peduncles descend
from my ribcage, wasps colonize
my pelvis, seeking the ostiole's
warm-mouthed murmur: sex till death.
The male fig wasp develops, mates,
and dies inside the fruit of his birth.
How many men will die in me?

ii.

How many men will eat my fruit,
meditate for years beneath
my banyan bones? A parable
of the fig tree: when the branch
is tender, and putteth forth leaves,
ye know that summer is nigh. Rejoice
in me, each under your own vine
and fig tree, fruit of paradise
ripening beneath the leaves
that multiply, hiding our sins.

iii.

*When I grew into my beauty,
I became a kanephoros
and wore a necklace of dried figs.*
A woman learns to initiate
herself, leads processions to
the altar on the acropolis,
bears the kanoun to sacrifice.
Old men tell her: *Dwell within
the temple of our beliefs, not
the wilderness that lies beyond.*

iv.

What if wilderness lies within?
I sacrificed to Dionysus –
infected body, mind, and bed
by the god of figs, I slew
the mountain lion, my son: you.
Cursing the fig that yielded no fruit,
Jesus said, *Let no fruit grow
on thee henceforward for ever* –
his fig was just a metaphor.
Every mother mourns with me.

v.

I've become like the dumur flower,
favorite of monkeys, bats,
refuge of the wingless male.
When the fig wasp dies, the fruit
absorbs his body. His winged mate
carries pollen fig to fig:
women's work. Each one ripe
contains fifteen hundred seeds.
Whoso keepeth the fig tree
shall eat the fruit thereof.

The Parrot Flaubert

That spring she couldn't rid herself of him:
his essence lingered in the rows of boxwood,
the balky lawn mower, the wheelbarrow
with the flat tire he'd propped against the porch.
Magazines, bills kept coming in his name.
Ants still overran the pantry, bait
untouched, as if she'd never set it out.
She had to remind herself he'd really gone.
Those last months, he'd sequestered himself
in the basement, flitting from channel to channel,
crowds of celluloid Welleses and Garbos
repelling all her efforts to engage him.
Unhappiness sprouted thorns, muscled in
among the end tables. The words of a Russian
cabaret song lodged in her brain, repeating
insistently, reminding her of mortgages,
Chantilly silver spoons, hand-knotted rugs,
the silken net that had ensnared them both.
Honestly, when she thought about it now,
what she'd experienced as tragedy
might, in fact, have been – something less.
She recalled the stillness in which he'd sat –
he'd seemed impervious – while the final
verse played out around him: the once-plucky
heroine driven to hysterics, smashing
plates, the old cat saucer-eyed beneath
the sofa, and the parrot Flaubert, sobbing
uncontrollably again *en français*.

Knitting in Siberia

Let me warn you that a genuine interest in knitting can keep you fascinated, eagerly pursuing it, and never satisfied, through a lifetime.

— Rose Wilder Lane, *The Women's Day Book of American Needlework*

I've been thinking about the prairie, Rose,
how that word sounds the same in every language.
This prairie sweeps out east, not west, but speaks,
like all prairies, of freedom and fair chance.
It's April in Siberia: this morning,
as I dodge drops from gables, eaves, wooden
rickrack beribboning the city's old homes,
I can feel the river ice crack, heave,
struggle to wrench free. Tomsk, too, was once
a prairie town like all the little towns
in your mother's books: millions of girls like me
still measure their lives against the handmade
pleasures of her story. And when we're grown –
kids gone, marriages collapsed – we find
you there before us, chaperoning Laura
as she visits the city to which you've run,
mother and daughter already colluding in
one another's fictions: *I do want
to do a little writing with Rose to get
the hang of it a little better so I
can write something perhaps I can sell....*
As good a myth as any, how things get started.
Here's what I know: point of the needle jabbing
my finger, the snarl of yarn, reel and loop,
the tying off of stitches. Rose, you taught me
how to knit when my own mother gave up:
she blamed it on my left hand, said she couldn't
teach me backwards.... Tomorrow I'll look at business
plans from modern-day homesteaders, choose
winners to visit America: the climber
who designed a light-weight metal harness,
the gold-toothed ex-KGB hack who waves
a letter from the regional governor,
the woman crafting an empire of cigarette kiosks
whose toddler bangs both fists upon my door.
Home, for now, is Moscow: triple locks,
biznesmeny, streets choked with Mercedes Benz.
Phone calls from my mother – that singular ring
the phone makes when the call's from overseas –

I learn that someone's died, that someone's
been born just from the way she says, *Hello?*
Tonight in my hotel room on this strange prairie,
I'll look at stars, their unfamiliar postings.
I'll think of Russian convicts perched on sledges
skittering across the ice, of the wagons
your mother rode to Kansas, Minnesota,
beyond. No turning back, not then. No second
thoughts. I'll purl new rows in the sweater
I'm knitting for a nephew I've never seen
back there in America, parse each stitch
backwards, steadying the yarn as it slackens,
twists free, and, then, pulls taut: same pattern our mothers
picked out. That we teach ourselves. Repeat.

Day of the Border Guards

for Barbara Roesmann

May 29, 1987: German Teen Lands Plane in Red Square

This story's true: spring at last in Moscow,
time of thawing earth, of drying mud.
Sunshine and mist hopscotch across Red Square:
stones the color of smoke, St. Basil's domes,
those child-sized Kremlin windows. Banners flutter
in the breeze, proclaiming it the Day
of the Border Guards. In front of Lenin's Tomb,
young Border Guards in full parade regalia
snap photographs, some laughing, tugging girls
by the hand, some already draped across
the shoulders of their comrades. Except for
the clothes, the cameras, today could be
any spring day in a thousand-year span:
I could be myself, or any one
of Pushkin's women, or Margarita walking
the alleyways with yellow flowers in
her arms. Possibilities: a man
I've never met spots my flowers, knows
immediately he's loved me all his life.
Onegin shouts at his coachman to stop.
I marry a general; I marry a madman.
I become a witch, an Old Believer,
a Streltsy wife sledging to Siberia.
I poison myself (arsenic? hemlock?). Just
as I swallow the fatal dose, an object
darts from the western sky: silver, exquisite.
I watch it circle, descend, buzz Red Square.
Someone shouts, incredulous, *He's landing!*
People start pushing, running, trying to
get out of the way. The airplane noses down
right there, right in Red Square. The pilot –
he can't be more than seventeen – climbs out,
extends his hand. Now no one moves. We wait
until an officer of the Border Guards
threads his way among the crowd, sways
ever so gently across the sharp-edged stones,
I hold my breath. Sirens blare in the Kremlin.
Soon a thousand things will happen at once:
someone will shove a camera in my hand,
ask me to take his picture with the pilot.
Special Forces cops will ring the plane:

they'll handcuff the boy, cordon off Red Square.
I'll be herded to the metro, lose
my flowers in the crush. Wonder what
it was I saw. Because now I'm a witness,
I stand and watch – all of us watch – as –
slowly, shockingly – that drunken officer
of the Border Guards stretches out
ten trembling fingers to print the faintest stain
of hope on the airplane's shiny metal skin.

On Merwin

How long it took as you tried and failed and
tried again to unstaple the word from the page
seeking its living essence rather than an inky simulacrum
through Provence through Hawa'ii through Pakistan
where you chronicled the baiting of the bears
each year my uncle gave me your book a new one
each year the words spilling across the page like
shells and mollusks and sea anemones of the blind
seer of Ambon who as you do mined the sorrows
of his life for beauty – he writes too much said
my uncle sadly they take him for granted – he
should just put back the punctuation I said
to myself each time each time I was mistaken

My Student Reads E. Dickinson

i

The immediate form of the poem is taken into consideration directly after reading the title.

Assigned to write one final essay on a poem that holds meaning for him, my student selects "A narrow Fellow in the Grass," poem 986 in the Johnson edition. My uncle's copy of Johnson shows its age: the pages creased, annotated, Dickinson's dates written in my uncle's hand inside the front cover. The pages are interleaved with a Roger Shattuck article on Emily's abstemiousness, a note from Ed dated *Friday night* about his first reading of "There's a certain slant of light," and two letters from friends discussing "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –." My uncle's question marks bleed into yellowed paper beneath the poems. He's left a check above the narrow fellow: the corner of the page is folded down.

ii.

Once I read the word "narrow" I immediately recognized how narrow the stanzas were. The narrowness did not stop here, though, but continued on throughout the poem.

A boy observes a spotted shaft in the grass, mistakes it, at first, for something useful. Benign. Then catches his breath: zero at the bone. The narrowness does not stop here: it slithers inward, to the boy's heart, where it nestles, warms, coils back upon itself. *Is the gun her art?* my uncle wonders, laying his own emphatic thumb on the dyad of love and fear: each requires the other for completion. Forty-three thousand interpretations of this poem materialize in .23 seconds on Google: seemingly not enough to convince my student, to whom Dickinson appears uncordial,

her yellow eye inscrutable as Sanskrit.
Hard to blame him: I, too, have lingered
in doubt, hesitating to turn the pages,
to write, or even think, the questions. I,
too, have stood in corners. Failed at love.

iii.

The contents of Emily's poem significantly relate to its form. The contents are brief, yet descriptive.

WEIGHT my uncle has written, all caps, beside
"There's a certain slant of light." Last night
a blizzard swallowed up the town: today
my student might be dodging snowballs, nursing
a hangover, or listening to Biggie.
Hard to envision Death, or Distance, through
the whine of snow blowers, though it's there
on the page – Emily, the friends who wrote
the letters, my uncle: all dead (Biggie too).
His books now fill a wall in my living room.
Don't give me any New Testament gods,
he said at the end. *Give me fire and brimstone,*
the God of Job – that's the God I believe in.
Internal difference: where the Meanings are.

iv.

Emily Dickinson was known for her unusual content and form of her verses. Some experts even attribute this to why she was only a minor poet during her lifetime.

Surfing the net this morning, I read that Polish
police recovered the sign stolen from
the gates at Auschwitz: *ARBEIT MACHT FREI*.
The thieves – common criminals, according
to the story – cut the sign in pieces for sale
to collectors of Nazi memorabilia.
I also find the website of a Brooklyn
professor from whom my student has lifted text:
*Her use of language anticipates the way
modern poets use language.* I wonder
what they signal to my student, these signposts
by which I navigate the universe:

Auschwitz, of course, and Amherst, Brooklyn, places
I've passed along my transit. He hasn't found
the boggy acre, the floor too cool for corn,
or even the barefoot boy that he himself
must long ago have been. The dividing grass.

v.

Briefness and imagination are two commonly represented themes in this poem and we can attest to both of them.

And then it closes at my feet. Weight,
meaning, love wrestle with the kind
of doubt that twines itself around the heart.
What does it matter if my student's stolen
someone else's reading of Dickinson?
Is he really perishing for lack of
what is found there? I know myself: fear
cankers from within, wrinkling the words
until they shimmer before the eye. Like
my student, like the four thieves who hauled
the pieces of that sign halfway across
Poland before they were caught, I, too,
have hacked at words, their alien meanings.
But where shall wisdom be found? Where is the place
of understanding? My uncle, also a teacher,
would have cursed the TV, latchkey parents,
then led my student word by excruciating
word through the poem, till he couldn't fail
to comprehend. As he taught me. As he
taught me. Not for love, exactly, but
because it had been given him in task.
Teach me, and I will hold my tongue....

Kingdom of Heaven
Novodevichiy Convent, Moscow, 1524

i.

At thirteen, they taught me to be a woman,
limned my skin with lead so it resembled snow,
brushed my brows with antimony, shade
of a sable's tail. They rouged my cheeks
with beets till they gleamed like poppies,
pulled back my hair so tight I feared I'd faint –
not one strand must ever show. They forced
sharp, stinging drops between my lids,
dilated my pupils as wide as a falcon's –
I'd never seen a falcon's eyes. I was lucky:
a man came for me. He saw I was beautiful.
He saw I was strong. But he himself was not
strong: he died before our wedding.

ii.

Now I pass my days embroidering faces,
studding the eyes of saints with pearls.
Fishbone, feather stitch, chain and tuck:
I work their flesh in peach-tongued silk.

iii.

Sometimes in dreams I walk a path
where gold-leaved birches rustle and nod
against an autumn sky. Mushrooms
cluster at the roots of trees, poppies
spill their seed on the fields. I stretch – shiver –
my hair, my body now unbound. The path
is peopled with creatures: beneath dry,
dusky skin, the earth stirs, whispers
the language of our feet. In this dream,
my fur glows richer than the sable's.
I am flying with the falcon.
I am snowing perfect pearls.

Note on Inna Kabysh

Inna Kabysh (b. 1963) is the author of five books of poetry: *Lichnye trudnosti* (1994), *Detskiy mir* (1996), *Mesto vstrechi* (2000), *Detstvo, otrochestvo, detstvo* (2003), and *Nevesta bez mesta* (2008). In 1996 Kabysh was awarded Russia's Pushkin Prize. She is also an awardee of the Alfred Toepfer Fund (Hamburg, Germany) and winner of the Anton Delwig Prize (2005). With the exception of several short poems published in anthologies of contemporary Russian writing, almost none of Kabysh's work has been translated into English. The six poems presented here are translated from the versions in *Nevesta bez mesta* (Moscow: Vremya 2008), a volume of new and selected work.