

Ode on La Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen de 1789

Dawn stains the permafrost in streaks
the weak rosé of wine stains twice-scoured,
faded spills from a party where everyone got too drunk
and forgot how they once dreamed of freedom

Captured for eternity in a dance of pixelated shadows
Alexei Navalny quips for the webcam:
“Few things are as refreshing as a walk in Yamal at 6:30 in the morning.”

Now floating free above the gulag known as “Polar Wolf”
Erofeev’s¹ dissident hero sat for a rematch with Death
trading for Dead Souls in a chess game rigged by gangsters.

If Petushki marks the end of the Eastern tramline to perdition
where a muse apocryphal as Schrodinger’s Cat may or may not await him,
their liberation dreams moistened by Tear of a Komsomol Girl:

Combine ingredients and mix for 20 minutes with a honeysuckle twig

lavender - 15 grams

verbena - 15 grams

the cologne "Forest Water" - 30 grams

nail polish - 2 grams

mouthwash - 150 grams

lemonade - 150 grams

Then Butyn’ lies far enough west of the Kremlin
for a lad to grow up pure as salt, arrow-straight and unbowed.

The yard beyond the diamond-wire grid falls silent, an icy tundra far above the crashing
sea.

The passage of Snow Bunting and Curlew as ghostly a memory
as cocktails on the veranda and the swish of silk pantsuits.

Ocean-eyed Yulia mounts the lighthouse stair, calling in an outrush of breath to her lost
love:

“Alexei, I am dreaming of the day you will be free, and our country will be free.”

1. Erofeev, Venedikt. Moscow-Petushki (Moscow to the End of the Line), 1969. Samizdat (underground self-published) prose-poem, Moscow.

86,400 seconds

One inbreath

a l o o o o o n n n g g h o u t b r e a t h

Caesura~~~~

Who breathes there?

Breath breathing body ragdoll soft

Lungs squeezing in

Puffing out

the rubber bands that lace the rib bones to the back bones

packed stem to stern like crystal goblets in excelsior

(Tencel, tinsel, strands of lead)

to the swaying hip bones now stilled

& the l o o o o o n g tethered thighs

strung in a bow at calf's hinge, below

As above,

nitrogen plashes down our airways, the

tin----

tin----

ton of a gong

splashing starry & dewlike over taut plains, the soft skin

folds

Breath breathing body in a magnetic universe

as electric semaphores leap galvanic

neuron to duodenum to viscera

the brain the brain the brain!

So much ado about winds more gossamer than sea foam

far from the bloody throb of a breastbone-cozened heart.

La Donna Who Swims with Sharks

A woman revered
for having spent twelve years
living alone in a cave
is speaking

A fan of fine wrinkles folds and unfolds
around her pale lips
as she tells the story of *La donna*
an Italian diver who swims with the sharks

who thrusts her chain-mailed arm into their mouths
beyond the incurved cage of teeth
to remove fishermen's hooks embedded,
lost in their tender flesh

Shark after shark bedeviled by cruel steel seeks her out
As feeding sharks swarm harmlessly about her.
Feared as they are, it's one of the most vulnerable animals,
says the diver, captured
floating in the silvery depths.
This made me want to protect them.

The sage continues: This is the manifestation
of pure love in action.
She reminds us,
There's supposed to be 1,000 Buddhas and there've only been seven so far.

We have so long to go
Until we too can accept things as they are
To dare approach an alien form disarmed
Or sit alone on an April cave floor flooded by snowmelt
the inward gaze turning outward

A sodden and shivering embrace
in the glorious light of everything
unfixed
Unfixable

Metempsychosis

Nights sugar-spun with ephemeral white moths
who'd flit papery bodies through any crack of door
to resume their weave and bop
around the green-browed banker's lamp,
the triple bathroom vanity

In this time of life spent in willing confinement
When asked my occupation on endless forms,
I'd fancifully reply
"Lepidoptera Whisperer"

Tiny moth minds chaotic with false pheromones,
they were damn hard to lasso in
Times I could get them to settle,
go rockabye onto a gentle finger.

One brilliant afternoon in the porch's deep shade
I saw a monarch crashed into a broken web
One dirty strand draped over a hindlimb
Brilliant orange wings untouched yet stilled

The spider, eight times the smaller,
Loitered in feigned indifference
At the far reaches of her spun domain

With moth-trained forefinger
I swooped beneath the captive homewrecker
Pressing up against his chitinous abdomen

As I lifted, his pincered feet took hold
A trace of imprisoning silk trailing haughtily
Like a toe ring victory pennant

Carried through the air, intact and free
Hard spiky feet pressing in a death grip
His wings flap once, twice, but he doesn't fly away

Is it the flavor of my skin
Or vestiges of trauma and shock
that makes him cling so fiercely?

On the far side of the compound
with much nudging
I prod him gently onto a shady stem.

Lingering in grasping regret,
Belly kissing the rough grey bark,
He demurs, reluctant to accept his new perch.
Only now do I wonder if he were envenomated,
doomed to die slowly, alone

Screech

Over a blind rise
 Tires kick up plumes of dust
 pebbles shot at the sun's sinking disc
 A brown mound pops up sudden
 from the sand-topped old caliche
 turns imperious lamp-bright circles
 a flash of incandescent yellow
 then disappears beneath my bumper
 Ka-thunk!
 unblinking unsurprised

This lightest of jarring thuds
 echoes into a sonic crescendo
 A sound no-sound
 Shrieks lightning through my core
 A-yowl as a nighttime tomcat
 Dire with rage
 Fierce as a hunting eagle
 arrowing leaden from the sky

What was it what was...What was that?
 What was...a cat?
 Turning back in a slow rumble of tires
 A dun and grey curve
 Sits quietly in the roadway
 Innocent of life.

A bunny! Poor bun-bun-bun
 I've hit your kin before
 Lagomorphs heading unerringly
 for my churning night-blind tires
 When suddenly I see the feet,
 Furless and crenellated,
 Dagger tipped.

An owl lies dead in the middle of a dirt road
 Perfect and bloodless

Tawny fluff of feathers frames a broken neck
The pale hook of a quiescent beak
Its last will and testament: a silent shriek of pure avian rage.

Thin Skinned

*"Who hasn't been tempted by the sharp edge of a knife?
An ordinary knife cutting ordinary tomatoes on
an ordinary slab of wood on an ordinary Wednesday."*

"Poet of an Ordinary Heartbreak" [Chris Abani](#)

The flesh of one feels the pressure of the knife
Bearing down to slice the other
One pale arm freckled by the desert sun
One red fruit, delicately membraned

The knife moves in rhythm to the arm that wields it
The fruit resists the tug of the blade
A ponderous seam, neither fire nor ache
Whose flesh is rent?

Fecund innards splash the scarry wood
in the odor of summertime vines
where green hornworms peek through scattered eyes
arrayed like Indra once forgiven

The only thing bloody here is Mary
Great Mother who died for our sins
She who hears the cries of the world
Not saving us from the politician's slab

All that is alive
Every living thing, fruit and stem
wants to keep on living
The womb that bears the fruit no less expendable
than the fruit.

Labrys

I remember the arfing din of the seals, turning circles like circus performers by the rocks
that hold up that famous pier
And the visible line left behind on the sea-wracked sand,
curved souvenir of the wave-tongues' lapping

I remember what is invisible,
the soft pitapat of rain on a pouf ball of dandelion seed, Ephemeral
like when memories sparked by every inch of this city hovered in a crazy-quilt cobweb
over the sidewalks of my passage

I remember loving you
hand-in-hand under a mist of sprinkled beer from second-story spectators
as young women strutted proudly bare-breasted
warm-skinned and exultant,

making snakelike down the dirty urban streets, the silvery-bronze axe throat-bound and
dangling all along this two-mile-long island, single-sex parade
in the olden times when our body parts still belonged each to each, and whole
repealing shame, we named ourselves as we pleased

I remember not understanding you at all
(one thing that doesn't improve with age)
I remember the resonant boom of the drums that heralded our passage

I remember thunder
and the double lightning flash so sudden it mocked simultaneity
an amulet on a finely wrought chain

The Squirrel Gamblers

In the midnight woods
The squirrel gamblers meet
Each gang carrying a stash
And more in secret caches
Obscured from the moon.

Gathered in a circle, giddy,
They bang glossy shells like marbles
In metronomic orbit
Saturn's circled riches
Careening out of bounds.

Tail a serpentine arc
Of sinuous plumed speech
The tuft-eared winner will abscond,
Chittering,
Master of this shadow bower.