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TEN POEMS

by
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POEM

*Since early September we have been caught in the pull of the cosmos.
Close your eyes, and you'll know how a leaf that brushes your face
Rubs against the shutters, by mistake touches a cloud,
And sticks between the rooftiles to escape the touch of our hands.*

*A tree drains the day. The sky is white and blind.
The voice withdraws, having waded into the ebbing valley.
Everything gathers within me so I would know how wearied Atreus
Rejoiced at the castle's silence and the steaming waters.*

*Will you pass this threshold? Fate, weir, gravel,
Niggardly shabby churches, triangular mires.
The wide hour rushes into rot and loam,
The city circles, and the twelve winds rise in a row.*

*Will you win me or lose me—thus far no one knows.
The fallows have eroded, the constellations have been pruned.
I attract misfortune, like true north the magnet,
Like a magnet a magnet, misfortune attracts me.*

SESTINA

*U is nearly six, and the ice-covered road
Bends toward the north. Chains
Clatter on tires. The muffled metal echo,
Like the surface of a lake, glitters up front.
The weightless and wounded March snow
Still tries to cover the annihilated forest.*

*Like a drawbridge which divides the sluggish forest,
My glance lifts and stops. It is led astray by the road
Against which several times have battered the snow
And the monotonous chains*

*Of birch trees. In the pure mist the well rises in front
Of the empty houses. And everything else is an echo*

*And clots of air. The aimless echo,
Which does not exist, resounds through the forest.
The graphite mirror stands blackly in front
Of the great darkness. We have been given the road
And the heaven-sent chains,
The invisible but all-powerful snow.*

*The old-aged spring is watched by the snow,
And our hearing is unraveled by the many-faced echo.
Like a pond which has broken loose from its chains,
A blind thought seeps into the forest.
Here, gasoline will not help, the white road,
Or the beam of light clearing up front.*

*The formless cosmos emerges in front.
The biting star, the mindless snow
That cloaks the field, the armed road.
A shadow, a reflection, a painting, an echo
Fill the crumbling Arden forest,
And their payment is the solitary chains.*

*Will we be tempered by your chains?
Things and elements stand in front
Of me. I will leave that severe forest
Where the trees are covered and guarded by snow,
And the word is replaced by an empty echo,
And everything ends. Perhaps the road*

*Is a net of chains. My protected road
To your forest. The earth is frozen with snow.
We have become enemies. You are only an echo.*

POEM

*As if in a photograph, it is spacious and dangerous.
The skies pull back from the rooftops
Having consumed the white plague of the city,
The early freeze penetrates our words,
Singing our mouths and lungs
In the empery by the imprisoned seas.*

*The past provides no signs.
The blackened sun beats against the floor,
And our journeys finally end
Where our birthplace, deadlock, and burden
Become irreparably severe
And the columns of Paestum sink into the marsh.*

*Tuesday. Clear weather. Near winter.
The lowlands press against the Finnish shores
And surround the harbor.
Perhaps then or perhaps earlier
The hour ruptured above the river
And time transfigured into gesture.*

GHETTO

*We will return here. It is silent.
There are so many houses. Collated, weighed,
And divided as commonly as coal.
It is the final time.*

Betrayal

*Stamps the newspaper glasses,
Floods through the yellow crack in the door,
Colors the bandages, numbs the bond
And the ink, and weighs down the nets.*

*The thoughts of a child, infirm houses,
The abating waters, the unreal hills!*

*There is no death and the judgment will not come.
Flame and sand lick the window frames.
Neither Hebrew nor Roman—
According to our final rights,
We are only letters, footnotes, outlines and plans.
We are white paper. We are ash.*

A POEM ABOUT FRIENDS

For Natalija Gorbanevskaya

*When even strangers are not strangers
And all that has not yet happened
Flows in currents to nonexistence,
As if nothingness had a direction,
When outside the city day ends
And the radio crackles as the storm approaches,
Let's lock ourselves away once again
From the last minutes of summer.*

*When the skies are dark, through the door walk
The vanished, the overdue, the retreated
For whom this night our room
Is the only Elysian field,
Whose shadows wander through our dreams
Having loved and forgotten each other,
Who settle down in the pits of mirrors
And unexpectedly surface and rise.*

*And so are reborn in their buried coffins
The winged women, the unseen brothers,
The generation long changed to echoes,
To book margins, to dry grass;
And those who still live are gathered by fogs,
Empty houses and long journeys.
Their weapon—resistance and silence,
And the hope that Apollo may yet save them.*

*The garret will dissemble nature's bounds,
The night will separate the thaw from the frost,
And even language in the presence of death
Will protect their constancy if,
Having poisoned sensation and thought,
Having hollowed out a hole in the stone steps,
An unasked for future awaits them—
Their wasted and remitted thing.*

*They visited our forest. The dead
Furniture remembers their wood-like fingers.
Having marched into maturity
They do not answer to the earthly judge.
They are an open and great family
Whose children share a single name—
Having replaced their voice, emptiness
Fills our spaces to the limit.*

*I don't believe in misadventure and believe
In friends for whom I have equally divided
The distance between the world and the eyes,
This fragile and ethereal endlessness.
All faces vanish in the light.
Lamps burn out, truths come clear,
But all their footsteps meet in me
The way parallel lines in the distance converge.*

*Again the fall, filled and lavish.
In the city won by a few souls
Above foreign streetcars and old houses
This is September's first brave hour.
Large barges loom in the water,
Each nerve in the morning is strained,
And the first leaf that hits the ground
Is angular, like a coat of arms.*

Editor's Note: Natalija Gorbanevskaya is a poet who was shut up in a psychiatric hospital for her August 1968 protest against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. She has since emigrated to the West and now lives and writes in Paris.

POEM

*a few of the blue-grey balconies remind us of bark;
they are deeply engraved with Martian-like tree-writing;
bright nails and numbers fall into formation;
the air smells of cold and sap; the paints have not yet hidden
beneath the burden of snow. Healthy, quick, splatterable turpentine
by the roadside, the frankness of unnecessary letters
and weighty, almost unreal, ice formations,
the black round city like a shellacked plate
beneath the burden of snow.
Black shadows of tree trunks, streetcars,
then the telephone bell, toys sharp as if broken;
and the thicknesses of metaphors. When we walk into the street
watches shine in windows and on pulses.
Who will take our places now? Who will need
the December rain, February thunder, March drought?*

A POEM ABOUT ARCHITECTURE

*here the days are all so loyal
and all so light, my friend,
like the heights of the bell towers and steeples
at whose bottom we wait for darkness;
so tell me, how will we struggle against
the springs found in the clay,
the meteorite mints on the porch,
the dynasty of islands and straits?*

*and so then we, who pick the luxurious apple
which did not grow for us in the deserts,
who have divided the glory of the dead
like a giant linen shawl,
who have declared freedom's moratorium,
who have learned to repeat
the history of heaven's unliving in the storm,
the geometry of resurrection;*

*and so the beginning, and the foam in the boat
beyond the smoking red embankment
(boulevards, sailboats and the Baltic
breathe deeply and accept) —
though the city stones constrict us,
with new names we named forever
the waves, middle-age, middle-earth,
winters and the water full of birds;*

*and so our homeland; defend yourself;
its gothic doors are ajar,
and the airless distances are so close,
and the heavens are like smokeless gunpowder*

POEM

*Let the time you do not remember
and the world you did not find
be as black and white
as stones, as the names of appletrees
and boulevards.*

*Let sugar, curds, and the persistent,
square-cornered water in jars,
and the dying lights in movie theaters,
and the nightingales in suburban fields,
suffer through litigations for many hours.*

*Let the taste of gunpowder remind us
that the dawn brightened not so long ago
and small trains on picnics pass by
the beast-cages of the city, —*

*because the canal where our tears flow
was so easily marked by pencils
and yellow salt strewn by the hand
of a blind, incomprehensible God.*

THE VALLEY OF ARARAT

*So unexpected, finished, and sensible,
And we are not searched for in vain
By the forgetful and scorn-swollen
Incensed lord of the earth.
And not in vain are the blueberries
Of the biblical flat-topped hills
So abundant and so miserable
When the waters of the Savus are born
In the dead Armenian springs.*

*We will accept your offering of peace,
All of your translucent lead —
O, how our mouths are cut by the black hoar-frost
In the dead Armenian springs.*

AXENOS PONTOS

*That very first sea of misfortune
Is as inhospitable as the spears of the Danaides,
Its salty waters flood to shore
In Sapphic strophes.*

*That's how he, perhaps, beneath the olive tree
On the distant roads fell asleep forever
Without seeing the Phaeacian boat
And Nausicaa.*

*We won't believe that he returned,
That in Ithaca's barns he forgot his land,
Where the mountain snows overcome the Pontos
Screaming sand,*

*Where there is no beginning, present, or kindness,
And in the gods' night, in the weightless abyss,
The Pleiades, like a golden wave, whip themselves
Into foam.*