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LIKE WATER, LIKE FIRE


*An anthology of Byelorussian poetry
from 1828 to the present day*

TRANSLATED BY
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*Look, and see a world eternal/
Marvellous and many-hued.*

A. Fet

Greeting to thee, life in freedom,
Oaks' canopy above the head,
With sky and hills and fields all gleaming
Through the leaves' net.

Rags of shadows in the clearings
Lie concealing the bright gold,
Whose layers from below appearing
Gleam through torn holes.

And the sun, towards the night-time
Flirts its red fan in the sky,
And the wind, by it excited,
Far away flies.

When the twilight palely glimmers
And the waters turn to dark,
Then in silver needles shimmer
Assembled stars.

And equal dear and fair become the
Brilliant gleaming and the shade,
The day whose birth awaits its coming,
The day which fades.

SOFT WARM EVENING . . .

Soft warm evening, quiet breeze, new rick of hay,
You have laid me down upon the earth to sleep,
No bright dust along the roads like smoke-cloud plays,
In the heavens, the moon's pale horn glimmers, strays,
In the heavens, quiet the stars' first blossoms peep.

A shooting star falls in a burning tear,
Plumage softly sighing, a white owl glides past;
And, my soul at one with nature, I see clear
The stars tremble in the wind above me here,
In the quiet, I hear the growing of the grass.

IN WINTER

Hail, frosty evening, ringing, calling,
Hail, crunching crisp, soft spread of snow,
No snowstorm blows, the wind has fallen,
And freely the light sledges go.

Like phantoms, birches whitely hover,
Under night-time's dark-blue quilt,
In the heavens, the stars shiver,
Frozen utterly, frost-chilled.

The moist moon from on high is shedding
A shaft, transparent and aglow,
And with silver cloaks is spreading
The blueing acres of the snow.

With sledges cleave the snow, good horses!
Gay copper bells, ring out with zest!
Forests and fields fly in swift courses,
The blood is boiling in the breast.

ROMANCE

*Quand luira cette étoile un jour,
La plus belle et la plus lointaine,
Dites-lui qu'elle eut mon amour
O derniers de la race humaine*
Sully Prudhomme.

Venus has risen above the broad skyline,
Brought in her wake shining memories of love,
Do you recall, when we met for the first time
Venus had risen above?

From that time forth, evermore I'd go gazing
Upon the night sky, seeking long for that star,
Within me a deep silent love for you blazing
From that time forth, evermore.

But the time of our parting draws near, ever nearer,
Thus does our fate, does our fortune appear;
Deeply, profoundly I loved you, my dear one,
But the time of our parting draws near.

In that far country, my love buried under
My heart, dull and dreary, each night, high above,
I shall gaze on that planet, my heart filled with wonder,
In that far country, my love.

Gaze upon Venus once more, when far distant
One from another, there mingling we'll pour
Our glance – let love flower if but for an instant,
Gaze upon Venus once more.

THE CHRONICLER

His soul grown weary-tired in life's stern tempests fending,
Within cloister walls his days he now is ending.
Here is silence, here is calm – no hubbub and no noise.
Copying a chronicle four years he has employed.
Copying the whole from an ancient parchment,
From first word to the last, of Mahileŭ and what passed there.
And here are deeds of good and ill-deeds equally
Set in the record. Just so the industrious bee
Even from bitter flowers can fill its combs with honey.
Then of events he saw he adds true testimony.
Here are the things which came to pass in former ages,
What men thought then, and of what disputed sagely,
Why they fought, and how the true faith they defended –
By this paper all made known to their descendants!
All is long-forgotten, dead, on waters drifting –
But now it will arise, once more in memory living,
When they find his simple, unadorned narration,
Telling of that life, its hopes, its expectation.
Just so the blue sea carries to the shore
To us a little flask where resin once was poured,
Covered with small mussel shells and mud. Long, truly,
It lay in the water, much it did endure there;
Some fishermen may find the bottle, stave it in,
And, so it happens, they may find there is, within,
A letter. By the custom of the sea, some message
Sent by shipwrecked sailors. Somewhere they have perished
In the ocean; maybe centuries rolled on
Since that time, maybe the nation now is gone,
And, all is changed, and even memory is drowsing!
But, letters, you once more will waken and arouse men,
And then about their forebears they will learn, and read
About their woes and joys, about their noted deeds,
To whom they made their prayer, what for they were seeking,
Where on the deep sea floor the waves forever keep them.

THE WEAVER-WOMEN OF SŁUCK

From native home, from native tillage
To the lord's court, for beauty's sake,
Luckless girls taken from their village,
Girdles of gold to weave and make.
Long hours of toiling they endeavour,
Forgetful of their girlish dreams,
Labour at the broad weaving ever,
Where the Persian pattern gleams.
Outside the walls, the smiling tillage,
The blue sky gleams beyond the pane,
And thoughts go wandering, willy-nilly,
There where the spring's in flower again,
There by the rye, in the bright distance,
The cornflowers shine with azure still,
And waves of chilly silver glisten
Where rivers gush between the hills;
Edge of an oak-wood, dark in verdure . . .
And hands, forgetful at the loom,
Neglecting the designs of Persia,
Weave in the native cornflower bloom.

SNOWSTORM

Wind beats on the rooftop drums,
Thunders on them, rings and hums,
Music ever louder poured
From the ball of the Storm-Lord,
Wind beats on the rooftop drums,
Thunders on them, rings and hums,
Now there seethes a wine of snow,
Gushing in white foaming flow,
Wind beats on the rooftop drums,
Thunders on them, rings and hums,
In the streets, drunk wildness blows,
Booming, drunken snowstorm goes,
Wind beats on the rooftop drums,
Thunders on them, rings and hums.

MY NATIVE COUNTRY . . .

My native country, how God's ban doth blast thee,
How thou dost bear sorrow and ills!
Stormclouds and marshes . . . Over poor harvests
The wind may roam at its will.

To ruins thy native villages topple
With grief the breast stifles and chokes; –
Behold these poor homesteads, birch-trees and poplars,
Everywhere gloom-stricken folk . . .

How much upon strong backs they have borne there,
How worked with those toil-blackened hands;
How many times were they forced to bear torture
From forests and dales and broad lands.

Do you but turn your eyes on this people –
The heart chokes within you for grief,
How many woes see you, how much of weeping,
How many needs, sans relief.

A song sings of how, fordone by his loving,
Janka, the widow's son, dies,
There, where a sad birch is drooping above it,
The grave of a poor lad now lies.

Rumours and tales of accord, fortune's favour –
The heart hears of them not a word,
Woe chokes and stifles the nation's breath ever,
Woe everywhere is the lord.

In a wide wave it has spread like an ocean,
Drowning our native land quite . . .
Friends, can we vanquish this woe of our nation?
Friends, do we yet have the might?

SWIFTER, BROTHERS . . .

Swifter, brothers, advance to the fray
With life, leaving all terror aside,
Fearful folk's cries cause us no dismay,
Though the battle be spread far and wide . . .

Against water-flow as it pours
Only that which is living can ride,
And the wave of the stream ever-more
Bears away what has ceased, what has died.

TO A SINGER . . .

Now, then, my young friend, that the heart in man's breast,
As if stone-hewn, is hard, unresponsive,
Always upon it weak verse will be smashed,
Without kindling in it holy conscience.

From steel one must forge, temper flexible verse,
Patiently working and plying,
Then, when you strike, like a bell 'twill resound,
And from cold stone the sparks will come flying.

SONNET

Un sonnet sans défaut vaut seul un long poème.
Boileau.

Where the Egyptian sands spread far around,
Close where the waves of azure Nile are flowing,
A tomb stood many thousand years: men going
Within, some seeds hid in a jar were found.
Although the grains were parched and dried, still sound
Their vital force awoke, and, new life knowing,
Flourished abundantly, young ears were growing,
In spring the crop stood high above the ground.

Forgotten land of mine, this is your symbol;
At last thy people's spirit is atremble,
I believe it lies not in sterile sleep,
But that it will surge upward like a fountain,
Which, rushing in a mighty, sounding leap,
Pierces the soil, into free spaces mounting.

FROM THE SONGS OF A BYELORUSSIAN PEASANT

I bend and I toil until, stretched to breaking,
My life like a rotten thread gives,
And did I but know how much sweat would be taken
And poured from me, I could not live.

My feet tramped out viersts by the hundred on hundred,
Bridges and roadways I built.
I poured out my sweat when in pieces I sundered
Dry soil with my plough as I tilled.

I toiled over sandhills and quagmire, I suffered
No little of torment and pain,
And I'll not be ashamed when I sleep, the earth under,
Of hands by toil blackened, engrained.

Now the hour comes to die; sweat and tears are gnawing
My life away, like mouse's teeth;
Anguish bends me, like snowstorm on willow out-pouring,
Ne'er in my life could I breathe.

Fortune gives but a glance, then flies off, far far distant,
I could only know it in dreams;
So let, let my life then be sundered this instant,
Like the rotten thread that it seems.

II

I sought from the wealthy and prayed them for bread,
They gave me but stones and no more,
And between them and me these stones were firm-set,
Like a wall built by giants they soar.

And the wall grows, ever higher and higher,
And many men greatly do fear;
What will come to pass when it shakes and falls dire,
Whom will it bury under it here?

EMIGRANTS' SONG

There are in this world such far-rovers
Who believe not in God nor in devil,
Who delight in bright banners high over
The ships that in ocean ports revel.

They have none here to leave whom they cherish,
For they have neither kin nor belongings,
They care not if they live or they perish,
On one sole aim are fixed all their longings:

To visit lands, so far unsought-for,
To taste there of fortune and grieving,
And to perish among the salt waters
Of blue seas where white foam is heaving.

But we do not seek such a bounty,
It is not far lands we are needing,
We would not have left our dear country
If there had been bread for our feeding.

And in clatter and noise of streets roaming,
Where the crowd, ever-restless, whirls streaming,
We dream of the village, the Nioman,
And Libava with harbour lights gleaming.

* * *

When Basil died, far on the march,
He dreamed of his land at the last.
'Farewell, ah, farewell, ploughland strips,
Farewell, too, to you, unploughed fallow,
I shall never plough you again,
Nor at dawn so a rich crop of grain,
Dark meadow, I'll not gaze on thee more,
Thou clean, broad field stretching boundlessly!
Nevermore to walk across thee shall I go,
Nevermore the green grass shall I mow.
I am leaving thee, pinewood sincere,
Dark and dreaming, forest primaeval!
No longer shall I hear thee rustle so,
No more lay thy lofty pines low.

Ah, farewell to you, family dear,
Ah farewell to you, my dearest friends!
No more to press you close to my heart,
Sit with you, in jokes and talk take my part.
Ah, a reverent farewell, Biełaruś,
Thou my country all fortuneless.
Thy son does not forget his mother,
For thee he'll lie here, earth his cover . . .'
When Basil died, far on the march,
He dreamed of his land at the last.

LAVONICHA

O Lavonicha, Lavonicha my dear,
I remember you in loving words sincere,
I remember your curved brows' black downy haze,
I recall your bright eyes and your merry gaze,
I recall your lively form, and, more than this –
I remember well that you knew how to kiss!

O Lavonicha, Lavonicha my dear,
You sang louder than the nightingale to hear,
In the dance you always took the foremost place,
'Snowstorm', 'Jurca', 'Bull-calf jig' – you set the pace,
And at harvest time, so boldly reaped you on,
That it quite astonished your no-good Lavon!

O Lavonicha, Lavonicha my dear,
Half the village are your gossips; it is clear
You know how to welcome guests – a hostess gay –
You've learned always just the proper things to say,
How to cheer, and how to make dull grief depart,
And, in season, how to press friends to your heart.

O Lavonicha, Lavonicha my dear,
May God grant your life be long and never drear,
May you live in joy among this world so sad,
As you once brought gladness, so may you be glad,
May my memories of you ne'er disappear,
O Lavonicha, Lavonicha my dear!

Lumen coeli, sancta rosa.
Aleksander Pushkin.

I

IN THE VILLAGE

Beauty of young maidens sets the heart a-dancing,
And the souls of mothers have power to entrance us;
Higher beauty when they merge in living grace!
Artists, painters ever bow before its face,
Striving always through their canvas to discover
In a maiden's face the devotion of a mother.
Thou, O Virgin-Mother, art that beauty's sign –
From beneath the brush Thy holy features shine.
And I gaze on them in mystic trepidation,
My heart striving for the land of my own nation.
And I recollect all my long-past years!
Among my past life's images, dark and drear,
As I, eager, seek, with soul perturbed and stormy,
One event of long-ago appears before me.

Once upon a working day in summer-time
I passed through a village. In a dreary line
On both sides of the winding narrow lane, the houses
Stood there, grey, decayed, like old rags, dull and frowsty;
In the walls their windows staring blindly back,
And even the thatch itself was rotted black.
All was ruins, grown old; here death had come crawling.
Only here and there was something still adorning
The village dreariness. The poppy still unfurled
Bright flowers like butterflies, where many colours swirled,
Beside the path, and with them made the soul grow carefree.
Then, too, one might notice here and there a pear-tree,
Crooked, gnarled with age . . . and that, indeed, was all –
But no one to be seen, no people, none at all –
All in the fields. No trace of bright skirt for a moment,
No new bride passed with pails to bear the water homeward,
No white caps of peasants to be seen, nowhere,
No sounds of colts' neighing echoes in the air,
No sad song was heard, floating, ringing, flying . . .
Then, how strange! There came the sound of infant crying.
Hearing this, I started and looked round. Alas!
I'd scared a little boy; he crawled upon the grass

Beside the path, on hands and knees, poor little baby,
Towards his nursemaid – she a girl of eight years, maybe –
And now he'd reached her, and into her lap straightway
He hid his little head, voice fearful with dismay,
And, as the tip of a small birch nods in the breezes,
The girl bent to the little boy to calm and ease him,
And wiped his tears, and started murmuring to him,
Exactly, as a mother would. And thus, within
One living form, the two mingled and merged together,
The stature of a girl, the manner of a mother.
At that moment she, childlike in form, and thin,
Seemed sudden to appear filled to the very brim
With some far-spreading native loveliness within her,
And, I recall, by soul grew finer for an instant,
But maybe in the girl it was not loveliness –
In that thin, grubby, puny little girl expressed –
But something higher which great Rafael endeavoured
To show through the features of Our Lord's own Mother.

A better page thou art in my life's diary!
I read you once again quiet and joyfully.
Let many of these years be borne off by the freset,
Let in the dark abyss the lovely features perish
Of this sweet little girl, lost from my memory,
Yet I believe in hardship's hour they'll gaze on me.

* * *

Bielaruś, thy folk long have been yearning
For a golden and brilliant day,
See, the eastern sky kindled and burning,
Count the fires that in flying clouds play . . .