

Maria GALINA

Poems

From Ex Fisica

He loved her for her outward beauty
 Unhappy marriage, mouth-sucking sweetie
 Her clean little holes and her soul's purity.
 And so alongside him she trips
 Like a wind-up doll with a pouting lower lip,
 As yet unacquainted with the hormonal blip
 Long long legs, and her back 's curve (he checks this every time) baby blue and pink
 She doesn't have facial hair to pluck, her bowels keep time like the speaking clock,
 And he even likes the fact that she is (beyond a fried egg)
 A lousy cook.
 They walk the length of the beach, along the sea, in whose depths salt gnaws
 The bones of the unknown dead.
 Where a gull bobbing on the swell follows the shadows of fish
 Passing over the bed,
 Where a fisherman sits on a pier, beginning with the letter M,
 He hasn't caught a thing, but actually that wasn't why he came.
 Look, he says, here we are, and out there is something else,
 I once had a dream that I was alone – I woke and I was sobbing,
 You have such soft, soft glands, he says? They drive me to distraction...
 She is quiet, because she doesn't need telling
 She has the prettiest liver, helped by the odd dry wine
 (Although she would rather something stronger) and strong little calves,
 And her kidneys are in blossom, like spring flowers,
 Her malpighian glomeruli are
 Quite unflawed.
 He says, look at the evening, the clouds over the sea, the green
 Star, the water,
 What a shame the whole effect is spoilt by this aimlessly wandering woman
 Over there,
 Old and ugly and leaving her tracks on the beach
 With an frail skeleton, brittle with the calcium leach
 And an oncoming hip replacement
 And a liver as black as a basement.
 She says, alas, that is my sister (of course, this is not to be understood as a literal statement).
 And thinks herself, I won't look at her I won't look up –
 Tomorrow I'll get down the gym, have a check-up
 Get the doctor's word that my liver is sweet and pure
 And my stomach juices could digest barbed wire...
 Let's go home, she says,
 You seem tired...

*

Says one to the other, what's wrong?
 The evening draws in. the trees creek
 The wind has picked up, the gate squeaks
 The swallows are darting and marking the sky...
 Don't know, answers the other, can't sleep and that's all

The wind has picket up, the trees creak,
 The evening draws in, the gate slams to
 The sky darkens, and whatever it is -
 Swallows or bats up in the sky...
 Good grief, whatever, let them fly,
 Look instead at the window – the apple tree breathes
 Over it, waves its wet sleeves
 The curtain flutters, the shutter squeaks
 Midges stream around the bulb.
 The other answers, I don't feel easy,
 The curtain streams, the shutter bangs
 As if someone wants in, but doesn't know how
 Pleads and pleads and cries and cries,
 The midges burn on the bulb,
 Poor midges, I'm suddenly sorry...
 Well let them, says one, we won't It in,
 And so what if It is out under the window
 Crunching on gravel, rustling one grass,
 And so what if It is twitching the curtain
 Wailing, weeping, tweaking the shutter...
 But – the other answers – It is inside already,
 Can't you see the cat hissing and watching
 There, sitting there, on the old cracked chair
 Nodding and whispering and watching
 Nodding and watching me –
 Ask it to look away...
 Then one says to her, well don't be scared,
 Look here I am, standing beside It,
 Look, I'm taking its hand in my own grasp
 And by hand I'll lead It from here,
 Across the garden, out by the gate,
 Along the dusky and darkening road
 And past the willows who shake their heads,
 Into the golden fields and blue
 From where there is no way back...

Translated from Russian by Sasha Dugdale

Judith

It's easy to trace the vertebral socket
 So the naked blade can pierce the Atlas bone.
 Ah such strength in her gentle arms.
 And what else? Well, self-control, no doubt, and talent.
 Life could have passed blissfully, right up until now,
 A real possibility in these sparse woods of ours,
 Mosquitoes humming, a camp fire, a children's song
 And what else? A girl guide in blue shorts.
 But then humiliation looms: a vast gymnasium
 With weights and bars and lifts and similar trunkated words,
 Where a little girl, bespectacled, vaults over a horse,
 And a boy sniggers into his fist over the heads of those below.

Never mind, my nymph, keep on – the instructor doesn't bite
 And no-one's died of shame yet.
 They also say there's a wood close by, a pine wood,
 And water in the nearest lake, though not too clean.
 What else? There's a light beyond the crossing,
 Just two hours more of this and then a Russian class.
 So up, Judith, up and polish those glasses
 And sharpen your sword, girl wonder, sharpen your sword!

Correspondence between Bakhtin and Turbin

Turbin writes to Bakhtin:

Your genius will honour the land
 Those carnivals of yours and feasts
 Are but a part of a grand jest
 Through which reason, time out of mind,
 Has sought to escape the chains that blind...

Bakhtin writes to Turbin:

I cannot breathe, I cannot sleep.
 The weather now is hot as hell,
 Yesterday Lenchka did well
 To cadge some herring and some groats,
 The locals being stingy folks,

Turbin writes to Bakhtin:

I'll visit you for Easter.
 Till then I burn the midnight oil
 Over your works I gladly toil,
 I'm sending some cigars to you,
 To pay your genius its due.

Bakhtin writes to Turbin:

The doctor here is treating my gums.
 No salt fish, but a drink all right.
 Lenchka cannot sleep at night –
 When the moon is full, she says,
 I call out in my sleep and rave...

Turbin writes to Bakhtin:

They hate the Modernists today.
 The avant-garde is doubly damned,
 They've both earned me a reprimand.
 I hope to God the things don't get worse!
 Ah well, I'm still reading your works.

Bakhtin writes to Turbin:

Today I bayed at the moon.
 I lay there licking at my fur,
 But rise at six just as before.
 If it weren't for the pangs of hunger
 I'd have long ago finished my oeuvre.

Turbin writes to Bakhtin:
 My friend, spare a thought for you wife.
 I'll bring cigars and caviare.
 Think of the feasts we have in store!
 For as you say: eternal night
 By mirth alone is put to flight!

Bakhtin writes to Turbin:
 I'm ready to my coffin.
 I can't sleep, I wander till evening,
 My underclothes rot in the bowl,
 The woman who stands by the window,
 I've forgotten what she is called.
 The sky has turned red with the moon
 And terrible times have began.
 A fire is blazing on high
 I'm neither my own nor another's,
 Our talent, though almost divine,
 Consumes us by night in the darkness.
 Where it not for the beast inside
 I suppose we might have survived.
 Terrible times are afoot,
 I'm getting no sleep, not a jot.
 The earth plunges into the gloom...
 But woe to the builder of tombs
 Fashioned from the slabs of our fate –
 I swear I'll rip his gullet out.
 But visit us, my friend, please do –
 For there'll be white mushrooms to eat.

Translated from Russian by Robert Reid

Ghazal

“I shall idolise a Turkish woman from Shiraz, return Samarkand, and Bukhara for the sake of her birthmark,”

—Hafez

For the sake of a Turkish woman from Shiraz, consumed in the
 deadly fumes,
 I shall pull the post-modern infection out by the roots.
 For the moon's face and the shapes of gazelles and tight
 curls,
 I shall drop Jaspers, Derrida and Deleuse, and Jung too
 Ah, no need of more in the garden of frantic delights.
 There, weeps Mircea Eliade, no Iliad can match his plight.
 What's so special about Jaspers – it's the jasper of her
 cheeks, the agate of eyes,
 onto the grass her variegated, argus-eyed silks cascade...
 You're no passion – you're a splinter that cannot be
 pulled out by force.
 Towards you the native tongue creeps through snows from our

kolkhoz
 to the moony fields of the East, to its mine fields,
 where the gentle palm of a prophet lifts up a sword with its
 crescent maw.

**What, in July's honey heat, do you weep for, poor
 Goy**

What, in July's honey heat, do you weep for, poor
 goy,
 unshaven, naked, what are the snares you flee?
 Saturated in lime-tree scent, the boulevard recedes,
 and to the acacias clings hot groin of a cloud,
 spray flickers, glimmering on the town clock,
 the horny heat of turtledoves seethes in the heavens,
 and a sail rummages, listing in a sunny *négligé*,
 while you sit, like some prince, robed in golden mange.
 I don't know what I'm weeping for, but I know at whom.
 It's the lord, his beggar's bowl, and the entire town,
 myself, poor goy, *mischigener ascetic*, I sorrow
 that there's no other life, and this is no life either.
 I loathe the morning and the glorious light –
 no longer is it for me, or I for it,
 and the burning wind flees the darkness of the steppes,
 Take pity, Lord! What you're doing to me? Tell!
 From the heavens seeping like resin, flows a pitchy dark,
 and my youth has passed, and my life, too, has passed.
 The pollen from the poplars has tumbled down, the evening
 light dies,
 and towards night three hags are paraded by the lord of the
 flies.
 Bags of bones, they file past, uncouth -
 the one bringing up the rear my love...

I said to him – don't throw me into this prickly bush

“Do what you like, only don't throw me into this prickly bush.”
 —Tales of Uncle Remus

I said to him – don't throw me into this prickly bush:
 this is my dear home, blossoming behind me.
 Where each leaf trembles, there's a rustling hush,
 the berries are shot with black enamel and the colour blue.
 I said to him – better to burn me in the bonfire,
 blue-grey smoke has already floated overhead by morning,
 and a shrike sings among the thorny branches
 in the prickly bush, at the time of its dawning.
 Better to throw me into the water, because the water tastes
 bitter,
 like a prickly berry and down below it's the same coloration.
 But in the prickly bush fixated on a needle is a star,
 not needed for the time being by any of the neighbours.

Ah, Brer Fox, you're nobody's fool,
 don't be won over by such notions or ideas.
 I'll seek out whatever creatures make you drool,
 I'll lead them out to your blackthorn lair.
 I myself can't go home – too sharp is the thorn
 that has lodged in my chest - my left paw aches.
 Better pay attention to the fine bonfire behind you
 and right there beside you, a splendid lake.

Translated from Russian by Daniel Weissbort

*

Dr Watson has returned from the Afghan War
 With two wounds in the small his back.
 The Hippocratic Oath, a lancet and some tweezers.
 He sings the praises of our enlightened country.
 Holmes has a top-secret mission to Odessa.
 Watson visits Bedlam every morning
 And the British Museum every evening
 He has hardly any friends.
 Tonight, Patti's performing at the Opera
 And Dr Watson is drinking ginger vodka.
 Dr Watson has returned from the afghan War.
 He has no children, no wife...
 Holmes waits for a detective in the café Otton;
 Of course, he'll find out who murdered the Czar.
 Two Rumanians scrape at warbling violins
 And trainee chefs serve mackerel.
 Holmes has gone away; there's no-one to fight
 That ancient, goat-lipped darkness
 Dr Watson has returned from the Afghan War
 He's an expert on the devil's work.
 Gas-light pushes its way through the fog;
 Dr Watson grips the lancet in his pocket.
 The water round London's docks is putrid:
 He won't go near it.
 The dockside whores laugh raucously into the dark,
 More frightening than the Hound of the Baskervilles.
 It's the source of vice, the home of sin,
 Rotten with human trash.
 Was it for this he shed blood in Afghanistan
 And closed the eyes of dead boys?
 The morning light pushes its way through the fog.
 Mrs Hudson sighs as she wipes the lancet –
 Doctors are kept so busy these days.
 There's no rest for them, even after dark!

Translated from Russian by Carol Rumens
