

MARINA TSVETAeva

Poem of the End

Prague, February 1–Illovishchi, June 8, 1924

1

In the sky, rustier than tin,
A finger, a pole.
Risen in our appointed place,
Like fate.

—*Quarter to. Right?*
—*Death wouldn't have waited.*
Smooth. Exaggerated.
He tosses his hat.

In every eyelash—challenge.
His mouth—clenched.
Low. Exaggerated.
He bows to me.

—*Quarter to. Sharp?*
His voice rings false.
My heart sinks: what's wrong?
Brain speaks: watch out!

Sky of ugly portents:
Rust and tin.
He's waited at our usual place.
It's six.

Our kiss is soundless:
Stuporous lips.
As one might kiss the hand
Of a queen or corpse . . .

Some hurrying idiot
Shoves an elbow—into my side.
Boring. Exaggerated.

Some siren begins to wail.

And wails, —like a howling dog,
Long-drawn, raging.
(The exaggeration of life
At the point of death.)

What yesterday rose to my waist
Is risen—beyond the stars.
(Is exaggerated, that is:
At flood-stage.)

To myself: darling, darling.
—*What time is it? Past six.*
To the cinema, or? . . . —
His explosion: *Home!*

2

Wandering tribe, —
See where this brought us!
Thunder over our heads,
A drawn sword,

All the ghastly
Words, lying in ambush,
Like a house collapsing—
One word: *Home.*

Wail of a lost, spoilt
Child: *home!*
A one-year-old's grunting:
Give me and mine!

My friend in dissipation,
My chill and fever,
Much as others long to stray,
You want to go there!

Like a horse, jerking its tether—
Up!—so the rope breaks.
—*There's no house, is there?!*
—*There is, —ten steps more:*

*A house on the hill. —Any higher?
—A house on top of the hill.
A window set under the eaves.
—“Lit, and not by a single morning’s*

*Sun?” Then, back to life, again?
—That would be the simplicity of poetry!
House, that means: out-of-the-house
Into the night.*

(O, to whom shall I breathe

My sorrow, my misfortune,
My terror, greener than ice? . . .)
—*You’ve thought too much.* —
A thoughtful reply: —*Yes.*

3

Then—the embankment. I follow
The water’s edge, as if it were solid and thick.
Semiramis’ hanging gardens—
So this—is where you are!

The water’s—a steely strip,
The color of a corpse—
Which I follow, as a singer
Follows her sheet music, as one blind

Follows the edge of a wall—*Come back!?*
No? If I crouch—will you listen?
To the quencher of all thirsts
I cling, like a lunatic

To a gutter . . .

And I’m not shivering
From the river—for I was born Naiad!
To follow the river, as if it were your hand,
Of a lover, walking beside me—

And faithful . . .

*The dead are faithful.
Yes, but not everyone dies in a squalid room . . .*
Death to the left, and to the right—
You. My right side numb, as if it were dead.

Shaft of stunning light.

Laugh, like a cheap tambourine.
—*You and I need to . . .*
(Shivering.)
—*Will we have the courage?*

4

A wave of fair-haired
Mist—a flounce of gauze.
Much too stale, much too smoky,
And, above all, too much talk!
What does it reek of? Extreme haste,
Indulgence and peccadillo:
Inside information
And ballroom powder.

Men with children, acting single,
Wearing their rings, venerable youths . . .
Too many jokes, too much laughter,
And above all, too much calculation!
Prominent and petty, alike,
Top to bottom
. . . Inside trading
And ballroom powder.

(Half turned away: *is this—
Our house? —No, I won't be your hostess!*)
One—bending over his checkbook,
Another—over a tiny kidskin glove,
And another—over a little patent leather pump
Works unobtrusively.
. . . Advantageous marriages
And ballroom powder.

Silver notches at the window—
Like a Star of Malta!
Too much caressing, too much petting,
And above all, too much pawing!
Too much pinching . . . (*Yesterday's
Leftovers—don't be so picky: they are ripe!*)
. . . Commercial intrigues
And ballroom powder.

*Do you think this chain's too short?
But then it's not just plated; it's platinum!*
With their triple chins

Trembling, they chew their veal
 Like calves. Over each sweet neck
 A devil—a gas burner.
 . . . Business failures
 And some brand of gunpowder—
 Bertold Schwartz's . . .

He was so—
Gifted—such a philanthropist.
 —*We need to talk.*
Will we have the courage?

5

I detect movement in his lips.
 But know—he won't speak first.
 —*You don't love me?* —*No, I love you.*
 —*You don't love me!* —*But I'm tormented,*

And wasted, and worn out.
 (Like an eagle surveying the terrain):
 —*You call this—a home?*
 —*Home is—in my heart. —How very literary!*

Love is flesh and blood.
A flower—watered with blood.
Do you think love is—
Idle chat across a table?

An hour—and then we both just go home?
Like these ladies and gentlemen?
Love is . . .
 —*An altar?*
Sweetheart, to that altar bring scar

Upon scar!—Under the eyes of waiters
 And revelers? (I think:
 “Love is—a bow drawn
 Taut: a bow: separation.”)

—*Love is—a connection. When*
Everything we have is separate: our mouths, our lives.
 (I did ask you: not to speak of it!
 Our hour that was secret, close,

That hour on top of the hill,
 That hour of passion. *Momento*—like smoke:

Love is—all one's gifts
Into the fire, —and always—for nothing!)

The shell-like slit of your mouth
Goes white. No smile—an inventory.
—*First on the list, one*
Bed.

—*You may as well have said*

One wide gulf? —The drum-wail
Of your fingers. —*I'm not asking you to move mountains!*
Love means . . .

—*You are mine.*

I understand you. So?

—————

The drum-wail of your fingers
Grows louder. (Scaffold and square.)
—*Let's go away.* —*And I: Let's die,*
I was hoping. It would be simpler!

Enough of this squalor:
Rhymes, rails, rooms, stations . . .
—*Love is: a life.*
—*No, it was something else*

To the ancients . . .

—*So what?*—

The shreds

Of a handkerchief in my fist, like a fish.
—*So, should we go?* —*And what would we take?*
Prison, the rails, a bullet—you choose!

Death—and none of these arrangements!
—*A life!* —Like a Roman tribune
Surveying the remnants of his force,
Like an eagle.

—*Then, we should say goodbye.*

—*I didn't want that.*
Not that. (I'm thinking: listen!
Desire is the traffic of bodies,
While we should be souls—to each other

Hereafter . . .) —And *he* didn't say it.
 (Right, when the time comes for the train to pull out,
 You let pass to your women, as it were some
 Goblet, the sad honor of

Parting . . .) —*Perhaps it's my delirium?*
Did I hear you right? (You, polite liar,
 Letting pass to your lover, as it were some
 Bouquet, the bloodstained honor of this

Rupture . . .) —Clearly: syllable
 After syllable, *so—should say goodbye,*
That's what you said? (As it were some handkerchief
 Let drop at a point of sweet

Excess . . .) —*In this battle*
*You—*are* Caesar.* (What an impudent thrust!
 To let pass to your adversary the sword
 You surrender, as if it were a

Trophy!) —He goes on: (some ringing
 In my ears . . .) —I double over:
 The first time I am spoken of personally
 In this breakup. —*Do you say this to every woman?*

Don't deny it! A vengeance
 Worthy of Lovelace.
 A gesture, doing you honor,
 And stripping the meat from my

Bones. —A chuckle. Above the laughter—
 Death. A gesture. (Without desire.
 Desire is the traffic—*of others*
 While we shall be shades—to each other

Hereafter . . .) A last nail
 Driven home. A screw, if the coffin is lead.
 —*A last, very last request.*
 —*Yes. —Not a word, ever,*

About us . . . to any . . . well . . .
Men after me. (From their stretchers
 The wounded—do yearn for spring!)
 —*And I would ask the same of you.*

Should I give you a ring, a keepsake?
 —*No. —Your wide-open eyes are*

Unreadable. (Like a seal
Set upon your heart, a signet ring

On your finger . . . No scenes!
I swallow.) More ingratiatingly, quieter:
—*A book then? —What, like you give to everyone?*
No, don't even write them, those

Books . . .

This means, I mustn't.
This means, I mustn't.
Mustn't cry.

In our wandering
Fishermen's tribe we
Dance—and don't cry.

Drink—and don't cry.
Pay with our hot
Blood—and don't cry.

Pearls in a glass
Melt—and rule
The world—and don't cry.

—*So it's me who's leaving?* —I see
Right through you, Harlequin, for her fidelity,
You fling your own Pierrette—a bone,
That most contemptible

Prize: the honor of ending it,
Of ringing down the curtain. The last
Word. An inch of lead
In my breast: would be better, hotter

And—cleaner . . .
My teeth

Press into my lips.
I will not cry.

All my strength—to press into
My softest flesh.
And not cry.

In our wandering tribe

We die, and don't cry,
Burn, and don't cry.

In ashes, in songs,
We do bury the dead
In our wandering tribe.

—*So am I first? Mine the first move?
As in chess then? And
You see, even mounting a scaffold
Men ask we go first . . .*
—*And quickly.*

*Then please, don't look! —One glance,—
(Any moment mine will come thick and fast!
And then how will I drive them back
Into my eyes?!) —I tell you, you mustn't*

Look!!!

Clearly and abruptly,
Looking up:
—*Darling, let's go,
Or I'm going to cry!*

I forgot! Among all the breathing
Money-boxes (and commodities!)
The blonde back of *her* head flashed:
Wheat, corn, rye!

All the commandments of Sinai
Washed away— Maenads' pelts!—
In a pile to rival Golkonda,
That storehouse of pleasure—

(For everyone!) Nature doesn't amass
Riches in vain, is not completely niggard!
From these blonde tropics, my
Hunter,—how will you find your way

Back? With her rude nakedness,
Teasing and dazzling to tears—
Adultery, like solid gold,
Pours out. Laughing.

—*Isn't it true?* —A clinging, pushy

Look. In every eyelash—an urge.
—And above all—at her core!
—A gesture that twists into a braid.

O, gesture that is already tearing off—
Its clothing! Easier than eating or drinking—
A smile! (For you, there's some hope,
Alas, of salvation!)

From—that nurse or your fraternal order?
From an ally: from our alliance!
—Buried as I am—to be able to laugh!
(And unburied—I laugh.)

7

Then—the embankment. A last.
That's all. Apart, not holding hands,
Like neighbors avoiding each other,
We wander on. Away from the riverside—

Weeping. Salty, falling
Quicksilver I lick away, not caring:
Whether Heaven sent Great Solomon's
Moon to meet my tears.

A pole. Why not bang my forehead against it
Until it bleeds? Until it shatters, not just until it bleeds!
Like two criminal accomplices, fearful,
We wander on. (What was murdered—is Love.)

Wait! Are these really two lovers? Walking
Into the night? Separately? To sleep with others?
—*You understand, the future*
Lies there? —I lift my head up and back.

—*To sleep!* —*Like newlyweds, on a floor . . .*
—*To sleep!* —*When we can't even manage to fall*
In step. In time. Plaintively: —Take my arm!
We're not criminals, that we have to walk like this! . . .

Electric. (As if it were his *soul*—has
Come to lie on my hand.) A current
Strikes through feverish leads and
Excites, —his hand comes to lie on my soul!

And clings. Everything is iridescent! What could be

More iridescent than tears? Like curtains, a rain
 Of many beads. — *I don't know of any banks like this*
That really come to an end. — There's a bridge, and:
 — *What then?*

Here? (A hearse draws up.)
 Calm eyes
 Fly up. — *May I take you home?*
 A *la—st time!*

8

A *la—st* bridge.
 (I won't let go, won't pull away!)
 A last bridge.
 A last toll.

Wa—ter and dry land.
 I lay out my coins.
 Mo—ney for death,
 Charon's token to cross Lethe.

A sha—dow of a coin
 Into the hands of a shade. This money
 Is sou—ndless.
 So, into the hands of a shade—

A sha—dow of a coin.
 Without glint, without tinkle.
 My coins go—into his.
 The dead have their poppies.

A bridge.

Ha—ppy destination
 Of lovers without hope:
 Bridge—you are passion:
 A convention: an unbroken between.

I nestle: it's warm,
 I'm your rib—so I cling.
 Neither *ahead of*, nor *behind* you:
 At some interval of insight!

Without hands, or feet.

With all my bones and forces:
Only my side is alive, O
Which I press to you, next to me.

The whole of my life—in that side!
Which is my ear—and my echo.
As the yolk to the white
I cling, like a Samoyed to his fur,

I press myself, I cling,
I nestle. Siamese twins,
What are you—to our conjunction?
The woman—you remember: the one you called

Mama? Forgetting everything and even
Herself, in the motionless triumph
Of ca—rrying you,
She held you no closer than I do.

See! We li—ke this!
It's true! On your chest you cradled me!
I won't jump do—wn!
To dive—I would have to let go of—

Your hand. I press close,
Press closer . . . And I can't be torn away,
Bridge, you are a bad husband:
A lover—slipping away!

Bridge, you have taken our side!
We feed your river with bodies!
I have fa—stened on you like ivy,
Like a tick: so tear me out by my roots!

Like ivy! Like a tick!
Godless! Inhuman!
To ca—st me aside, like a thing,
Me, who never cared for

A single thing in this
Inflated, material world!
Tell me it's unreal!
That night follows night—some

Morning, an Ex—press to Rome!
Grenada? Even I don't know,
Throwing back the featherbeds

Of Mont Blancs and Himalayas.

The de—ep valley of the bed:
I warm it with the last of my blood.
Lis—ten to my side!
After all, it's much finer

Than po—etry . . . It's good and warm
Still? Who will you sleep with tomorrow?
Te—ll me it's my imagination!
That there's not, never will be any end

To this bri—dge . . .
—As it ends.

—*Here?* —With a child's, or a god's
Gesture. —*We—ll?* I cling.
—*Ju—st once more:*
A last time!

9

Walking the factory blocks, loud
And resonant to our call . . .
A concealed, sublingual
Secret of wives from husbands, of widows

From their friends—to you, I impart the whole secret
Eve took from the tree—here:
I am no more than an animal,
Wounded in the belly by someone.

I burn . . . as if it were my soul peeled away with my
Skin! Steam disappeared down a hole,
That notorious and foolish heresy,
We call the soul.

Pallid green Christian sickness!
Steam! You don't treat a soul with poultices!
When it never existed!
There was only a body, who wanted to live,

That now does not want to live.

Forgive me! I didn't mean it!
Just a wail out of my gut!
As the condemned await execution
After three in the morning

Over their chessboard . . . Grinning
To mock their warder's eye.
After all, we're just pawns!
And someone plays with all of us.

Who? The kind gods? Or the evil?
In the eye of the peephole—
An eye. Clanging down the red
Corridor. A latch thrown up.

A drag on cheap tobacco.
Spit, we've lived our lives, you know, spit.
. . . These checkered pavements are
A direct route: to the ditch

And to blood. The secret eye:
The moon's hearing eye . . .

.....

And casting one sidelong glance:
—How far away you already lie!

One mutual
Wince—Our café!

Our island, our chapel,
Where in the mornings we—

Lowlives! Transitory couple!—
Celebrated our matins.

Smell of the market, of something gone sour,
Of drowsiness, of spring . . .
Here the coffee was vile, —
Like burnt oats!

(The spirit of good horses

Is broken with oats!)
 Not a bit Arabian—
 That coffee stank of

Arcadia . . .

But how she smiled on us,
 Sitting us down beside her,
 Worldly and compassionate, —
 As a grey-haired mistress

With her doting smile:
Carpe diem! Carpe . . . Smiling
 On our madness, our poverty,
 Our yawning and love, —

And, above all, upon—our youth!
 Our giggling—without provocation,
 Our laughter—without malice,
 Our faces—without lines, —

O, above all, upon—our youth!
 Our passions unfit for this climate!
 Blown in from somewhere,
 Surged in from somewhere

Into this lackluster café:
 —Burnous and Tunis!—
 On our hopes and our muscles,
 Under our threadbare robes . . .

(My dear, I'm not complaining:
 Scar upon scar!)
 O, how she saw us off, our
 Proprietress in her stiff cap

Of Dutch linen . . .

Not quite remembering, not quite understanding,
 As if led away from a festival . . .
 —*Our street!* —*No longer ours . . .* —
 —*How many times we walked it . . .* —*but no longer we . . .* —

—*Tomorrow let the sun rise in the West!*
 —*David break with Jehovah!*
 —*What are we doing?* —*Separating.*
 —A word that has no meaning to me,

A supremely senseless word:
—*Sep*—*arating*. —*Am I just one of a hundred?*
Just some word of four syllables,
Beyond which emptiness lies.

Stop! In Serbian, in Croatian,
Really, is it just the Bohemian cropping up in us?
Sep—*arating*. *To separate* . . .
A supremely supernatural Babel!

A sound to burst the eardrums,
To test the limits of anguish . . .
Separation—is not a Russian word!
Or a woman's! Or a man's!

Or a god's word! What are we—sheep,
To gape as we eat?
Separation—what language is that?
There's no meaning in it,

No sound of it! Well, maybe an empty
Noise—a saw perhaps, through drowsiness.
Separation—is just Khlebnikov's school
Of nightingales groaning,

Of swans . . .

How did it come to this?

A dammed-up lake gone dry—
Air! The sound of hand clapping hand.
Separation—it's thunder

Over my head . . . An ocean flooding our cabin!
Off our most distant promontory, off our farthest cape!
These streets—are too steep:
To separate—after all, means to descend,

Down the hill . . . Two leaden feet,
A sigh . . . A palm, finally, and a nail!
An overwhelming argument:
To separate—is to go separately,

We—who have grown together . . .

To lose everything at a stroke—
Nothing is cleaner!

Beyond town, the outskirts:
An end to our days.

To our legs (read—to stones),
To our days, our homes, and to us.

Abandoned summer homes! Like mothers
Grown old—just so, do I revere them.
It is, after all, something—to stand vacant:
Nothing hollow can stand vacant.

(Summer homes, standing half vacant,
Better you were to burn down!)

Just don't cringe,
Re-opening the wound.
Beyond town, beyond town,
Breaking the sutures!

For—with no superfluous words,
No magnificent word—love is a line of sutures.

Sutures, and not a sling, sutures—and not a shield.
—*O, don't beg me for protection!*—
Sutures, with which the dead are sewn in for burial,
With which I am sewn to you.

(Time will tell how strong a seam:
Single or triple stitched!)

One way or another, my friend, —our seams
Would go! To shreds and tatters!
Our only glory is the seam burst open:
By itself, didn't just unravel!

Under the basting—living tissue,
Red, and not rotted!

O, he loses nothing—
Who bursts a seam!
Beyond town, the outskirts:
Our foreheads separate.

On the outskirts they are executing people
Today—wind blowing through brain matter!

O, he loses nothing who departs

At an hour when dawn catches fire—
I've sewn a whole life for you through the night,
A fair copy, with no loose ends.

So don't upbraid me now, if it's crooked.
The outskirts: stitches ripped out.

Untidy souls—
Marked by scars! . . .
Beyond town, the outskirts . . .
The ravine with its descending sweep

Of outskirts. With the boot of fate,
Hear it? —across the watery clay?
. . . Consider my quick hand,
My friend, and the living thread,

The live, clinging thread—no matter how you pick at it!
The la—st lamppost!

Here? A conspiratorial—
Look. The lowest form of human—
Look. —*Shall we go back up the hill?*
A la—st time!

12

Like a heavy mane
Across our eyes: rain. —Hills.
We've passed the outskirts.
We are beyond town.

This place doesn't belong to us!
Any more than a stepmother is mother!
No further. Here
We will lie down and die.

A field. A fence.
As brother and sister.
A life—in the outskirts.—
Build here, beyond town!

Ahh, it's a played-out
Business—gentlemen!
Everywhere—outskirts!

Where are the villages?!

Let the rain tear and rage.
We stand and part,
These three months,
First time we are two!

Did God seek a loan
Of Job, as well?
This isn't working out.
We're beyond town now!

Beyond town! Do you get it? Out of it!
Outside! We've crossed a divide!
Life is a place no one can live:
A Jew—ish ghetto— . . .

Wouldn't it be a hundred times more
Worthy to be a Wandering Jew?
Since for anyone who is not vile,
Life is a Jew—ish pogrom, —

Life. Only converts survive!
Judases of every faith!
On to the leper colonies!
On to hell!—beyond the Pale!—not back into

Life,—where only converts survive, only
Sheep—go to slaughter!
Underfoot, I trample
My perm—it to live here!

Into the ground! As my revenge, on David's
Shield! —Joining the heaps of bodies!
Isn't it fascinating the Jew
Had no wish—to live?!

Ghetto of God's chosen! A divide
And a ditch: Ex—pect no mercy!
In this most Christian of worlds
All poets—are Jews!

Knives sharpened on stone,

Sawdust swept
With a broom. Under my hands
It is furry and wet.

Where are you, twin male
Virtues: hardness and dryness?
Under my palm—
Tears, and not rain!

What greater temptation—is there?
Than to make land—turn to water!
When your hard and glittering eyes
Stream under my palm,—

There's no greater loss
For me. An end to the end!
I stroke—I stroke—
I stroke your face.

Such is the arrogance of Marinas,
Like me, —of we Polishwomen.
After your eagle eyes
Stream under my palm . . .

You're crying? My friend!
Now I have it all! Forgive me!
O, how big and salty
In my cupped hand!

A man's tears are brutal:
Like an ax striking a forehead!
Cry, with someone later you will
Make up for the shame lost on me.

Out of—the same sea—
We are fish! A flourish:
. . . Like an empty shell
Lips upon lips.

In your tears
I taste—
Wormwood.
—*And tomorrow,*
When
I wake up?

Down our steep path—
 Downhill. The noises of town.
 We meet three streetwalkers.
 Laughing. At your tears,

Laughing—high and
 Low—both—billowing!
 Laughing!
 —at your inappropriate,
 Shameful, male

Tears, visible
 Through the rain—like two scars!
 Like a pearl—shameful
 On the bronze of a warrior.

Your first tears, and
 Your last—O, let them fall!—
 Your tears—are pearls
 In my crown!

I don't avert my eyes,
 I stare—through the downpour.
 Go on, you toys of Venus,
 Stare! This union of ours

Is more than your attraction,
 Your going to bed.
 The very Song of Solomon
 Gives way to us,

Infamous birds that we are,
 Solomon yields to us,
 —Crying together is better
 Than fooling ourselves!

So, into the hollow waves
 Of darkness—stooping and equal, —
 Traceless—and speechless—we go
 Down, like a sinking ship.

[Translated from the Russian by Mary Jane White]¹

¹ This translation is made under license from Russica Publishers, Inc., from their five-volume Russian-language edition of Tsvetaeva's work, edited by Alexander Sumerkin.