

**VALERY ALEFF**

**POEMS II**

**THE RED PAVILION**

(2000)

## LIFE AND DEATH

My normal life. Is it really 'normal'?  
Call it what you wish.  
Put it in inverted commas,  
In brackets.  
Put it in my room where I'm sitting now.

My normal, everyday life.  
What does it look like?  
It looks like my room.  
It looks like my computer screen,  
Whenever my computer is on.  
(And it is on all day long.)  
And I have a clear view  
Of the woods from my window.  
Do I enjoy the view?  
Put 'enjoy' in inverted commas.  
What's the difference?  
Do I feel these inverted commas?  
Do they influence my life,  
My everyday life?  
Hardly. Anyway  
Even the walls of my room  
Look like inverted commas  
Or like square brackets—  
From the outside.

What does it sound like,  
My everyday life?  
I wish it could sound  
Like a Haydn quartet.

I hope my death will sound

Like the last movement of

*Das Lied von der Erde.*

A song of Heaven.

## A COMMUNIQUÉ

‘Several obdurate differences remain,  
Preventing a compromise solution.’  
Those differences still remain.  
No compromise solution has been found.  
People go along the main street  
Without looking at each other.  
People go up the street  
And down the street.  
They never meet somewhere in the middle  
As if the middle of the street has disappeared.  
It *has* disappeared in the long run.

# *LE TEMPS PERDU*

I saw a portrait at the Tretyakov Gallery.  
 Why hadn't I seen it before?  
 The resemblance was striking.  
 I recognised your features  
 And even your eyes,  
 The perspective of your glance.  
 (Twenty-six years ago  
 I was at the end of that perspective.)  
 The portrait of a young lady,  
 The second half of the eighteenth century.  
 Now I can find you only  
 In another century, in another city,  
 In another life, in a piece of music.  
 And music is another life.

At some point Swann describes to Odette  
 The feeling he got when listening for the first time  
 To Vinteuil's *Sonata for Violin and Piano*,  
 To the proverbial *petite phrase*.  
 And then he listens to the *Sonata* once more,  
 After his temporary separation from Odette.  
*Mais tout à coup ce fut comme si elle était entrée.*  
 As if she had come back.  
 She did come back after a while.

I also listen to our sonatas,  
 To our quartets and quintets.  
 What's the use?  
 Of course your ghost comes  
 Whenever our *petites phrases*  
 Resound in my room.  
 (Our *petites phrases*,  
 Not Beethoven's *Geistertrio*.)  
 Your ghost comes on time,  
 Being far more punctual

Than your real self: punctuality  
Is the politeness of ghosts.

But what's the use of the *petites phrases*?  
They don't bring you back for good,  
Your real self.  
What's the use of music?  
What do I care about Wagner's infinite melodies?  
They're not long enough to reach you.  
What do I care about your ghost's punctuality?

Perhaps you're just being late. As usual.  
Ten years late. Two hundred years late.

## INFORMATION

We all suffer from information overload.  
Try as we may, we can't get rid of ourselves.  
Our thoughts bombard us with questions  
And answers. Our feelings  
Put us in the picture about  
What goes on outside our body  
And inside it.  
Do we need to know  
What goes on inside our body?  
Toothache, earache, heartache,  
An upset stomach.  
Do we need to know anything  
About our own digestion?  
And about heart attacks?  
Our heart often warns us  
About a forthcoming attack.  
What for? We can't really forestall it.  
No point in going to a doctor.  
No point in throwing away cigarettes.  
The heart attack will come anyway.  
And it's better not to know  
Anything about the future.  
A sixteenth-century prophet  
Foretold how the world would end.  
Should we read his writings?  
This knowledge would lead us nowhere  
Except to the end of the world.  
Should we sit down and twiddle our thumbs  
Till the end comes at last?  
Or should we just wait for the last heart attack,  
Our own heart attack?  
As inside, so outside.  
(Does the universe suffer from heart attacks?  
And our earth? What are earthquakes?)  
Every sensation is a disaster

And a superfluous piece of information.

And our thoughts lead us only

To the end of the world.

Or to other worlds.



## THE MEMBER OF A TCHAIKOVSKY FAN CLUB

His Achilles' heel. That irresistible urge  
 For promiscuous sex. Cruising  
 In the red-light districts of European cities,  
 He aspired to find somebody  
 Who might quench his thirst for the Absolute.  
 But the Absolute could be found  
 Only in statues, in monuments. At night  
 He often caressed them on city squares:  
 Poets and heroes, painters and composers,  
 Athletes and goddesses. In the daytime  
 He went to museums and picture galleries.  
 He looked around and saw  
 A few particles of the Absolute,  
 Scattered here and there.

His marriage was a sham: he could not  
 Marry a statue or a portrait.  
 So he married an ordinary woman.  
 'I'm only flesh and blood,' she would say apologetically  
 Whenever he asked her not to move. At home  
 He mostly caressed Tchaikovsky's music  
 By playing the *First Piano Concerto*,  
*The Dumka* and *The Seasons*.

His sudden death  
 In a car crash  
 Shocked everyone. At first  
 He wished to die like Tchaikovsky—  
 By drinking a glass of unboiled water  
 During a cholera epidemic.  
 But the official version of Tchaikovsky's death  
 Doesn't add up for a number of reasons. Besides,  
 There was no cholera epidemic in Western Europe—  
 Not at the end of the twentieth century.  
 Even in St Petersburg there was no cholera epidemic

In those days. So he just  
Relinquished his grip  
On the steering wheel.

# THE DRUNKARD'S SONG

*Es war nicht in mir. Es ging aus und ein.  
Da wollt ich es halten. Da hielt es der Wein.  
(Ich weiß nicht mehr was es war.)*

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Das Lied des Trinkers*

When I was 10, being 50  
Seemed light years away.  
Now I'm 53 and being 10  
Seems light years away.  
Why should I think  
About those days?  
Why should I drink  
To those days?  
Why should I recall  
My first love,  
My second love,  
My third love?  
They're all gone.  
What remains is myself,  
Here and now.  
What remains is my solitude  
And my wine cellar.  
And the rest happened  
When I was at college  
Which seems light years away.  
Light years, dark years—it depends  
On the vantage point from which  
I contemplate my life.  
Or is it a *vintage* point?  
Is there such a thing  
As a vintage point?  
A vintage joke, a vintage BMW,  
A vintage Hollywood movie—  
I'm not interested in *them*.  
I'm only interested in vintage pistols  
And in the 1947 vintage which seems  
Light years away, wine years away. Yet

The 1947 wines are wonderful.  
From this vintage point  
My life looks and sounds wonderful.  
My life is synonymous  
With the wines I drink.  
My life rhymes  
With the wines  
I drink.  
When I drink  
Wines from the top vintages—  
1928, 1929, 1945, 1947, 1949—  
I'm in vintage form.  
And I contemplate my life  
From the vintage point.  
What shall I do  
When these bottles are gone?

**A FAREWELL NOTE**

According to dictionaries,  
There are natural disasters  
And unnatural ones.  
The former are caused by nature,  
The latter by people.  
The latter variety is natural too—  
In my opinion.  
What's so unnatural  
About dropping a bomb?  
In what way is that different  
From floods and earthquakes?  
Blowing one's brains out  
Is not unnatural either.  
We have gone back to nature.  
(Why don't we understand  
The language of birds?  
A signifier, a signified—it's so easy!)  
I could be kept alive artificially,  
But let nature take its course.

## THE LAST LAUGH

Why do we always leave things to the last minute?

A BUSINESSMAN:

I wait and wait and wait  
Until the last minute comes.  
And when it does come  
I tidy my papers up  
Or give somebody a call  
To say what can be said  
Only at the last minute.

Why should I worry?  
Why is it always such a rush?  
Last minutes, first minutes.  
What's the difference between them?

Of course I can miss a train  
Or a plane. So what?  
There'll be other trains and planes.  
I'll make other appointments,  
Meet other people  
And sign other contracts.  
I always wear a lucky charm  
On a chain round my neck.

A POET:

I wait and wait and wait  
Until the last minute comes.  
And when it does come  
I'll finish my poem.

Until then I'll work on it.  
I'll sign my poem,  
God will sign my life.  
My poem, my life.  
What's the difference between them?  
Last minutes, first minutes.  
Death, immortality.  
In my end is my beginning.

A HINDU:

No one was ever born.  
No one will ever die.  
There are neither first  
Nor last minutes.  
There are no minutes at all.  
The past and the future.  
Life and death.  
What's the difference between them?

A SCEPTIC

There's a great difference  
Between theory and practice.

## SYMBOLS

The sun shines again  
As if it was a symbol of something.  
Do we need its heat?  
There are enough radiators in the world.  
Perhaps we need a symbol.

Do we need its light?  
There are enough lamps in the world.  
But light is also a symbol.  
And lamps are nothing:  
They just supply us with light.

And moonlight is a different symbol.



## FACTS AND MYTHS

What's yesterday?  
Is it a hard fact?  
Is it a myth?  
I did nothing yesterday.  
I only thought about my youth,  
About the Moscow Conservatoire,  
About the monument on which  
We had resolved to climb  
After our final exam.  
(We didn't—we were smashed.)

I thought mainly  
About three people.  
They used to be hard facts.  
Now they're myths.  
And sometimes myths are  
More tangible than facts—  
Harder than hard facts.

Three people. Three musicians.  
A composer, a violinist, a pianist.  
The inexpressible beauty of their art.  
I would run into them rather often  
At the Moscow Conservatoire.  
And even in the streets.  
I was indifferent to their fame.  
To me, in those days,  
They were just three people  
Living in Moscow.  
Three hard facts.  
I could have touched them.  
I never did.

Now I do touch them:  
Their recordings, the music,

My own body.

## A MULTI-FAITH SOCIETY

Stones are unconscious  
Of mist and snow.  
They're neither mad nor wise.  
And when a crowd stones an outcast,  
Historians don't scrutinise stones  
And their motives, if any.  
They never accuse *them* of cruelty.  
According to Meister Eckehart,  
Stones believe in God  
But they don't know it.  
They're unconscious of God.  
Likewise they might believe  
In the existence of snow and rain.  
A rolling stone might believe in moss.

A stone might believe in the hand  
Throwing it at a nearby tree  
In the course a childish game.  
(No outcasts, no upholders of tradition.)  
And the tree might believe in the stone  
Hitting and hurting it.  
Does the tree know it has been hurt?  
It might believe in pain, in wounds.  
Unconsciously, unconsciously.  
It might believe in the axe  
Cutting it down.  
And forests might believe in pyromaniacs.

## HOME, SWEET HOME

We sink into our favourite armchair,  
Hoping to relax with a cup of tea  
And a newspaper. But our thoughts get  
In the way. They're not as comfortable  
As our favourite armchair: we can't  
Sink into them. And if we do,  
We may fall through.

Our thoughts  
Often let us down—at the wrong moment.  
Why do we think about death  
At home, of all places? Why recall  
Betrayals and farewells?

We have time to kill,  
And time kills us instead.  
We have time on our side,  
And time is never on our side.  
We start playing with words,  
And words are dangerous toys.

Watching TV is very much  
A hit-and-miss affair.

Our beds are too comfortable  
To distract our attention  
From the brevity of life,  
From the disloyalty of friends,  
From the fragility of love,  
From the obstinacy of hate.

And from the obstinacy of fate.

## MEMORY

Whenever I go to Moscow  
My friends remember me.  
They might remember me  
When I'm elsewhere.  
And I'm mostly elsewhere.

They just *remember* me.

I was already a ghost  
On the day of my departure.

Memory, memory.  
You might have waited  
Until I left my flat.  
Why were you in such a hurry?

Do you want to keep me to yourself?  
Why not share me with reality?  
I think you've already had a fair share  
Of my body and mind.

My friends talk to an image  
And not to myself,  
To my real self.  
Likewise I talk to them  
In the one-dimensional world—  
That of our memory.

I step out into the night  
And the whirling snow.

Parts of my childhood  
Are so vivid to me  
They could be memories  
Of yesterday.  
This snowstorm dates back  
To 1959.  
Or to 1961.  
Yesterday I was in Versailles.  
And I hardly remember  
What I did yesterday.  
I wrote a poem, two poems.

Memory is a bad historian  
But an excellent story-teller.

In Moscow the spring sun  
Melts the snow by mid April.

There are some snow-covered mountains  
On the Evian label. The water I drink  
Is a remembrance of the snow.  
A three-dimensional memory.

## INDIFFERENCE AND LOVE

She never so much as glanced at me  
In her prime. A haughty woman.  
Now she's almost sixty.  
And she seems to have changed her mind.  
She looks at me quite often now.

The dead are reluctant  
To change their minds.  
They're not likely  
To fall in love with us  
In their celestial palaces  
If they hated us on earth.  
She's not dead yet.  
Just in her late fifties.

I was in love with her once.  
But she never so much  
As glanced at me in those days.  
She looks at me now—  
Her favourite occupation.

Will she stare at me in the Hereafter?  
Or will she revert to her indifference?  
And will she revert to using her maiden name?

Are the dead closer to their youth  
Than to their maturity?  
Are they in their second childhood,  
In their third childhood?



Are they in their first childhood—  
In their *Ur-Kindheit*?

## HOUSES

Every old house  
Is haunted—not only  
By suicides and victims of all sorts.  
A smell may haunt a house  
And a colour. Even the air  
Seems to be multi-coloured  
In old houses.

Every old house  
Is like a film the plot of which  
Has so many convolutions  
You need to concentrate  
In order to follow it.

## A JOURNEY

*When a person here sleeps, as it is called, then, my dear, he has reached pure being. He has gone to his own.*

*Chandogya Upanishad* (trans. by Radhakrishnan)

On the verge of sleep  
I'm always sceptical  
About writing poetry.  
And I'm often inspired  
On the verge of sleep.  
But I don't note down my ideas.

What did I wish to write about  
Before my afternoon nap?  
What does it matter?  
Unwritten poems are far more beautiful.

A train...a journey...  
A nostalgic journey  
Back to my childhood...  
No, I can't remember.  
What kind of journey did I have in mind?  
A spiritual journey?  
A journey of self-discovery?  
Perhaps. On the verge of sleep  
Such an idea might have crossed my mind.  
In a sense, sleep is a journey of self-discovery.  
And a spiritual journey.  
In the condition of deep sleep,  
Personal consciousness subsides  
And the self is said to be absorbed  
In the Highest Self.

Now I don't remember anything.  
Now I can describe only  
An ordinary train journey.

A few landscapes, a few words  
Uttered by my travelling companions,  
A helping of sauerkraut, a glass of beer.  
And the *Divina Commedia* lying in my lap.  
A few notes on the *Purgatorio*.  
The Highest Self  
Absorbed in my self.

**OTHER LIGHTS**

It's just a trick of the light.  
The whole set-up is different.  
The whole world is different.  
Everything is a trick of the light.  
Even darkness is a trick of the light.  
And death is a trick of the light too.  
Why not extinguish all the lights  
And switch on other lights?

Perhaps there's only one candle  
That can save us—  
One candle in the whole world.  
Perhaps there's only one match  
That can light the candle—  
One match hidden  
In an ordinary-looking box of matches.

## ODE TO WINDS

The wind is picking up.  
It seems to talk to someone.  
Talking to someone  
Who is hard of hearing.  
Or giving someone  
A good talking-to.

Winds are a good talking point.  
But who talks about them nowadays?  
Only meteorologists and those  
Who deplore the aftermath of a storm.

A lot of trees were blown down  
In the recent storms.  
A ship was blown 200 miles off-course  
By a tempest last month.  
Several people drowned.  
And no Prospero saved them. Nowadays  
Prosperos know how to unleash tempests,  
But they can't save anybody.  
They're half-Prosperos, in a way.

And Shelley is dead and gone.  
Even half-Shelleys are no longer around.  
Spring is far behind.  
Even Winter is far behind.  
We're living in a no-season's land.  
Neither in space nor on earth.

To whom the wind talks...

For whom the bell tolls...

Grand Narratives.

### JUST A LOT OF NUMBER-CRUNCHING

*Miniver cursed the commonplace  
And eyed a khaki suit with loathing;  
He missed the mediaeval grace  
Of iron clothing.  
E. A. Robinson, Miniver Cheevy*

I prefer swords to Kalashnikovs  
And I'm doubtful about progress.  
You can mock me if you wish.  
Those who look back  
Are always laughed at.  
Even those who look sideways  
Are the scorn of everybody.

There's nothing ahead.  
A large number of people  
Going somewhere.  
Just numbers without  
People. I was never much  
Good with numbers.

I look elsewhere—at a woman  
I'll never run across  
In the streets,  
On country roads,  
On my cross-country  
Skiing excursions.

The breeze  
Lifts her embroidered sleeve.



## GROWING OLD

Growing old is easy.  
You don't have to do anything.  
Or rather you can do  
Whatever you wish.  
You can sprawl out on your couch  
And remain there all day long  
Without shifting your gaze  
From the television.  
You can hit the bottle  
Or get high on grass.  
Sex and drugs and rock and roll.  
You can jog or play squash.  
You can go on a diet,  
Hoping to lose five pounds  
Before Christmas.  
You can study religion  
Or foreign languages.  
  
Or you can write poems  
About youth and love.

## HOMAGE TO LUIS BUNUEL

You put something inside yourself,  
 Some feelings, some objects:  
 Love, tenderness, delights,  
 Monuments, landscapes.  
 Where are they now?  
 What has become of them?

What's a landscape?  
 An object? A feeling?  
 What's love?  
*Cet obscure objet du désir.*  
 Where can you put this object?  
 In your heart, in your genitals?

I wish there was a bag inside me—  
 A huge bag into which I could put  
 Everything I need, everything I yearn for.  
 I wish I could open and close it at will.

Every time I broach the subject  
 Someone always comes out  
 With the old cliché,  
 'It's better to be happy  
 With what you've got  
 Than to be always yearning  
 After something you can't have.'  
 But what *have* we got?  
 Frustrated yearnings,  
 Unfulfilled desires.

There are gaping holes inside us.  
And outside. Everything falls through.  
We can't shake anybody's hand.  
We can't kiss anybody's lips.  
Only the sea breeze strokes our faces.  
Only music strokes our hearts.

### THE NATURE OF THINGS

It is easier to love without reciprocation.

It's raining today, so I cannot take a walk in the woods.  
And the woods don't mind. Nor do they remind me  
I've got three umbrellas in a wardrobe.

The woods don't miss me. I don't mind their coolness.  
And they don't mind my listening to poems  
Or novels during my hour-long strolls.

I don't listen to their Wagner-immortalised murmur.  
I look mainly at the path I must follow.  
They don't mind. They live and let live.

And the rain doesn't mind  
My listening to it from my study.

Walking in the woods at twilight,  
Sitting at home on a rainy day,  
Listening to an English poem—  
It's in the nature of things.

## TO VLADIMIR MARTYNOV

The best literature oversteps the bounds of literature.  
It is something else—a river, a garden path, a smile  
(A smile, not a simile), a glass of wine.

In your recent book

You speak about the music of angels,  
Which is no music at all. In Russian churches  
They used to sing like angels for three centuries.  
The ecclesiastics combated music but sang like angels,  
Knowing that heavenly songs have nothing in common  
With the music written by composers.

The best friendship

Is beyond hugs and kisses. Our conversations are more akin  
To music than words. And music is often silent. In fact  
Silence is the foundations of music. Now and then  
We hear the sounds of silence we call either  
'The music of the spheres' or 'the song of angels'.  
And what we hear on those occasions  
Can last for one or two years—three at the utmost.  
But once again music returns to absolute silence.  
Once again angels interrupt their song.

We haven't spoken to each other for ages.  
The Iron Curtain, petty conflicts.  
Well, raking up the past is not my glass of vodka.  
Besides, neither you nor I have been short of go-betweens:  
Angels must keep themselves busy.

Do you think I'm being blasphemous?  
Call it 'telepathy', then.

### **SHE DIED AT THREE IN THE MORNING**

I don't keep late hours any more.  
Nights have lost some of their magic.  
Nothing is hidden in the dark,  
And silence is the same everywhere:  
In broad daylight, during a love scene,  
Up in the mountains.

And the stars look artificial—  
As if somebody has switched them on  
For the sake of beauty.  
And whatever you do for the sake of beauty  
Is not beautiful.

Beauty is an inborn quality.  
Some people have an inborn tendency  
To develop certain kinds of tumour.  
Others are born with the gift for beauty.  
And even Time can't destroy it.  
Time can just switch it off.

An old Russian lady. She was  
So beautiful  
Youngsters looked contrite  
In her presence.

She died of cancer.  
Even on her deathbed  
She was beautiful,  
As beautiful as night.  
More beautiful than night.

*AVANT UNE LECTURE DU RÊVE DANS LE PAVILLON ROUGE*

The Chinese say a piece of jade  
Can ease the pain of unrequited love.

If you take a piece of jade  
And keep it close to your heart  
Your blood seeps into the stone  
And your heart stops bleeding.

Many centuries ago  
A man followed this advice.  
(He was a renowned painter.)  
He took a piece of jade  
And kept it close to his heart  
Until the stone grew red.  
His heart didn't stop bleeding.  
His clothes grew red too.  
And also his room.  
His heart didn't stop bleeding.  
Whatever he touched grew red.  
The grass on which he walked grew red.  
Whatever he looked at grew red.

His fellow-artists,  
Who enjoyed the diversity of colours,  
Implored him not to look at anything.  
Nor was he supposed to leave his house:  
His virtuous neighbours dreaded  
The whole area might turn  
Into a red-light district.

His house grew red too. And all his belongings:  
Furniture, mascots, keepsakes, kitchen utensils.

In my library I've got a Chinese book entitled  
*The Dream in the Red Pavilion.*

*Le rêve dans le pavillon rouge.*

(I've got it in French translation.)

I haven't read it yet.

What is it about, I wonder?

Is it about that man, about his house?

About the dream he had in his house?

What did he dream about?

His beloved?

Or did he dream about a blue world?

A blue world, a blue moon?

What colour was his dream?

Did the dream belong to his blue period?

If you colour your dream blue,

It may look rather cold.

Perhaps he was fond of cold dreams.

Was his dream in colour or black and white?

Was it as red as the rest of his life?

Red sky at night, painter's delight.

The colour of blood,

The colour of fire,

The colour of life.

The colour of the soul,

The colour of the heart,

The colour of the South.

The colour of union symbolised

By the red threads in the sky—

The red threads of destiny.



The colour of esoteric knowledge,  
The colour of the philosopher's stone.

The colour of jade.

## AN UNTIRING STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

A friend of mine quipped once,  
'I originally wanted to live in the next world  
But ended up in this world which is  
The next best thing.'

The dead *are* our next-door neighbours.

Why not proceed straightaway  
To the next world, to the Hereafter?  
From the Hitherto to the Hereafter?  
Why roam aimlessly in this transit lounge?

Or do the unborn *live* in the next world?  
Why don't they stay indoors?

The unborn must be given an opportunity  
To choose in which world to live.

## A DREAM

For years a woman has dreamt of being a candle.

Whenever there's a power cut,

Her husband doesn't need to strike matches

Or curse the darkness.

He likes reading by candlelight.

## THE BARBARIANS

The empress had fallen  
Under the influence of evil advisers  
And was becoming increasingly unpopular.  
The emperor wasn't interested in politics. Besides,  
He wouldn't listen to his doctor who had told him  
To change his drinking habits.  
The empire was doomed.

Everything disappeared except the barbarians.  
They just sat in the streets of the capital  
And ate raw meat. After a while  
The country became an independent republic.

A president instead of an emperor.  
He *was* interested in politics.  
And he drank only water.  
The first lady had no advisers:  
She spent most of her time at fashion shows.  
The republic was doomed.

Everything disappeared except the barbarians.  
They just sat in the streets of the capital  
And ate raw meat.  
And they drank human blood.

## HER SECRET

A woman can say one thing,  
But the signs of her behaviour—  
The way she puts her make-up on,  
The clothes she wears—  
Are the indicators of her real feelings.

Psychiatrists are right:  
A woman's message is written in code.  
And I've broken many codes.  
But there are exceptions to the rule.  
That woman is an exception.

Her make-up, the clothes she wears...  
While studying the signs, I encounter  
Other signs beyond them.

A perspective of signs opens up  
Whenever I endeavour  
To penetrate the thoughts of that woman.

It's better to admire her without  
Probing into her secrets.  
After all, her only secret is her beauty:  
Her smile and smell,  
Her lithe ballerina's body,  
The way she talks while leafing through a book.  
She lives so gracefully.

She doesn't seem to care about me.  
What does it matter?  
Even her indifference is beautiful.  
Her indifferent eyes and lips.

## REPRESSION AND DREAMS

It took several hours for the fog to lift.  
And when it lifted at last  
Another world appeared before us.

I have no idea whether it was the next world  
Or a parallel one. It borrowed *something*  
From the world we used to live in  
But the set-up was different.  
And sunsets were different.

Actually what we took for the sun  
Was no sun at all. Just a glowing ball or a bullet—  
One of those bullets that glow brightly  
As they fly through the air,  
Indicating the path they have taken.

There was no moon.  
And no stars.  
And our feelings were different.  
There was a discrepancy  
Between our feelings and their outward expressions.  
Our hearts were pounding with excitement  
But everyone talked in a quiet voice.  
And the bullet-like sun was flying westward  
Through our hearts, not overhead.

And the West had become the East,  
As we realised after a while.  
The North had *not* become the South.  
And in the night we heard a bizarre noise.

We peered into the gloom but couldn't see  
Where the noise was coming from.

Perhaps we just projected our embarrassment  
Into outer space. And the noise we heard  
Might have been our desire.

At times some large black rain clouds  
Glowered in the sky.

But there was no rain, no snow.

And no tears welled in our eyes; yet we felt like crying.

### AN OLD LADY TALKING TO A YOUNG MAN

Have you ever tried a cigar?  
I'll fix you up with a job  
And you'll be able to afford  
Cigars and cognac almost every evening.  
You don't accept money from old ladies, do you?  
How much do they pay?  
No, you are too proud for that.  
I would resent being regarded as a gigolo, if I were you.  
So I'll fix you up with a job.  
You've got too much time on your hands.  
You go dancing pretty often.  
You dance with girls and they snuggle up to you,  
And you snuggle together.  
And they kiss you on your dimples.  
I'm not jealous.  
I don't feel jealous every time  
Another woman looks at my boyfriend.  
Just a word of warning—  
Young girls are dangerous.  
They get pregnant too easily.  
And diseases, diseases...  
You don't want to die, do you?  
I'm not asking you to stay with me round the clock.  
Young people must have 'fun' now and then.  
Well, go to the pictures!  
Enjoy yourself in public libraries!  
Reading broadens one's mind!  
But don't hang around parks and byways!  
Do you want to be arrested on drug charges?  
I'm filled with disgust at what I've witnessed in prisons.



It's time for you to face up to your choices.  
Either you stay on in that tiny squalid flat of yours  
Or you put everything behind you  
And start a new chapter.

## THE DOORS

My cold is so bad I've lost my sense of smell.  
I've lost a part of the world.

'Man is always passing through two doors:  
Out of this world and into the next,  
And out and in again.'  
(A Hasidic saying.)

Last night a door opened  
And I got stuck in the doorway.

I've got one foot in the grave.  
Or rather my nose is in the grave—  
In the next world, in the odourless world.

The day before yesterday  
I booked a table for two  
At my favourite restaurant.  
Women, wine, food.  
What are they without my nose,  
Without my palate?

My first love. A fourteen-year-old girl.  
I can still smell the fragrance of her skin—  
In spite of the cold.  
The fragrance of her skin,  
The fragrance of her hair.  
And I've still got the taste of her lips  
In my mouth.  
The taste of her lips,

The taste of her neck,  
The taste of her ears,  
The taste of her eyelids,  
The taste of her fingers.

I booked a table for tomorrow night.  
Planning so far ahead makes no sense:  
One may catch a cold,  
One may get cold feet,  
A few doors may open,  
A few doors may slide shut.

## GOD

He has been almost totally paralysed  
 And in a wheelchair  
 Since the car crash two years ago.  
 But he talks a little when he feels like it.  
 He talks only to his wife.

Today he feels like talking.  
 ‘No change.  
 The same wheelchair.’  
 ‘What do you mean?’ asks his wife.  
 ‘Somebody else used to push it,’ he answers.  
 ‘Who?’

Two minutes later:  
 ‘God.’

Five minutes later:  
 ‘You’re my God now.  
 God forsook me.  
 Two years ago.  
 There’s no God except you.  
 No difference.  
 Always been paralysed.  
 You’re paralysed too.’  
 ‘God can’t be paralysed,’ she answers.  
 ‘God can’t afford it.’  
 She’s not in a playful mood—  
 Why should she be in a playful mood?—  
 But she spends her time  
 (And her husband’s time)

Cracking jokes and telling witty stories:  
 She thinks she must amuse her husband,  
 Diverting his attention from his problems.  
 At school she was always devising games  
 To amuse her classmates.

Half-an-hour later:  
 ‘So you’re not God,’ he says.  
 ‘Don’t push my wheelchair.  
 Only God’s allowed to do that.’

Three minutes later:  
 ‘Only God can do that *properly*.’  
 ‘I *am* God,’ she answers.  
 ‘Liar. God is omnipotent,’ he protests.  
 ‘I push your wheelchair,  
 I cook your meals and serve them.  
 I *am* omnipotent.’  
 ‘Get away from me!’

Six hours later:  
 ‘I’m not paralysed.  
 Just having a nervous breakdown.  
 Don’t feel like doing anything.  
 Why should I walk?  
 I feel like talking.’  
 ‘That’s right,’ she answers.  
 She speaks in a tired voice.  
 She’s tired out after the long journey:  
 In the afternoon she wheeled him along  
 The longest alley in their neighbourhood—  
 As far as the nearest petrol station.

Twenty minutes later:  
 ‘Why didn’t you fill me up with petrol?  
 I ran out of petrol.  
 Two years ago.’

‘You don’t need petrol  
If you believe in God,’ she answers.  
‘I don’t believe in God.’  
‘Nothing can help you  
If you don’t believe in God.’  
‘*You* can help me.’

Half-an-hour later:

‘You can *help* me.’

**DOUBT**

*Quien duda existe. Sólo morir es ciencia.*  
Vicente Aleixandre, *Sin fe*

Doubt is a wonderful sentiment.  
When I doubt my whereabouts,  
I live everywhere and nowhere.  
When I doubt my identity  
I become a bird and a grave  
In which somebody else is buried.  
I become the snow and the sky  
From which it falls.

The self-assured are too stiff:  
They know where they stand,  
They know what to do.

I know my actions are  
A melody, an inaudible melody.  
Even I don't hear it.

## EMPTINESS

His mind is half-blank—  
Half-empty, in other words.

No notebooks, no address books;  
No friends either at home or anywhere else.  
Only his native city is his imperturbable,  
Unresponsive friend to whom  
He talks as he walks along her streets,  
Around her squares. In his half-empty mind,  
His native city is a woman whose body he strokes  
And makes love to in the course of his walks.

He used to hear many voices,  
Quarrelling, inquiring, making statements.  
Now he hears one voice—  
His brook of consciousness.

He used to hear rapturous applause  
As if thousands of his admirers  
Were lining the streets, clapping, shouting  
And dancing like pagans.  
Now he hears music—  
The voice of his soul.

Emptiness is the aim he strives for.  
Half-emptiness is just a stage  
He's going through.

He's doing it in stages  
So he won't be empty



For another couple of years.

There are no cities in emptiness,  
No women, no lovemaking.  
And one's not supposed  
To talk in emptiness.  
Even talking to oneself  
Is out of the question.  
Even one's brook of consciousness  
Must dry up.

Is there music in emptiness?  
He will find out.

### SMALL MERCIES

I suppose we must be thankful  
For small mercies:  
A half-full bottle of wine;  
A fifty-year-long life;  
A small amount of knowledge—  
Neither a guide nor a burden;  
A few friends;  
Not too many enemies;  
A childhood one can recall  
Without being subjected  
To Freudian torture;  
Only one visit  
To the intensive-care unit;  
Only two wives or two husbands,  
Each of them betraying us  
Three times at the utmost  
(With three different persons);  
A child who is neither a genius  
Nor a criminal;  
A job that is neither lucrative  
Nor exhausting;  
A nice tombstone.

## FREEDOM FROM OBLIGATIONS

I've always been in a hurry,  
Simultaneously doing two or three things.  
Now I've got plenty of time.  
And nothing to do.  
Not even a half-thing,  
A zero-thing.  
(Writing poetry is a zero-occupation.)

Watching TV, leafing through books.  
I don't feel like reading anything:  
Only leafing through books is a suitable pastime.  
And pages turn into leaves, dead leaves.  
They rustle like dead leaves too.

I hate to see animals  
Pacing up and down in their cages.  
What else is there to do?

As citizens of the global village,  
We can't ignore our obligations to others.  
Do animals have obligations?

### A SOCIAL BUTTERFLY

What separates us now?  
Light, darkness,  
A memory lapse?  
What a pity I can't remember  
Every instant I spent in your company.  
What would you do  
If you were alive?

Your presence left nothing  
To the imagination.  
Your absence makes heavy demands on it.

Clairvoyants can remember the future.

A butterfly has settled on a wicker chair  
As if to pose for a painter or a poet.

'Take your hat off, for goodness' sake,  
And stop posing!'  
How often did I tell you that?

## ANOTHER ENDURANCE TEST

I was walking knee-deep in sludge.  
A gust of wind blew my umbrella inside out.  
Why did I feel so happy during that stroll?

I wasn't in love. I was no longer young.  
And the world wasn't better ten years ago.  
Why did I feel so happy during that stroll?

Because I'd undergone  
Another endurance test  
Without going mad.

## SADNESS

Decrepitude, death—  
One can read a lot into a sunset.  
I just look at it.  
No thoughts flash through my mind,  
No memories haunt me:  
The Roman Empire, its decline  
And fall. Wagner's *Ring*. I don't even think  
About the young lady  
Who told me last week, 'You're too old.'  
I just look at it.

Whenever you look at something  
You're bound to grow sad,  
Provided you look long enough.  
Every dawn is a twilight.  
Every smile is a grimace of disgust.  
Every minute is Time.

'It's forbidden to be old,'  
Said Rabbi Nahman of Braslav.  
It's not forbidden to be sad.

And sadness is a red circle  
Left by a glass of wine.  
And noise is silence.

**ANY OTHER NAME**

(1997)

## ANOTHER NAME

At the end of his life, in retirement,  
Toscanini said he was tired of his name.

You can change your name, if you wish.  
What would happen then? Wouldn't you walk  
Along the same streets—in another city,  
In a distant city?

Even on other planets  
The streets are the same: dirty and hostile.  
And the same horses trot along those streets.  
And someone always shouts from a window,  
Calling out to somebody else—to a friend,  
A passer-by. And somebody sells apples  
Under another sun.

And somebody sings  
Under a balcony as if there were  
Some melodies left in the world.



## CORNERS

What's our childhood? A paradise  
 Or a mass of bruises, a myriad blunders?  
 Every corner is an enemy—and a discovery.  
 What's there to discover? Death, among other things.  
 Recently I re-discovered him in one of my dreams.

I *was* awkward in my childhood.  
 Did I enjoy it? Not quite.  
 I wished to become a grown-up—  
 To overtake Time by breaking toys.

Now I'm almost fifty.  
 Do I wish to grow younger?  
 What for? Anyway I won't have enough time  
 To walk as far as a last corner.

### POSTSCRIPT:

I finished this poem. Two days later,  
 I read in a poem by Milosz: 'I was running,  
 As the silks rustled,  
 Through room after room without stopping,  
 For I believed in the existence  
 Of a last door.' Did I believe  
 In the existence of a last corner  
 When writing my poem? I did, otherwise  
 I wouldn't have spoken about it.  
 Another question: Do those who speak  
 About last doors and corners have enough time  
 To reach them? Always, always?

## THE INTERIOR OF FATE

Even the gods are subject to fate.  
They're afraid of darkness.  
They're afraid of light,  
For light is as dangerous as darkness.  
And A plus B always equals war.

Fate often sits in our armchairs  
And smokes our cigars;  
And drinks our wines.  
And we fawn upon our fate  
Which, out of sheer generosity,  
Might postpone its decisions  
For a few years or just  
For a few minutes.  
A suspended sentence. A suspended  
Dot, a suspended comma.

I wrote three poems entitled  
*Landscapes of Destiny*.  
Fate is more intimate:  
One poem is enough.  
It's not a landscape—just a room  
Where we find ourselves at our birth.

A man is sitting there, a man  
Or a woman. A book is lying  
On a table. In that book  
Punctuation marks  
Are more important than words.

A landscape is a room—  
The room of an angel.

**MARFINO**

Another memory, a happy one.  
She was several years my senior.  
(I was fifteen.) She looked at me  
Once—in the dining room.  
(I brushed against her shoulder.  
Intentionally.) We spent  
Ten days in that *maison de repos*,  
Thirty-four years ago.

You did not  
Kiss me among the ruins  
Of that palace...in boats gliding  
Down the river...  
None of them ever capsized.  
Shall we try it first thing  
Tomorrow morning?  
I hope you cannot swim.

A little montage and retouching.  
Mine is an art of titivation.  
And titillation.

A French champagne—not a Russian *Sekt*.  
A half-empty glass  
On a bedside cabinet.

I'm no longer too young for you, *dorogaya*.  
(My darling, my darling.)

I'll never grow old.

**OUR CONVERSATIONS**

To George Edelman

We often talk about how people neglect  
Human codes: the code of politeness,  
The code of honesty, the code of friendship,  
The code of love and even the code of hatred.  
Oh, if only they did it on purpose!  
(Flouting codes would be proof of their existence  
In those people's minds and lives.)  
But they know nothing about them.  
They don't trample them underfoot,  
Nor do they jump over them—  
They just walk and walk.  
They don't even trip over them.  
Why are they so neglectful?  
Have they misunderstood  
Jesus Christ's teaching:  
'I came not to send peace, but a sword'?  
I don't think so.  
They just walk and walk, their hands  
Thrust deep into their pockets.  
What do they hold in their hands?

## MY SMILE

Another memory.

Childhood is indigent.

A child's reality is too flat;

No time-perspective prolongs it beyond

A colour, an event or a sound.

Shadows are non-existent. There's

No polyphony in one's childhood—

Only a Gregorian chant.

A buoyant Gregorian chant.

And old age is indigent.

We constantly look

For memories and proofs

Of former realities:

A photograph, a keepsake,

A smile—our own

Smile. (We often sink

Into the past in front of

Mirrors.) What does it prove?

We haven't forgotten

How to smile.

Once upon a time

You owned a dozen hats—quite a feat,

Considering the Spartan plainness

Of Soviet life.

## TO VADIM SUCHANOV

For thirty years we have practised  
The art of conversation.

Out of laziness (and modesty, I suppose),  
We do not use cassette recorders.  
So nothing remains of our talks,  
No proofs of wit and wisdom.  
We do remember some of our jokes,  
Our *bon mots*. But mostly  
We remember the pleasure of  
Talking to each other.  
And this pleasure cannot be recorded:  
Even an electrocardiogram  
Would not capture it.

What *might* it look like?  
A hill, a mountain? Hardly.  
In amplitude and speed  
Our heartbeats remain unchanged  
In those moments of wordy happiness.  
(No emergency defibrillation is required.)  
They just begin to glimmer.

## THE CHOICE

A day is empty, if not filled with a poem.  
 A written poem, a read poem—or something  
 Which sounds like a poem or has the feel,  
 The smell of a poem.

Is it better  
 To write poems or live within poems,  
 Walking along trochees, sprawling on rhymes?  
 I don't know. But I continue  
 To substitute my visions, my nightmares  
 For Parisian cafés and the parc de Versailles.  
 A poor barter, I'm quite aware of that.  
 Indeed I might even be happier  
 On the Champs Elysées  
 (At the height of rush hour)  
 Or in the mosquito-buzzing taiga—  
 Someone else's nightmares.

'I've no choice.' A common explanation.  
 'It's poetry that chose me.'  
 Nonsense! Everybody can choose  
 In these matters.

Rimbaud wasn't a second-rate poet.  
 And he ought to have said of himself:  
 '*C'est la poésie qui m'a choisi.*'

He chose to learn Arabic,  
 Hindustani and Russian,  
 Disregarding his own



*Voyelles and consonnes.*

### CAPITAL LETTERS AND SMALL VICTORIES

It is odd how some minor ailments  
Disappear with the passing of the years.  
Hay fever used to plague me in my youth,

But I no longer mistrust  
The month of June  
And *Unter den Linden*.

Minor ailments are  
Out of Time  
And out of tune.

## IN MEMORY OF JOSEPH BRODSKY

You died when I was writing a novel.  
Should I have interrupted my work?  
You were fond of elegies.

I did not interrupt my work  
But re-read scores of your poems:  
Death is the best literary agent.

I love most your late poems: *Primechania*  
*Paprotnika* (*Notes of a Fern*).

You said you were  
A bad Russian, a bad Jew,  
A bad American—but a good poet.  
You were a good Russian  
(You wrote poetry in Russian),  
A good Jew  
(You were proud of your origins),  
A good American  
(You advised Baryshnikov  
To settle in the States)  
And a good poet,  
A very good poet.

Only your heart was bad,  
From a medical point of view.

Domestic animals need symbols;  
So do computers and humans. You've become  
A symbol of the Russian Bronze Age.

The Silver Age was in the hands of  
Mandelstam and Tsvetaeva.  
And in your heart.

A good symbol.  
Not a poet of genius—  
Not Montale, not Milosz—  
But a very good poet.

It's not for me to judge.  
This belated elegy is not  
A judgement, a grade,  
Nor a shriek, a tear:  
You didn't favour *them*.  
A bow, rather.  
(In the realm of poetry  
You're my brother,  
Thanks to this rhyme.)  
A note, a commentary.  
A token of gratitude.

**PANTHEISM AND PESSIMISM**

I don't think I'll ever  
Have enough patience  
To describe a flower.

By describing a flower  
In minute detail,  
A poet might mirror  
The universe—especially  
If he fits the flower into  
The pattern of his own life,  
Making it sound like a sigh,  
A scream or, at worst,  
Like an echo.

The universe is so wild  
No flower can tame it.

And nothing will ever fit  
Into the pattern of *my* life.

**POSTSCRIPT:**

'He leads a wild life of drink, drugs and fast cars.'  
That's what I might say about the universe  
If it were a human being. It is not.  
The universe is not the man whose body  
Sprawls over the spheres in old drawings.  
A horse, rather. A herd of wild horses.

**TO ARTURO BENEDETTI MICHELANGELI**

The world is sadder without you.  
Actually the world did not really  
Care about you, and therefore  
It's neither sadder nor gayer  
After your disappearance.  
But we feel sadder in this world—  
The happy few who have heard you.  
We feel sadder, for no artist  
Has your dignity nowadays.  
And, in the realm of art,  
'Dignity' rhymes with 'mystery'.

You were not a 'nice guy',  
Nor did you kiss everybody.  
And photographers wouldn't dare  
Request 'cheese' in your presence.

I listened to you with my eyes closed.  
In the beginning was the Sound,  
And the Sound was with you,  
And the Sound was you.

Now we need light, I suppose.  
And a Tree of Remembrance.

### OLD SUPERSTITIONS

*I am not pleased at that ill-knotted fire,  
That bushing-flaring star:—am not I Duke?  
It should not quake me now; had it appeared  
Before it, I might then have justly feared.  
But yet, they say whom art and learning weds,  
When stars wear locks, they threaten great men's heads.  
Tourneur, *The Revenger's Tragedy**

I was in Munich. Suddenly I heard a cry:  
Our neighbours were staring at the sky.  
'The comet!' they shouted. 'The comet!'

They sounded happy. A new toy,  
The Disneyland overhead.  
(The Promised Land of our times.)

Why did Tolstoy  
Made such a fuss  
About Halley's Comet  
In his *War and Peace*?  
Why did the Russians  
Take it seriously  
In 1812 instead of  
Playing with it?

Napoleon wouldn't have invaded Russia.  
Imagine the picture: Tolstoy  
Writing his famous novel *Peace*.

A portentous sign,  
An ominous sign.  
No, just a toy!  
Tolstoy was wrong:  
Heaven is nothing  
But a side-show.  
Or a slide show.

## LIGHT

You used to be a woman  
And I was your shadow.  
Now you're a shadow  
And I'm writing about you.

Many poets speak  
About the dead:  
About dead friends,  
About dead wives.  
*'Wahr spricht, wer  
Schatten spricht.'*  
We are all shadows,  
Which probably means:  
There's light in the world.  
The light of the sun,  
The light of a comet.  
And the light of your laugh.



# TO VALERY SABLIN

*The 7th of November, 1975. As the Soviet troops parade on Red Square in commemoration of the 58th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, a state-of-the-art battleship of the Baltic fleet, 'The Storozhevoy', does an about-face and heads for Leningrad. The lieutenant commander, Sablin, demands air time on radio and television.*

*The ship was surrounded and all hands on board arrested.*

From a *Télépoche* TV guide. (1997)

A foolhardy attempt.

Some called you a Utopian;

Others thought you were a fool.

You made a foolhardy attempt

To—What actually

*Did* you intend to do?

What were your intentions?

Did you hope to stir Russian history

Into motion again?

Your intentions: To reach the spot

From which the cruiser *Avrora*

Announced to the world

The Russian Revolution (October 1917).

Your self-appointed mission:

A new revolution. An old symbol.

Why not sacrifice one's life

For the symbol in which you believe,

Even though others do not?

Isn't any flag a symbol? And the 'little

Patch of the ground' that stirred Hamlet into motion?

And a gauntlet on a parquet floor? Life itself?

Even a worthless life is a symbol.

And no life is wholly worthless

If there are symbols in it.

You wished to have your speeches  
Broadcast through the country.

Were you as naïve  
As Don Quixote?  
The Soviet Union  
Was not a windmill  
To be tilted at.

Turgenev said history was useless  
Without Don Quixotes. You read  
Cervantes' novel in the prison,  
Before the execution—only to find  
It is an updated version of  
*Crime and Punishment*.

Thanks to you and your like  
History will survive.  
And even in modern history,  
Alongside businessmen and scientists,  
There's a room for Sablins.

A tiny room in the basement.  
A candle is burning in it.

**STONE-FACED**

History forgets nothing.

History is different  
From those who create it;  
We mustn't confuse  
Humans and history.

Actually, history is also  
Created by animals and stones.  
Thus pebbles are as important  
As the foot that makes them crunch.

Humans forget a lot,  
But not everybody  
Has a short memory.  
History is often created  
By rancorous losers  
And disconsolate lovers.

Stones forget nothing  
As long as they live.  
History is often written  
By means of stones:  
Monuments, memorials.

An ordinary house  
Speaks of its inhabitants,  
Present and past.

History *looks* like stones.

History books  
Are imperturbable.  
They don't suffer  
Unutterable torments.

All torments are 'utterable',  
In the final analysis.

## THE PRESENT

I write a lot about history.  
 Or about death. And general ideas,  
 And eternal problems.  
 But what about the present?  
 What about the word I utter  
 On the spur of the moment?  
 Not the *mot juste*—  
 A haphazard word,  
 Something I say for the sake of talking...  
 Or living...Suspension points  
 Instead of a dot.

Why do I avoid the present?  
 Because I haven't worked on it yet?  
 But no one has enough time  
 To put the finishing touches to the present:  
 No one can touch it.  
 Only the future can.  
 Is that why I talk so much  
 About the future?

I'm weary of the future.  
 I'm weary of eschatology and the Apocalypse.  
 I'm weary of Godot (but not of Beckett).  
 I'm weary of missions and illusions,  
 And of future generations.  
 (The unborn can also be wearisome.)

Communism was a hopeful doctrine—  
 At the very beginning. But we are  
 In the middle somewhere.  
 We are always in the middle,  
 Neither at the beginning nor at the end.  
 Even cave dwellers were in the middle:  
 Between chimpanzees and the ancient Greeks.

So the world has been in decay for some time,  
But it's not dead.  
'Decrepit' is the right word.

Our ideas are infirm.  
Our lives go on.  
So we must fill in gaps.

## THE NAME

Colours enliven days.

But there's a sort of white-and-black space

Behind these colours. Or amidst these colours.

Call it 'truth' or 'lies'—what does it matter?

What counts is our closeness to this black-and-white

Photograph of the world. (*It is immutable.*) Our

Participation in it. (A photograph, not a motion picture.)

Call it 'essence', the essence of life.

Or perhaps it's just a nuance.

Instead of saying 'world' all the time,

I'd better use the words: 'shade', 'outline',

'Trance', 'stance'...

Or 'glance'.

# EVERYTHING

*We must renounce ourselves.*  
From an orthodox sermon

At the time  
I didn't know Montale.  
But you also helped me  
Descend the stairs  
Like the heroine of *Xenia*—  
Drussila Tanzi, alias Mosca.

Mosca means 'fly' in Italian.  
It also sounds like 'Moscow' in Russian:  
*Moscva, Moscva*. Oddly enough,  
Our stairs led to the truth—  
A cruel truth, a Heideggerian truth,  
The truth of *Sorge* and *Angst*.

Heaven lies at the bottom of a well,  
Hence the expression 'descent to the stars'.

We walked down. For six months  
We tried to get rid of ourselves,  
Following the advice of a priest  
And the imperatives of love.  
You walked towards death.  
I realised nothing is superfluous:  
Neither the self, nor philosophy.

Yet Wittgenstein advised us  
To get rid of philosophy.  
But not of poetry.



Of course  
I also walked towards death.  
  
Even death is not superfluous.

## A PIECE OF LIFE

Matthew Arnold wrote: 'The truth is  
We are not to take *Anna Karénine*  
As a work of art; we are to take it  
As a piece of life.'

Works of art

Disregard our death. They sparkle and shine  
As if nothing had happened—as if  
Schubert were still alive.

He did not finish

One symphony and three piano sonatas.  
(And he did not compose—not even in his mind—  
Ten quartets, twelve piano sonatas.)  
And Mozart did not finish  
His *Requiem*, his own *Requiem*.

The work of art lives in a house.  
'Now I've a wonderful writing desk  
So I can write,' said Pasternak, whereupon  
Mandelstam grew indignant: he never  
Owned a writing desk, let alone  
A house. He wrote his poems  
In the open air—on the white snow,  
Under the black suns.

That is why

His poems smell of orange peel.

Works of art steal

Our gestures and thoughts. They disregard  
Our aching bodies.  
(They record consumption  
And ignore indigestion.)  
They snub our second thoughts.  
And our third thoughts.  
(These are far more important.)  
And they capture and depict  
Only the first fear—  
The prelude to *Angst*.

In short, they are preludes  
Without fugues,  
Fig trees without figs.

And pieces of life are  
Adam and Eve  
Without fig leaves.

### CONSPICUOUS BY THEIR ABSENCE

One of my films  
Disappeared recently.  
On a cassette I had recorded  
*Dieu a choisi Paris*. A kind of  
Documentary  
Featuring many artists  
And also scientists:  
Saint-Saëns, Einstein...

I must have erased the film  
For the sake of some thriller—  
Without knowing it.  
But this kind of thing  
Had never happened before.

I'm sure a top model  
Wouldn't let anybody  
Erase her—not even  
An absent-minded poet.

But artists—and some scientists  
Who are artists in their own right—  
Do not live outside their works,  
Neither in the streets nor on cassettes.

Einstein couldn't remember  
His own telephone number.  
He forgot he'd been filmed.

Luckily he remembers

The books on his theory  
I have in my library.

And Saint-Saëns knows  
I burst into tears  
Whenever I hear  
The aria of Delilah.

## A HOPE

Our century is almost over,  
So is our millennium.

There'll be fewer hopes  
In the next century,  
In the next millennium.  
Fewer hopes, more dentists.  
Nobody will fear them.

But humans don't need hopes.  
They need magic pills.

In the next century,  
In the next millennium,  
There'll be fewer heroines  
And much more heroin.  
But humans don't need heroines.  
They need top models.

There'll be more computers  
And more talk, more signals.  
And fewer ideas.  
A signal will travel  
All around the world  
And return to its creator—  
Like Magellan.

Sure enough, Magellan  
Returned to the Creator  
At the end of his voyage.

But he didn't return to Portugal.

'Sailing around the globe  
In such tiny boats  
Wasn't so much brave as foolhardy.'  
(From some future encyclopaedia.)

There'll be fewer Magellans  
And many more megastars,  
And megastores, and megatons,  
And megawatts.

But I hope  
Someone, somewhere—  
In some red desert—  
Will discover America,  
And India,  
And Ancient Greece,  
And Ancient China.

# TO ANNA AKHMATOVA

I understood you yesterday.  
Suddenly, in the woods.

In the same woods I read you many times.  
And always I shut your books, saying:  
'Mandelstam is better, Tsvetaeva is better.'  
The Russians are fond of hierarchies.

I saw your tomb near St Petersburg.  
Why didn't your tomb tell me  
You were a wonderful poet?  
Tombs *are* talkative.

Your tomb is in my woods now,  
And every tree is your poem—  
Down to the Tree of Knowledge  
And the Tree of Life.

Selected works:  
Every pillar, every frieze,  
Every sound, every noun.

Every river is the Neva.



**SHIPS**

I'll never become  
A national poet.

I'm no poet at all—  
Just a man  
Who tries to survive  
By means of poetry.

A national poet—  
A national treasure,  
As they say in Japan.  
A poet laureate,  
As they say in England.  
A man who cuts ribbons.  
A man who drinks water  
Chiefly on podiums.  
A man who hurls bottles  
Against new-built ships.

I drink champagne,  
A lot of champagne.  
But I'm not likely  
To send any ship  
On her maiden voyage  
Save the Titanic.

*ALLES KLAR*

‘We adore explanations,’  
A Frenchman told me once.  
‘And the English prefer hints.’

But what is there to explain  
Or hint at? I awoke  
And rose from my bed.  
I looked out of the window.  
The weather was awful.  
There was nothing to explain,  
Nothing to hint at.  
The trees hadn’t moved out of sight.  
Had they disappeared overnight,  
I might have sought to explain the fact.  
I would have found no explanation.

So I stayed at home.  
I read a few poems  
But didn’t try to explain them.

There were no hints in those poems;  
They were like my window and my bed.

They didn’t hint at the existence of God.  
They spoke about it in a whisper.

## CEMETERIES

I'm indifferent to cemeteries.  
No epitaph can resurrect a corpse.  
No statue does justice to former caresses.

Cemeteries. They look helpless.  
Their beauty is pointless.  
They *are* pointless. Indeed  
We needn't go anywhere  
To remember our dead mothers.  
We can cry in our rooms.  
No room is too small for tears.

I'm indifferent to cemeteries,  
But I go to Père Lachaise.

A polonaise,  
Not a cemetery.

A habanera.

## THE DIFFERENCE

Why are my thoughts different  
When I cannot sleep?  
I never think like that  
In other circumstances—  
When I'm a car-passenger,  
For instance.

Is my mind different  
In those periods of insomnia?

Am I transported somewhere  
During those sleepless nights?

The soul of a sleeper is supposed  
To wander away from his body  
And actually to visit the places,  
To see the people  
And to perform the acts  
Of which he dreams.

According to a Hindu belief,  
Our souls are transported to the Hereafter  
During our sleep.

I think about trivial events,  
About familiar objects,  
About friends and books.

I think about them *differently*.

# A COMMENTARY ON THE MAHABHARATA

‘What’s madness?’

‘A forgotten path.’

We forget so many paths:

The paths of truth,

The paths of honour,

The paths of wisdom,

The paths of beauty,

The paths of love.

Which ones lead away

From madness?

Any of them?

All of them?

Is one path enough

To save us from it?

A path of love?

Would this path save us from madness

If we followed it scrupulously,

Without ever stepping off?

(The maths of love.)

As a child, I was expected

To do exactly what my parents told me,

And not deviate in any respect.

I wasn’t a *modern* child.

(Nor Childe Harold’s apprentice.)

So I’m used to following various paths.

And I love traditions.

Does this mean

I’m sane? What differentiates a madman

From an ordinary citizen?

Do madmen always go in zigzags,

Stepping off kerbstones,

Scaring car drivers out of their wits?  
Do car drivers become mad in their turn—  
As a result of those would-be collisions?

Do madmen shout all the time?  
Or keep silent all the time?

What is madness? Who can describe it?  
Only a madman. Shouts or silence  
Are but outward manifestations of madness.  
And what about inner manifestations?

Alas, madmen seldom write memoirs.  
And if they do venture into the realm of literature,  
They fool their readers. They deviate  
From the paths of truth. But not necessarily  
From the paths of beauty.

## METAPHYSICS

I often use the word ‘metaphysics’.  
Borges said it was bombastic.

I think this word denotes  
What our time lacks most pitifully.  
It’s the best definition of this word.  
Just go around and look. And listen.

As Lermontov put it: ‘And a star  
Talks to a star.’ (In Mandelstam’s version:  
‘And the pine reaches up to the star.’)

Now only men talk to women or children.  
Or rather—children talk to children.  
(And trees are pollarded.)  
And poets whisper:  
‘There’s all sorts of goings on  
At that filling station over there.’  
Or they just describe a clothes-line.  
(Not Villon’s rope.)  
Or a telephone line.  
Or a line judge.  
But they seldom get  
To the heart of the matter.  
And they never listen to what happens  
In one’s heart of hearts. Why?  
There’s nothing to hear, I’m afraid:  
Nowadays, at best,  
People have only one heart.  
Not a vista of hearts, not a Shakespearean  
Multitude of souls.  
One soul only.  
And a short-term soul at that—  
Something akin to the cutlery  
In the Air France tourist class.

A disposable soul.

A short-term  
Body-park in the universe.



## REBELS

There are still some rebels in the world:

Good rebels and bad rebels.

Right causes and wrong causes.

Actually a true rebel

Knows neither bombs

Nor Molotov cocktails;

Nor Molotov himself.

He knows only swords.

And words—*other* words.

**STAMMER**

Paul Celan wrote: ‘Only  
in one’s mother  
tongue,  
can one express  
one’s own truth. In a foreign  
language,  
the poet lies.’

I composed many poems  
In Russian.  
And I lied in them.  
(One knows how to cheat  
In one’s mother tongue.) And I wrote  
About others. (In one’s mother tongue  
One can afford to be generous.)

Now I write  
About myself  
In a foreign language.

I stammer of course.  
I stammer and stumble—  
Stubbornly.

I stammer  
When I utter  
Something for the first time:  
It makes me  
Nervous.  
And every poem

Is a first  
Poem.  
And every truth is  
Eternally re-discovered.

I stammer through  
My words  
Because the world  
Upsets me,  
Because  
I'm terrified and  
Petrified.

And I'm not ashamed of  
Owning up to my fear  
In a foreign language.

I stumble because  
The world is not a  
Motorway.  
And a thought is a  
Country road,  
A Russian country road.

I stammer and stumble towards  
My truth.

Because truth is a stammer—  
At least in this world.  
And poetry is of this world.

In the other world  
There'll be only one word  
Rhyming with itself.

## MY GENRE STORY

‘The task of a film-director  
Is to tell stories.’

‘Every good writer  
Is a story-teller.’

Such statements are applauded  
By lowbrows, middlebrows  
And highbrows.

‘Brilliant stories, beautifully told.  
Yours to keep on video.’  
And the rest is the ‘*cinéma d’auteur*’ —  
Boring crap, in other words.

A great work is supposed to mix  
Entertainment and profundity.

I know, I know: the *Iliad* is a story  
Fraught with suspense.  
A war novel, really.

And the *Inferno* is a horror story,  
Or a ghost story. Take your pick!  
And *Hamlet* is a snuff movie  
With a touch of romance.  
And a ghost story of course.

And *Anna Karenina* is a railway story  
(A long-winded homage to the Age of Steam)

And a Hollywood melodrama.

And the *Mahabharata*...

But in the *Mahabharata*

There's the *Bhagavadgita*.

Within a story, there's a poem.

And this poem is a philosophical treatise.

*The Depression of Arjuna.*

This chapter speaks of the hesitation

And despondency of Arjuna—a legendary warrior.

Let me enlarge upon hesitation and despondency—

The story I'll write all my life.

## PEOPLE ARE ALWAYS RIGHT

Arguments are useless.  
People may agree with you—  
For argument's sake.  
They may even act  
In accordance with *your* ideas.

But they'll always think they're right.  
Or they'll just feel it—always.  
Or their unconscious will know it.

They've grown with themselves  
All these years—since their childhood.  
And they know that, up to now,  
Their lives have been a harmonious  
Alternation of causes and effects.  
(And you're not aware of that.)  
They know they're right because yesterday...  
And the day before...and last year...  
Besides, their uncle said...and their dog barked...  
And their awards...and their laurels...

Oh, they might nod their heads.  
They might clap their hands.  
But deep-down they know they're right.  
And life is wrong.

## INTRODUCTION TO AN ANTHOLOGY

*In our day every idler, every trifler, every bungler cries out for his freedom.*

W. B. Yeats, *Is the Order of R.R. et A.C. to remain a Magical Order?*

‘In spite of censorship[...]  
 In spite of everything[...]  
 A few voices, here and there[...]  
 A few protests[...]  
 They’re weak of course,  
 The voices—hardly audible,  
 As a matter of fact.  
 Well, as you all know,  
 They cannot shout  
 At the top of their voices,  
 Those poets:  
 They risk being deported  
 To Siberia and other  
 God-forsaken places.  
 Between ourselves,  
 Those places have also been forsaken  
 By all civilised human beings[...]  
 How awful[...]  
 When will citizens  
 Of the Eastern bloc taste freedom  
 At last? Not *our* freedom, needless  
 To say. I’m alluding to *their*  
 Brand of freedom—their unfledged,  
 Incomplete freedom.[...] May democracy  
 Triumph in their poor, pitiful countries[...]  
 So let us not judge them too severely,  
 The poets presented in this anthology.  
 Don’t forget—they suffer.  
 And they’ll suffer for years,  
 For centuries, for millennia,  
 Unless we help them.  
 They even lack toilet paper

And bathroom plugs.  
 But there's no lack of censors  
 In those barbaric countries[...]  
 Let us be indulgent.'

Don't be indulgent,  
 Dear fellow-poets.  
 Democracy is not an answer  
 To everything. And freedom  
 Is often serfdom  
 In disguise.  
 What do we know about  
 Freedom? 'The right  
 To choose the bonds...'  
 What do we know about  
 Inspiration? When  
 Does it come? Where?  
 What society is required  
 For poetry to be born?  
 What situation?  
 War or peace? Health or disease?  
 What does a poet's muse  
 Look like? How does she dress?  
 Does she carry a shield  
 Like Athena or Achilles?  
 Does she/he speak or sing?

Only a pilgrim's progress  
 Makes sense. Upon hearing  
 The word 'progress', Mandel-  
 Stam burst into tears.  
 He was five.



## Poets

Are pilgrims in disguise.  
Technology is not an answer;  
It's rather a question.

Why do we seldom ask questions?  
Why do we always supply answers?  
Why do we think that aspirin  
Can cure a nation or an instinct—  
An animal instinct at that?  
Why do we believe that aspirin  
Can produce an artist?

## MY MOTHER TONGUE

I have a bad conscience.  
 I use you for funny stories  
 Or for discussions with a friend.  
 (We talk about girls.) Or for something  
 I forget a few moments later.

I don't express myself through your words,  
 Your rhythms and intonations. Your music  
 Is reserved for everyday life, mostly  
 For telephone messages and vodka.  
 I also use you for *Shampanskoe*  
 But seldom for wine.

I may  
 Court a young Russian lady  
 By means of your syllables.  
 But my wooing is spurious.  
 My Russian words are lies.

I was often insulted  
 In Russian: by officials,  
 By chimney sweepers, by newspapers.  
 But it was a long time ago.  
 Now no one insults me,  
 Not even in Russia.  
 At least I don't hear insults.  
 I do hear the words of love  
 And some of them are Russian.  
 Why don't I reciprocate?  
 Why don't I write my love-poems

In Russian?

Whenever I attempt  
To write in Russian, I find myself  
At a fun fair, in a gallery of mirrors—  
Like Charlie Chaplin, like Orson Welles.  
Where am I? There are so many memories,  
Word-memories. The character I see  
Is so many-sided I can't decide  
Which side is me—my real self,  
The one Rita Hayworth aims at.  
(And who wouldn't like  
To become her target?)  
I can't decide  
Whose side I'm on.

And I don't know any longer  
Whom I loved.

In English  
I know it. And in French.

And in Japanese.

And in double Dutch.

## FUTURE LIVES

One of my colleagues  
Said yesterday on television:  
'I'm sure I'll be re-born  
And live through scores of incarnations.  
And I'm sure I'll be a musician again,  
In every incarnation of mine.  
A different musician: a singer, a conductor,  
But a musician—no doubt about it.'

And *my* future lives?  
Have I thought about them?  
I have. As they say,  
'You must take thought for the future.'

I wish I could become a writer again,  
A better poet, a better novelist.  
I think I've done my best  
To become better in the future.

I don't know who I'll become  
In my next incarnation; or what.  
According to Buddhists, it is hard  
To become a human. And only  
Humans can attain nirvana.

I might become a bird.  
Why not Keats's nightingale?  
Or an exotic bird—to inspire  
A Japanese painter.  
I think I've done my best

Not to become a vulture  
In my next incarnation.

I might become a stone  
In my next incarnation.

A pebble on a grave, I hope—  
At the *Novodevichye* Cemetery.

I'll have another name  
Or no name at all.

## GOOD DEEDS

I'm quite aware that Providence  
Doesn't reward good deeds  
In this world. Accordingly  
I expect no recompense  
When giving a lift to a friend,  
However long the detour.  
(Neither an immediate reward,  
Nor a long-distance one—  
A medal in the Hereafter.)  
But why do I systematically  
Get punished for it?

Why do radar traps spot my offences  
Against the Highway Code  
Only when I drive someone home?  
(Out of kindness.)

When I'm on my own  
They ignore my car,  
Whatever I might do.

Does Providence lag  
Behind technology—  
Especially high tech?

And yet, as stated above,  
It's usually associated  
With the future tense.  
And heights.

Perhaps

There are no radar sockets  
In Heaven.

No radar power points.  
No power points at all.

And yet Heaven *is*  
A power point—  
The power point.

And the power plant.

***LE CIMETIERE MARIN***

Is a man more precious  
Than any number of sparrows?  
Why do we drown kittens  
And save those who can't swim?

After all, the sea  
Is a wonderful  
Cemetery.

When I first chanced upon  
*Le Cimetière marin*,  
I thought Valéry had depicted  
The life of sunken ships.

Why not lie beside them?  
Are coffins really better?  
And the earth?

There are crosses  
At the bottom of the sea.  
And flowers.



#####

# **HAPPY AND CRAPPY ENDINGS**

(1999)

**HOPING AGAINST HOPE**

Hope is a word  
Which must be related  
To something—to another hope,  
To another word or an object  
Or a notion which has no counterpart  
In reality.

Perhaps reality is not real—  
Just a hope, nothing else;  
Just a rope on which  
One can hang oneself.  
And this rope is tangible, real.  
Even those keen on mountaineering  
Can trust it.

But there are no mountains  
In real life.  
Only valleys and deserts.

**THE PRESS IS LOOKING FOR A FRESH ANGLE ON THE STORY**

Many people stay in bed  
All day long,  
Waiting for something to happen.  
But nothing happens.  
History is motionless,  
Waiting for a big event—  
For the event that will alter  
The course of history.

Some stay in bed,  
Others work for themselves  
Or for the benefit of humanity.  
But humanity is motionless;  
No one can stir it into motion,  
Not even God.  
And history is a dot,  
Not even a zigzag  
Or a vicious circle.  
So 'the course of history'  
Is a contradiction in terms.  
A stain of blood.  
Or a blot of ink—  
From another angle.  
What's the best news angle  
For this story?

**SIDELINES**

How clumsy we are!  
We can't even walk on a flat surface  
Without tripping over non-existent roots  
Or carpets or what not.

And we can't follow a train of thought  
Without getting sidetracked.  
Other thoughts budge in  
For no reason at all:  
Thoughts cannot reason.  
And they don't bother to justify their presence.  
They just block the way to solutions  
And resolutions. They seem to defy other  
Thoughts, the right ones—  
The thoughts which are rational and logical. (Panic  
Destroys rational thought.)

There are also visions and memories.  
Dead faces floating in an empty room.  
No necks, no bodies—just faces.  
Those eyes stare at us  
And question our thoughts.  
They seem to say, 'It's useless.  
We followed the same train of thought  
And ended up in this room,  
In one of the rooms of your memory;  
An empty room, into the bargain.  
Why don't you furnish it?  
Why don't you respect our deaths?  
And why have you deprived us  
Of our bodies?  
Were they so ugly,

So repugnant?’

And we forget our preoccupations,  
Trying to remember their bodies.  
Some of them were beautiful.  
This pair of legs, for instance;  
Or that hand writing a letter;  
And her heaving chest.

Our only destination—an empty room  
In someone’s memory.

To reach another conclusion,  
We must follow our train of thought  
Without getting sidetracked.

## DOING THINGS BY HALVES

In Russia we say, 'To know someone  
 (Or something) like one's five fingers.'  
 One day I asked myself  
 What kind of man or woman  
 Created this idiom. An idiot  
 Incapable of counting up to ten?  
 A one-armed individual?

Lilia Kazantseva

Put forward a better hypothesis.  
 In her opinion, the idea had originated  
 In the mind of a one-eyed person  
 Seeing only half of the world,  
 Enjoying only half of the *Mona Lisa*.  
 The better half, hopefully.

Seeing only half of the world.  
 What does that really mean?  
 Seeing only half of a smile.  
 (And every half-smile is crooked  
 And cruel.) Seeing only  
 Day and not night.  
 (Would such a person  
 Ever go to sleep?) Seeing  
 Only unhappy endings. Or  
 Endings and no beginnings.  
 Black keys and black eyes.  
 (And singing the Russian *romance*  
*The Black Eyes—Ochi chyornie.*)  
 Seeing the upper lip  
 Of one's beloved.  
 And feeling one lip

During kisses.  
(No discrepancy  
Between what is seen  
And experienced!)  
A narrow-minded world,  
A half-minded world.

Actually I wonder  
If such a person is half-minded;  
Or half-bodied, for that matter.  
What about his or her forebodings?  
And fears? And sufferings?

Half-pain?  
Half-love?  
Half-angst?  
Half-death?

Does he or she always have  
Only one foot in the grave?



**CARMEN**

*Carmen* is an opera par excellence.  
More than an opera perhaps:  
Fullness overflows its recipient.

Over and over again  
José spills his beloved's blood  
In an opera house  
Or in the house opposite.

A knife lying on a tablecloth—  
Or elsewhere—is bound  
To pierce her heart.

As if no other women were to die  
Violent deaths in operas.

And in the streets,  
On television screens.

Red Square  
Has been smeared with her blood  
For centuries.

### THE ANNIVERSARY

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveller*

Robert Frost, *The Road not Taken*

I'm writing these poems  
To commemorate the anniversary  
Of my departure from Russia:  
Twenty-five years ago  
I requested political asylum  
In Belgium.

Anniversaries are boring:  
They remind us of metronomes  
And of those who need them  
In order to keep rhythm.

Every month there's something to celebrate.  
We drink toasts and are congratulated.  
We get presents and write poems;  
Or others write poems in our honour.  
And then our blood pressure rises so high  
Shakespeare's sonnets lose their flavour.

I left Russia and settled in Western Europe.  
So many people have left Russia.  
Do all of them drink toasts to their new lives?

I've got a lot of books;  
I've learnt a lot from them.  
And of course I've learnt  
The hollowness of knowledge.

Knowledge is a hollow crown

And often a crown of thorns.  
But only a huge library  
Can teach you that.  
And lassitude.

I settled in Versailles,  
Eighteen years ago.  
I go to the park no longer.  
I wish I could see it  
For the first time.

I wish I could see many things  
For the first time.  
I wish I could taste my *madeleine*  
(And Proust's *madeleine*)  
For the first time.  
I wish I had no memories,  
Only experiences.  
I wish I could sing  
A song of innocence.

The first declaration of love.  
I repeat the same words  
To young women.  
There are no first words among them.  
I do hope there are no  
Last words among them either.  
At least the women I fall in love with  
Are young—in their twenties.

I seldom go to the theatre.  
Now I prefer the theatre of solitude  
Which is absurd enough to entertain me all day long.  
But some of the plays I saw remain in my memory.

I wouldn't have seen them in Moscow.

And I received seven letters  
From Marlene Dietrich.

And for nine years I lived not far from Beckett—  
Eight miles away, to be exact.

And I heard Michelangeli in Paris.  
Six times.

And I've drunk wonderful wines  
Over the last thirteen years.  
Old wines.

Let me drink a toast to those wines.

And I'll also drink a toast  
To the life I would have lived  
Had I stayed in Moscow.  
To the second road.

#### POSTSCRIPT:

I might have lived a dozen lives  
Without knowing it.  
(A commonplace, an old custom.)  
A life in an adjacent room, a life in a distant town,  
A life in a tree, a life on the Moon.  
Those lives might not be as solitary  
As my present life.  
Other creatures of the same species—  
Discarded creatures, so to speak—  
Might rub shoulders with my doppelgängers.  
I might differ from myself by a nuance, a touch of colour,

By an alien idea. I often feel estranged  
From myself. And the strangers,  
Who are both myself and not myself,  
Might roam around the world,  
Life-sized, death-sized.  
I murder these strangers to make a decision,  
Choosing one road  
Instead of twenty or thirty roads.  
I murder them, but they might survive  
In another life, in an adjacent life,  
Walking along the roads I did not take  
For fear of being overtaken or overpowered.

I'm walking now  
Along the streets of Moscow.

I walked along these streets  
In the late seventies and in the eighties.  
I was murdered; and I died a natural death.  
In both cases I was buried at Pyatnitskoe Cemetery.  
I became a monk; I got married.  
And now I'm celebrating  
My silver wedding.

## IN MEMORY OF STANLEY KUBRICK

An elegy is a postscript, nothing else.

What can one say in a postscript?

Everything has been said;

Everything has been done.

You finished your last movie;

Destiny is a work of art.

On the other hand

Your movies are unfinished:

They grow in those who watch them

For the umpteenth time;

They grow in the unborn.

And what about the dead?

Can Julius Caesar watch them?

And Isaac Newton, and Nietzsche?

I saw *Dr. Strangelove*

At the KGB Club—

An appropriate place.

I heard about your *Space Odyssey*

At a bus stop. A middle-aged lady said

It was an exhibition of carpets.

She must have died a long time ago.

I hope there's a cinema in Hell:

It's never too late to plunge headlong into your

Space, getting lost in it

Like one of your astronauts.

Is that her punishment—  
Freezing to death?

## STUPOR

My friend, Vadim Suchanov,  
 Told me on the phone:  
 'Let's hang up, otherwise  
 We'll have nothing to talk about  
 When you're in Munich.'  
 (I was coming the next day.)  
 'Yes,' I replied. 'We'll just be  
 Staring at each other.'

At the airport I saw two people  
 Staring at each other:  
 A man and a woman.  
 Had they run out of ideas,  
 Of *mutual* ideas? Or were they  
 On the point of breaking off?  
 Was it their last meeting?  
 I saw no love in their faces;  
 Nor did I detect  
 Any sign of hatred.  
 I saw something in between—  
 A kind of stupor.  
 They seemed to have stepped  
 Out of a painting.  
 'Who painted them?' I wondered.  
 'What did the painter wish to express?'  
 Such a question shouldn't be asked  
 About a work of art.

What did God  
 Wish to express when He embarked  
 Upon the creation of the world?  
 Love, hatred, the absurdity of life,



Or indifference? Or had he run out  
Of *other* ideas?

He just created the world.

Perhaps He *had* run out  
Of other ideas, of *our* ideas,  
Of our mutual ideas.  
Did He have nothing  
To say to us?

Nothing except  
This world,  
This history?

Did He say anything?  
Was He staring at us?

**BAD WEATHER**

The weather is bad today;  
The birds are not singing.

I never listen to their songs,  
Their songs without words.

I prefer silence to songs  
And printed words to tunes.

Words are masks and husks;  
Tunes are open-heart surgery.

I'm no longer open-hearted;  
I'm open-minded, though.

My mind is still exposed  
To words and ideas,  
To hypotheses.

I'm not eager to protect my mind—  
Let it take care of itself!  
Besides, it's not exposed to Time  
As much as my heart.

Time is a tune,  
A wistful tune.  
Wishful thinking.

## ON THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES

Her holier-than-thou attitudes  
Made her very unpopular.

She was an extraordinary woman,  
Capricious, unpredictable.

Now I can predict her silence  
And her absence.  
Easy, isn't it?  
Yet I believe in ghosts.

Generally speaking,  
I believe in supernatural phenomena.  
And I'm prepared to seek the help of a medium.  
But what could her voice impart to me?  
I need no information on the Hereafter.  
As for her earthly secrets and betrayals,  
Let her keep them to herself.

Another poem about her—a ritual, no less!  
Have I been influenced by Thomas Hardy?  
Why can't I keep my feelings to myself?  
Would I feel anything without my poems?

Do feelings originate in words?  
Can I have wordless feelings?  
Are these feelings worthless?

Would I have written any love poem  
Had I not known her illness was fatal?  
Is death my source of inspiration?  
Her death, my death—any death?

Would I have set fire to Ancient Rome  
To write a poem about its destruction?

## IN THE COUNTRY OF THE BLIND

A meaning-blind individual is always serious.  
 He understands jokes only if told what they're about.  
 At best he can smile. His smiles are indulgent.  
 He doesn't understand the people  
 Who laugh around him.

He may be right: there's nothing  
 To laugh at.

Anyway

How can one spend so much time  
 On words when millions of people  
 Die of starvation?

Words are double agents and double dealers.  
 Words are double-edged and double-faced.  
 Anyway whatever one says  
 Sounds a bit like double Dutch.  
 Or it *is* double Dutch and triple Chinese.

But actions are simple.  
 The piece of bread you put into someone's mouth  
 Is neither hypocritical nor enigmatic;  
 Just a piece of bread.  
 Food is crystal-clear: there are no bread-blind people.

Life is full of allusions and illusions—  
 A tale told by a hypocrite.  
 It shouldn't be reduced to a few statements.

Why not reduce it to  
 To one statement,

To one point?

When can you do it?

On the brink of death?

They don't let you die peacefully:

People are frightened by all the machinery

There is in hospitals.

Is that why the blind smile so often?

**FROM THE DIARY OF AN IMMORTAL**

I am drunk, but the effect of alcohol  
Will wear off in an hour or so.  
And I'll find the world again—  
Their world, not mine.  
We've been separated  
For many years,  
For centuries.  
I've got my own world  
Which grows bigger and brighter  
As I empty my glass of wine,  
Swirling it from time to time.  
I swirl my wine round the glass  
And the world—their world—  
Grows smaller and smaller.  
I smell my wine and their smells  
Grow fainter and fainter.  
Why don't our worlds coincide?  
Why don't they grow bigger, both of them?  
Bigger and brighter? And merrier?  
Why do I hear my death day and night  
Whenever I'm in their world?  
Why do I shoot myself twice a day  
Whenever I swear off drinking?  
Why is their world mortal?  
Why am I immortal?

Michelangelo complained about his longevity.  
I wouldn't mind living forever.  
I wouldn't mind being Michelangelo.  
Unfortunately I am myself.  
Unfortunately I live in their world.  
Fortunately this bottle of wine

Is an elixir of life.  
And it is too late  
To undertake anything.  
It is too late to die.



## HISTORY FOLLOWS A CYCLICAL PATTERN

Medical science is progressing in leaps and bounds.  
Soon we'll be cured of our diseases,  
And our children will live over a hundred years.  
And their children will become immortal.

They'll marry and have plenty of children.  
They'll replenish the earth and other planets.  
They'll move to the stars and replenish them.  
And they'll build other planets, other Milky Ways.  
Some day they'll realise the universe is not infinite.  
They'll be cramped for space in the universe.  
But they'll be forbidden to kill each other  
By the United Nations peace-keeping force.  
So they'll have no alternative but to shrink.  
They'll shrink more and more and become flies.

As a result, a myriad flies will buzz around galaxies.  
And angels will swat them with rolled-up newspapers.  
Thus the history of the human race will come to an end.

And God will create Adam and Eve.

## PREMONITIONS

1

In the last act of Verdi's opera  
Macbeth sings along these lines:  
'I know I won't die—the witches have told me so.  
However, I feel my blood is drying in my veins.'  
He could feel it in his bones, in other words.

Where does one feel such things?  
Why didn't Shakespeare's Macbeth  
Say anything to this effect?  
Is music more attuned to premonitions  
Than mere words?

Or did he owe his revelation  
To the act of singing?  
Are singers endowed with the sixth sense?  
Do they feel the world with their throats?  
Why did Macbeth sing about his veins?  
An operatic convention, I suppose.  
Throats are associated with different phenomena.  
Here are a few examples, 'I swallowed a fish bone  
And it got stuck in my throat', 'I have a sore throat',  
'Those two are always at each other's throats',  
And so on and so forth. Besides,  
He couldn't have owned up  
To his throat being dry—not on stage!

2

Last month, in Munich,  
My friend and I took a train.  
I had to pick my things up  
Before going to the airport.

We had plenty of time,  
 There was nothing to worry about.  
 And yet my friend *was* worried.  
 Constantly he reminded me  
 I had to get to the airport  
 In time for my flight.  
 He pestered me through the afternoon.  
 (He'd never been like that before.)  
 And I would show him my watch.  
 And the clock on the Rathaus!  
 He was adamant.

#### ON THE TRAIN

We had plenty of time.  
 I even thought of drinking beer  
 Before going to the airport.  
 'I feel like a glass of beer,'  
 I told him nonchalantly.  
 'My throat is dry.' All of a sudden  
 The train came to a standstill.  
 (My friend wouldn't have written  
 'All of a sudden'.) A female voice said  
 There was an accident. Someone  
 Was lying under the train—  
 Under the wheels of *our* carriage!  
 The train was delayed for an hour or so.  
 The rest is irrelevant. (However,  
 I caught my flight—in the nick of time.)

#### IN THE AIR

How are such messages transmitted?  
 One may get wind of something.  
 But surely those messages  
 Aren't carried by the wind, are they?

(It was a windy day, by the way.)  
Some kind of telepathy?  
But why should a stranger  
Entrust my friend  
With his innermost thoughts,  
His subconscious?  
Was the deed done on the spur of the moment?

My friend knew about it  
In the afternoon.  
Was there something in the air—  
In the air of Munich, in the German air,  
In the European air?  
If so, the message *could* have been carried  
By the wind or by waves of some kind.

But *what* was in the air?  
The death of one person,  
The end of the world?  
I don't think the air would have bothered  
About my return trip to Paris.

I feel the end of the world  
On my palate, in my eyes,  
In my ears, on my fingertips.

Is it just the end of this poem?

## THE PASSIVITY OF THE DEAD

On television they showed  
Some photos of Kubrick—the photos  
He'd known nothing about.

They also showed  
The trailer for his last movie.  
And they asked a cynical question:  
'Would he have agreed to that?'

The dead are submissive.

**WALKING IN THE WOODS**

Every day I walk in the woods.  
I never change my route.  
I'm used to it and the paths I follow  
Are used to my feet.

I leave my flat  
Around four in the afternoon  
And walk until five or six.  
These hours are used to my solitary figure.

Sometimes I go out at night.  
Now I'm keen to walk in the moonlight—  
A recent habit.  
The moonlight is used to my meditation.

My world is small;  
I can wear it like an old piece of clothing.  
We are used to each other  
And neither of us is fond of surprises.

**DREAMS**

When one dreams of another,  
Are both aware of it?

Yüan Chen, *Three Dreams at Chian-ling*

Why do I dream about a woman  
I saw only once, in Moscow?

There are so many women  
I'd like to dream about:  
Greta Garbo, Vivien Leigh,  
Kathleen Ferrier...

What makes you so attractive  
To that part of my mind  
Which is in charge of dreams?  
Not only your beauty;  
Not only your mystery.

Perhaps I'm not your host.  
Is it the other way round?  
Do *you* dream about me—  
About that street, about a man  
Standing behind a car?

**NIRVANA**

At some point  
I turned on the auto-pilot.

I was flying on. There were only clouds  
Around me. And you don't take  
Clouds seriously, do you?  
Just some romantic nonsense—  
The attributes of a poem,  
A melancholy piece of music.

Now I don't fly any more.  
I've landed in a no-man's land.  
There's nothing around me,  
Neither humans nor clouds.  
And I am my own statue.

Michelangelo Buonarroti  
Comes to me in the night.  
He claims he's carved me  
From a block of marble.



**REDUCTIONISM**

Whenever I'm in Moscow  
I recall the rituals of my youth.  
And I try to reproduce them  
In spite of everything.

I often succeed and the past  
Becomes the present  
And the future.  
And the future becomes  
The past again.  
Let it remain in the past.

Let me caress the same woman  
Over and over again.  
She's still shrouded in mystery,  
For all my caresses.

There are no other women.

Let me always meet the same people—  
In the right places!  
Let them discuss the same problems.

There are no other problems.

There are no other worlds.

## VICTORIES AND DEFEATS

Some people know  
Defeats are beneficial.

But even those people  
Do all they can to win  
Either a game or a battle.  
They win both sometimes  
And lose everything else.

Many things lie beyond  
Battles and games;  
Life itself  
Lies beyond games.

Defeats are bound to tighten  
The string of your bow. (And to add  
Another string to your bow.)

Sometimes it's better  
To drop the bow  
And withdraw to a library;  
Sometimes it's better  
To live in the woods,  
In a cave.

Defeats and victories  
Are two sides of one coin.  
Better still, they are  
One side of one coin.  
(Better still, worse still—  
What's the difference?)

Perhaps it's better to win:  
Victories are associated  
With fame and prosperity.  
But victories are temporary  
And defeats eternal.

### OLD FRIENDS

If a man does not make new acquaintance as  
he advances through life, he will soon find  
himself left alone. A man, Sir, should keep his  
friendship *in constant repair*.

Boswell, *Life of Johnson*

My new acquaintances.  
They didn't know the women I loved;  
Nor did they see the tears  
I shed at the Bolshoi Theatre  
During the performances of *The Nutcracker*.  
They didn't come to my flat  
On the eve of my departure from Russia.  
They didn't see the tears  
I shed on *that* occasion.  
They never heard Gilels.  
They never saw Shostakovich  
Walking along Nezhdanova Street.

They know only my wrinkles,  
Not the smoothness of my skin.  
(Photographs are of no help  
In matters of friendship.)  
They know only my present thoughts,  
One third of them, one tenth of them:  
Now I mostly keep things to myself.  
They've no idea where these thoughts come from.  
They think I speak and act on the spur of the moment,  
But nothing is done on the spur of the moment.  
There are no moments in one's life—  
Only years and decades.

And you can find my footprints  
All over the world.

How many people do I need  
To replace Alexander Nemchina?  
Twenty, thirty.  
And I'd have to teach them many things  
Before they're permitted  
To take his place in my life.

I'd have to work with them  
For two years at least  
Without knowing what result  
I'll get in the end.

We don't need many friends  
In our fifties, in our sixties.  
Quantity is replaced by quality—  
By the quality of memories.

We talk to the dead.  
We update their thoughts.

**MY LAMP**

I woke rather early today.  
The sun is rising.  
Another day.  
I'm trying to get some sleep,  
Otherwise I won't be able to work:  
I'll have a splitting headache.

The beauty of nature,  
Of a young girl. Why not  
Enlarge upon them?

Michelangelo wrote about  
God, women, men and death.  
My headache is immaterial.  
And what does it matter  
When the sun rises,  
Whether it rises at all?  
Let it stay under the horizon:  
I've got my lamp  
Which is strong enough  
To enable me to see  
Whatever I ought to see.

**LITTLE INCIDENTS**

(A reply to Samuel Johnson and Vladimir Nabokov)

I remember very few 'little incidents'.

I know they're important—

More important than big ideas

And catastrophes.

Suppose I were the protagonist

Of Chekhov's *The Lady with the Lapdog*.

Suppose I were doomed to live on

Beyond the framework of the story.

What would I remember now? The lady.

I would scarcely remember her dog.

And I wouldn't remember the lorgnette she lost.

### A PERSON OF POOR JUDGMENT

He can't distinguish between his friends and enemies.

One might presume he's deeply religious

And goes to church twice a week—far from it!

What's more, he has no copy

Of the New Testament at home.

He doesn't *love* his enemies. If he knew

They were his enemies he'd hate them

And hire a dozen contract killers

To wipe them out. He thinks

They're his friends and smiles whenever

He spots them

In the streets, theatres and pubs.

He gives them money and assistance.

He doesn't notice their malevolent gazes

As he walks around, whistling

His favourite tune.

Two years ago he was diagnosed

As having an inoperable brain tumour.

He thought it was a benign tumour.



# AGORAPHOBIA

*Quien habla solo espera hablar a Dios un dia*  
Antonio Machado, *Retrato*

I needn't talk to anybody: a discussion  
Creates a perspective  
Of ideas,  
Of disagreements.

I talk to myself,  
Using a limited number of words:  
I'm rather short of breath.

What word to choose?  
'Love', 'life', 'death'?  
'Love' is a huge word:  
Two people create a perspective.  
And love of God likewise  
Creates a perspective—  
A cosmic perspective.  
And so does love of humanity,  
And love of nature,  
And love of the future.  
(Self-love is a tautology.)

The word 'life' is also too huge:  
There are so many sides to it.  
So many chances lost!  
So much effort wasted!  
And great expectations of course—  
Perspectives in their own right.  
Great expectations everywhere.  
Like highways they cross  
Endless wastelands.

Death is smaller than my room.

The Hereafter is an illusion  
Created by light and shade,  
By the tricks of perspective.

Another great expectation;  
Another fear of the dark.

**I WILL KEEP UP A PRETENCE OF NORMALITY AS LONG AS I CAN**

Tchaikovsky was afraid he might run out of inspiration;

Yet he wrote his best work on the verge of death.

I *am* running out of ideas. Of course I can continue

To work on my computer, typing meaningless words

Or re-typing an old poem over and over again.

What for? To keep myself busy. To pretend

I can write something. To pretend I'm alive.

## THE GENES

We've often been wrong  
And sinned a lot. But our children  
Will live in a better world:  
They won't make our mistakes.

They're not likely to draw lessons  
From our experiences.

Every lesson is a new experience  
And a new problem.

We've done a lot on this earth,  
Laying the foundations of a new era.

There are no foundations of anything—  
Only castles in the air:  
Castles of Happiness,  
Castles of Revolution,  
Castles of Idleness,  
Castles of Ideas,  
Castles of Discoveries,  
Castles of Beauty,  
Castles of Tradition,  
Castles of Order.

No one will enjoy  
The fruit of our labours,  
Not even ourselves.

Besides, our children  
Have our genes.

The world has our genes.

## HISTORY AND HER MOODS

History can't make an objective assessment  
Of her contents. History is partial.

A bed cannot take a measuring tape  
To find out how long it is; or how wide.  
But Figaro does it—in Mozart's opera.  
And there are no Figaros among historians;  
Nor there are any Martians among Earthlings.

History is a moody teenager.  
Sometimes she's in a lazy mood,  
Taking no notice of a hero,  
Of a genius, of a war.  
Sometimes she's in a talkative mood  
And there's nothing to talk about.

Salieri was a remarkable composer.  
He didn't kill Mozart  
But history decided otherwise.  
(Only now she seems to change her mind.  
Perhaps there *is* a Martian in our midst.)  
History decided he was a villain;  
History was in a gloomy mood that afternoon.  
And Pushkin believed history.  
He wasn't in an excellent mood either.  
He wrote a play where Salieri kills Mozart.  
And Salieri doesn't say: 'Name your poison!'  
He simply drops some poison into Mozart's glass.  
(In our plays victims are seldom allowed  
To choose the weapons that kill them.)  
Others followed; Salieri was dishonoured.  
In Vienna nothing bears his name,

Not a *Gasse*, not a stone.  
And there are few unmusical stones in Vienna.

Richard III was also dishonoured.  
A misshapen monster from birth,  
The murderer of Henry VI  
And of his own brother Clarence...  
A pack of lies, the Tudor propaganda!  
But Shakespeare needed another monster  
For his collection—a human monster.  
That afternoon he was in no mood  
For an outlandish creature like Caliban:  
He bore a grudge against an actor  
And consequently against humanity.  
Besides, the food and drink  
Had put him in a talkative mood.  
And there was nobody to talk to  
In the Boar's Head Tavern.

## TREES IN LOVE

The proportion of trees to humans  
Is about fifty trees to one human.

Their love stories last for centuries.

Writers are fond of expeditious love stories:  
A few glances, a few passionate kisses,  
One night spent together  
On the eve of a battle...  
A dagger lying on a carpet...  
A poisonous cup...  
More poignant and easier to describe—  
A short poem, a sonnet.  
Or a play in five acts.

How many acts should be written  
About the love between two trees?

If you fell a tree  
Its beloved won't commit suicide.  
Not at once—  
Not in the same act,  
Not in the same quatrain.

It might shed a few leaves, though.

POSTSCRIPT:  
Do trees love God?  
How many pages  
Does one need  
To describe this love?  
Not many. A sonnet



Would be enough.

**SERBIA**

They're bombing Serbia.  
Perhaps there's no other way.  
I don't know;  
I'm no expert in these matters.  
But I'm an expert on grief and anguish,  
On pain and suffering.  
Somebody's right,  
Somebody wrong.  
Actually the same person  
Can be both right and wrong  
At the same time.  
And history's often wrong,  
And seldom right.  
We're all living now  
In the heart of darkness,  
Beyond good and evil,  
Beyond our hearts and souls.

**END**

When will the world end?

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of August 1999?

When will the Third World War break out?

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of August 1999?

Who of my friends will betray me next?

When?

Tomorrow? In two years?

But even the last betrayal

Comes as a surprise.

And every world war is the last war.

And every love is the last love.

## A HAPPY ENDING

The show must go on.  
Actors die in the wings,  
In backstage rooms.  
They seldom die on the stage.  
Somebody makes an announcement;  
An understudy stands in.

The understudy doesn't look like his model,  
Nor does he sound like the character he plays.  
And he forgets his lines now and then.  
But nobody minds: the show must go on.  
(The understudy's smiles are repulsive,  
And he has a squeaky voice.)

The theatre is burnt to the ground.  
The company moves to another theatre.  
The new stage is so very different  
It takes a while to adjust.  
It's much smaller than the old stage.  
But the stage director loses neither heart nor head:  
He gets rid of a few props  
And makes a dozen cuts in the text.  
And the show goes on.  
So does life.

The King is dead. Long live the King!  
Not only kings pass away.  
Mr Johnson is dead. Long live Mr Jackson!

What about our fathers and mothers?  
There are a great many stepfathers and stepmothers:  
In other houses, in other countries.

Anyway mothers are replaced by wives  
 And fathers by husbands—even in their lifetime.  
 (Cordelia said something to this effect.)

What about our children?  
 There are lots of orphans in orphanages,  
 Waiting to be adopted.

And what about *Kindertotenlieder*?  
 Mahler wrote other songs:  
*Das Knaben Wunderhorn*, for instance.  
 He also wrote the *Eighth Symphony*.  
 Why not listen to *them*?  
 They're understudies of destiny—  
 A happy ending, not an unhappy one.

The world is swarming with understudies.  
 They're seldom fit for the jobs—  
 They don't know their parts,  
 In theatrical parlance.  
 But nobody minds because  
 The future belongs to understudies.

A civilisation is destroyed.  
 How to replace it?  
 There are uncivilised people around—  
 Understudies of progress.

Never mind, no one cares.  
 Uncivilised people aren't civilised enough  
 To realise they're uncivilised.  
 They call themselves 'pioneers'.  
 And they call their uncivilisation  
 'The civilisation of the future'.

(Words are patient and long-suffering.)

Life goes on.

## A HAPPY ENDING II

*The best film in history.*

From a poster for the film *Titanic*

Humanity won't destroy itself—  
 Out of laziness, out of indolence.  
 That's what I used to tell myself.  
 There are no *Untermenschen* among us:  
 We've done away with Hitler and Hitlerism.  
 There are no underdogs among us:  
 We know that economic prosperity  
 Depends critically  
 On an open world trading policy.  
 And we're not 'undergods'. Or even 'under God'.  
 (Not now, not any more.)  
 We're 'underhotdogs' perhaps.  
 But neologisms are too sophisticated for humanity.  
 Humanity is dumb, dull, flat and dead;  
 Four-letter words are enough to describe it.  
 That's what I used to tell myself.  
 And I might have been right, as far as humanity goes.  
 (Humanity in its present state—  
 Humanity of 'Titanic' fame.)  
 But there are other things in the world.  
 And those things, those forces  
 Should be reckoned with.  
 (Those forces contrived the encounter  
 Between the *Titanic* and the iceberg.)  
 Fate is also a four-letter word,  
 But there's more to it than meets the eye.  
 There's more to it than meets the ear.  
 It's a forty-letter word, a fifty-letter word,  
 And no word can describe it,  
 However long and sophisticated.  
 Even Schubert expressed but a part of Fate,

An infinitesimal part.  
 Our body knows what it is,  
 When wounded or tortured  
 Or subjected to a fatal illness.  
 And facts reveal their innermost nature:  
 A murder, a massacre, a genocide.  
 The Second World War greatly enriched  
 Our knowledge of Fate and its ways.  
 I thought the Third World War was a conflict  
 Between the Madonna and Madonna,  
 Between the Madonna and Maradona,  
 Between Proust and Prost,  
 Between *Remembrance of Things Past*  
 And remembrance of things present.  
 I thought the Fourth World War  
 Would be a period of peace:  
 Simple joys instead of James Joyce...  
 Money, money, money,  
 Instead of blood, sweat and tears...  
 Smiles, smiles, smiles...  
 Blind and deaf mice  
 Instead of men and women...  
 Running instead of reading...  
 I might have underestimated Fate.  
 (What if God is bent on destroying humanity?)  
 Suppose they're right, all those clairvoyants:  
 Scores of H-bombs, a desert, a few people in a bunker...  
 Just two people: a man and a woman.  
 And a copy of the Bible—  
 The only book on their desert island.  
 They read it now and then:  
 They've nothing else to do.  
 (No room for jogging in the bunker.)  
 'And God said unto them,





**LOOKING FOR THE ANSWER**  
**(2001 July)**

**‘NO’**

What’s better: yes or no? All his life  
Nietzsche was striving for ‘yes’.  
How many times did he say ‘no’?

Is it easier to say ‘no’?  
Perhaps it is.  
It’s so easy to say ‘no’  
To this morning,  
To this afternoon,  
To the fact I woke up  
Five hours ago.

And what does it matter  
Whether it rains or not?

Weather mustn’t influence our thoughts,  
Our choice of words, our choice of moods.

But is ‘no’ a mood?  
It’s more than a mood,  
More than a nervous  
Or a sunny disposition,  
More than the sun or the earth,  
Buddhism or revolutions.

What’s better: history or no history?  
No history doesn’t mean  
Paradise: we have lost it forever.

It just means—nothing.  
Not nirvana. Nothingness.

A wrong nothingness,  
A rotten nothingness,  
Or Hell in other words.

But history is no better.

**EYES WIDE SHUT**

It's getting dark.  
A part of the world  
Is gone already.  
Too many things remain  
And I'm not blind yet.  
Of course I can shut my eyes.  
I know I can open them.  
And I'm bound to open them  
Sooner or later.  
I've got no excuse.

It's pointless to shut your eyes  
If you had once opened them.

## HINDSIGHT

With hindsight,  
What could we learn  
From our mistakes?

Every mistake is made  
In Space and Time.  
And both Space and Time  
Shift around. Hourly  
We deviate from our course.  
(Both Space and Time  
Are difficult to argue with  
Because they keep  
Shifting their ground.)  
The point B to which  
We direct our steps  
Becomes point C  
And point D.  
Our mistakes look different  
From point D, from point E.  
They would be different  
If they were made at point F.  
Anyway mistakes aren't made  
In alphabetical order.

Mistakes are events  
And events just happen.  
What happens can't be corrected.  
We live and look back to find  
The dead and the tree under which  
We made our first declaration of love.  
(Our first big mistake.)

We should put everything we have  
Into the final game.

## THE CENTRE AND THE CIRCUMFERENCE

Does the world have a centre or not?  
We always go away. What does it matter  
If we go away from one point or two points?

I've never been looking for a centre—  
Just for an exit or an entrance  
Or a glass of water. I used to look  
For a beautiful face or a torso. And beauty  
Is always on the circumference.



# THE REPLY TO A LETTER

*I've got one question about your dialogue with Prof. Kawamura. At one point you said that artists like Schubert and Musil were sinning outside Creation—jenseits der Menschen. I'd like to know what you meant by 'sinning' in this context. Is the creative process a prerogative of God, in your opinion, or is it sinful to do something outside Creation, i.e. outside the Kingdom of God?*

From a letter

My dear friend,  
You have been misled  
By my English accent.

My remark is just a comment  
On Celan's poem where he says  
There are other songs outside  
Mankind.

Some artists bypass humankind  
And indeed Creation as they reach  
For the truth which *may* lie  
Outside everything:  
I don't think there's room for it  
Inside Creation.

They *sing*  
*Outside* Creation.

Many believe  
The truth is everywhere:  
In a sunset, in a glass of water.  
I think that inside Creation  
A glass of water is a glass  
Of water; and those who hold it  
Are just thirsty.

Is it a sin to look for the truth  
Outside day and night,  
Beyond the stars?  
Do creative artists  
Bypass God?

I don't think so:  
There's room for God  
Outside Creation.

**PARADISE**

Joyce said there was no more Paradise  
Either on Earth or in Heaven.

Only computers  
Dwell in Paradise—a *paradis artificiel*.  
Only computers represent it: the dance  
Of letters, the ecstasy of exactness,  
The velocity of thought.

Dante was up to the task.  
He was born in the days  
When one was permitted  
To catch a glimpse of Paradise  
Both on earth and in heaven.

Now only some ruined abbey  
Can be glimpsed  
Through the windows of our trains,  
Through our telescopes.

One glimpse is enough.  
One word is enough.

‘Paradise’ was written in heaven.  
Dante saw it—without a telescope.

## TWO COMMENTS ON HERACLITUS

1

‘The dry soul is wisest and best.’

In Heraclitus’ mind

Foolishness and death

Were associated

With cold and dampness.

Examples:

A cold-blooded murderer,

The cold and dampness of winter.

But why does the body dry up

*Before* death?

Why does it become like a parchment

On which nothing is written?

Is my soul damp

When tears well up in my eyes?

At its purest, divine reason

Is hot and dry—

As dry as a parchment

On which a sacred text is written.

2

‘The best renounce all for one thing...

But most men stuff themselves like cattle.’

Many renounce all for one thing:

For money, for glory, for love, for hate.

Some play the violin until they die on stage;

Others drink vodka until they die

By spontaneous combustion.

Many concentrate on one thing  
To the extent of depriving it  
Of all other things.  
And one thing must contain everything,  
Otherwise it's nothing.

And there's many a slip  
Betwixt cup and lip.

**BLINDNESS**

Going blind.  
How does it happen?  
What does one feel?

Waking in another world,  
A poorer world,  
A poor relation of the former ones.  
And the fog won't lift, whatever the forecast.

Trying to remove something  
From one's eyes,  
From the air,  
From mirrors.  
Being estranged from oneself,  
More and more.  
And this irresistible urge  
To run and catch up with one's relatives  
And friends.  
Yet they stand nearby.

How does music sound in a foggy world?  
Like an LP, not like a CD:  
The 'blind ear' can hear  
Very high-frequency sounds.

And then everything becomes music:  
Footfalls, a squeaky voice, a screech of brakes.  
And poetry, and prose, and a truism.

And every smell becomes a colour.  
And every touch becomes a colour.

Why do the blind smile so often?  
They live in a concert hall  
And in a garden ablaze with colour.

And others gaze at the world  
With dull, glassy eyes.

**THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SADNESS AND MELANCHOLY**

*Let us sublimate our sadness into melancholy.*

From a conversation

‘There’s always some sadness in beauty’—

The sentence I heard on television.

But sadness is everywhere.

Even ugliness is sad sometimes.

Beauty is sad: a famous photographer

Likes sad-looking profiles.

And he photographs top models

In profile, smoking cigarettes.

Beauty is melancholy: it is immortal.

Even roses are immortal.



### AN UPDATED VERSION

*Ohne Mythos aber geht jede Cultur ihrer gesunden  
schöpferischen naturkraft verlustig: erst ein mit  
Mythen umstellter Horizont schliesst eine ganze  
Culturbewegung zur einheit ab.*

Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*

Our modern mythologies  
Are not up to Grecian standards.  
So it's better to update old myths.

Ganymedes was the most beautiful youth alive.  
Zeus disguised himself in eagle feathers  
And abducted him from the Trojan plain.

Ganymedes is still the most beautiful youth alive,  
But nobody abducts him.

Nowadays the gods don't budge from Olympus.  
They sleep on floors and survive on scraps and leftovers  
From their employer's meal.

They're still fond of human beauty:  
Day and night they watch fashion shows  
Featuring some of the world's top designers.

**CHASMS**

Talking, talking, talking.  
Why do all these people talk?  
Why do they have to tell a story?

What counts is chasms—  
Neither stories nor plots,  
Nor Watson, nor Holmes.

Your thoughts shouldn't go  
From point A to point B.  
Let them be rooted to the spot.

**THE UNWRITTEN MAN**

I've always been on the wrong side of everything.

I don't know what side I'm on just now,

But I'm sure it's the wrong side of something.

I don't think I'm on the wrong side of the law:

I haven't been arrested.

There are other laws in the world—unwritten laws.

And I must be on the wrong side of an unwritten law,

On the unwritten side of the unwritten law.

I am unwritten, as it were.

No matter how much I write,

I'll always remain unwritten.

## VOICES

How delightful it is to talk to someone  
Without knowing whom you talk to.  
It often happens on the phone—  
As if angels communicated with us.

Voices have a spiritual, ethereal quality;  
Compared with them, even eyes seem vulgar.

I wish there were only voices left in the world,  
Voices without words. *Lieder ohne Worte*.

At the beginning was a voice  
And at the end will be a voice.  
Why not have voices in the middle?

Yesterday a woman told me  
We hadn't seen each other for years.  
Her voice was beautiful and demure.  
What a pity we'll meet tomorrow.

## PROMISES, PROMISES

A promising glance, a promising morning. At some point  
Everything shows great promise. And then  
The show is over and nothing really happens apart from something  
Nobody has been waiting for.  
Why does life make so many promises?  
Is it so enjoyable to break them?  
Breaking promises will never go out of fashion. Actually  
Nobody ever *breaks* promises: there's nothing  
To break. The moment you realise the promise hasn't been fulfilled  
It's no longer there. Nor has it been broken before.  
Promises exist only in a glance, in a colour,  
In the air.  
They don't exist in Time.  
Time and promises are incompatible.  
It's only when you start living with promises  
You find how incompatible they are.

**KARMA**

1

‘To go where eyes are looking.’  
That’s what the Russians say  
When weary or disappointed.

I’d rather go in the opposite direction:  
My eyes always look at something so hideous  
I instinctively turn back or shut my eyes.

I turn back and go in the opposite direction  
Until I reach the room I’ve never set foot in.  
I look at the walls; there are shelves along them.  
They’re loaded with the books I’ve already read.  
And the room is crowded with the people  
I’ve already met many times.  
The party’s in full swing.  
Not the first party, nor the last one.

Wherever you go,  
You come to the same room—  
To the room you’ve never set foot in.

And you meet the same people—  
The people you’ve never met.

And the same party goes on and on:  
A birthday party, a wedding anniversary.

You’re always looking backward,  
In the opposite direction.  
In the same direction.

2

I go until I reach the room

I've already set foot in.

No one sits anywhere.

No one lies anywhere.

And on the dinner table

There's a glass I emptied

Once upon a time.

The Garden of Eden

Beyond the window.

## TALKING TO ONESELF

Ah, those ancient philosophers!  
What did they want to teach us?  
So many wise sayings,  
So many good, unsolicited tips.

They knew no one listened to them.  
They knew no one would ever  
Take notice of their words  
Except for a few scholars.

They had no wish  
To be heard or read.

They merely talked to themselves.

Nothing elevates the soul so much  
As talking to oneself.



**WRITING A TOTAL NOVEL**

Why should I be in a hurry?  
I've plenty of time.  
And I'll say whatever I want to say.  
I'll describe everything under the sun,  
Above the sun: Hell, Purgatory, Paradise.  
I've plenty of time and plenty of paper.  
Why should I hurry? I must sit back  
And remember everything;  
And re-read whatever I've read;  
And read other books, all of them.

And then I'll look around, up and down;  
And go around the world in eighty days.  
And I'll speak to everybody,  
Even to those who have neither English,  
Nor French, nor Russian, nor German.  
I'll learn their languages  
And listen to their answers.  
And I'll ponder over their answers.

I'll think my own thoughts  
And every thought of mine  
Will find its way into my novel.  
So will my imagination, every figment of it.  
I'll recall what has never happened.  
I'll see invisible men and women.  
They'll leave the imprints of their feet  
On the snow in my garden.  
And I'll hear what only dogs can hear.  
I'll become a dog, if necessary;  
Or a saint—to hear celestial choirs.  
And what about smells?

Only dogs have a total knowledge of smells.

Only a weredog can write a total novel.

## THE PAST

'It was only after I turned sixty  
That old age began  
To creep up on me,'  
Said one of my colleagues.  
By the end of the week  
I'll be fifty-four.

As long as the past  
Remains in the present  
You're young,  
You're twenty-one.

But it's no longer the present.

Nothing is present  
Except some furniture,  
Eighteenth-century furniture.

I am also  
A piece of furniture:  
A desk, a chest of drawers.

In the sentence 'I'm getting colder'  
'Getting' is a present participle.

### THE IRREPLACEABLE FEELING

Childhood, Moscow, friends.  
There are smells, sights and signs.  
And all of them conjure up a feeling  
Which is irreplaceable.

And smiles of course. And tears.  
And the man who gesticulated  
More and more wildly  
As he became more excited.  
(I don't recall his name.)  
And the way Victor reacted  
When Anna said she wouldn't go  
To the dance with him.

Sometimes you just know  
Something didn't happen,  
Thirty years ago,  
Forty years ago.  
You don't even know  
What might have happened.  
Perhaps nothing.  
But the feeling is there,  
The irreplaceable feeling.

**THE LIFE OF CELLS**

How many cells have died  
In my brain since yesterday?  
Have they been replaced?  
By whom? By what?  
By God?  
By genetics?  
By Destiny?  
By another sentence  
In the Book of Life?  
By another comma  
In the Book of Death?  
Are the new cells  
Worthy of their late colleagues?  
How does a cell die?  
Does it realise it's dying?  
Does it scream in agony?  
Why can't I hear its screams?  
Does it suffer agonies of guilt  
At what has happened in its lifetime?  
At what hasn't happened?  
And what about the cells  
Writing this poem?  
When will *they* die?  
Is it their last poem?  
'I regret to inform you  
That cell N°185034  
Expired at the end of the third line.'  
Why doesn't my brain  
Say anything on the subject?  
(It *has* said something  
On the subject, hasn't it?)  
Do other cells working on this poem

Realise their colleague has died?  
Are they crying?  
Have they stopped working?  
What cells are working on this poem?  
Some distant cells?  
Some heartless cells?  
Are they working out of duty?  
Trying to look interested,  
But their hearts aren't in it.  
Trying to sound interesting,  
Enticing, magnificent, deep.  
Some of them stopped writing  
To watch the funeral procession.  
Some of them stopped writing  
Because it's pointless.

## ONCE AGAIN ABOUT LOVE

The way you looked at me sometimes.  
Your eyes.  
I don't remember what colour they are.

What I remember now  
Is my feelings, not your eyes;  
My love, not your words.  
As if you hadn't said anything  
During all those years.  
I remember only my love.

Perhaps this love has nothing to do  
Either with you or any other woman.

The sentiment of love  
In its purest form,  
Aimed at everything,  
At nothing.

Only this love is worthy of its name.  
(Other loves are just predicates;  
This one is a subject.)

Perhaps it's no love at all.  
I've no idea what's inside  
The notion of love  
And what has to be expelled  
In the bid for clarity and rigour.

Others might expel it as aberrant.  
I take it as the standard case.

## ACCIDENTS

Our trips. Our last trip to Epernay.  
I had no idea it was a farewell dinner.  
A lot of champagne, a lot of rain.  
On our way back the car went into a skid.

Only the accidents we don't notice  
Really count. Others are just a matter  
Of life and death. These are registered  
In hospitals, in mortuaries,  
On the grass.



## A FRACTION OF A SECOND

So many words are needed  
To describe something  
Which can be experienced  
In a fraction of a second.

Why not isolate this stretch of time  
And pin it to a wall, like a butterfly?

But to describe a butterfly—  
Even a dead butterfly—  
One needs a lot of words.

## rites

How strange that my teenage years  
Aren't as vast as might have been presumed,  
Given my penchant for nostalgia.  
They're limited to books and music.  
And some voices. No colours  
Come from them, no tastes  
Except for one or two ice creams.  
What to say about smells?  
My aunt's perfume. I don't recall  
That of my mother. Oddly enough,  
I recall mainly my mother's gestures.  
She always seemed to perform rites:  
The rite of breakfast, the rite of dinner.  
Or is it you I'm thinking about?  
Your gestures, your rites:  
The rite of morning, the rite of evening.  
No room for two women in my life.

**THE FORCE OF MEMORY**

I look before me and see a wall  
I've never seen before.

Yet this wall looks like a memory,  
Like something that vanished  
A long time ago.

And the paintings on the wall  
Seem to depict some ancestors.

Whatever you look at  
Is destroyed by your memory.

## REALITIES

Going to bed. Even ten years ago  
I awaited this moment with impatience.  
Now I care neither about my dreams  
Nor about my rest. Anyway, sleep  
Isn't a respite from reality:  
It's just another reality.

And my nightmares don't amuse me any longer.  
Nor do they frighten me: I've known  
These monsters for years. Nightmares  
Are dreams, nothing else;  
Or realities.

My garden is swarming with wasps  
But they don't sting me any more; they just  
Fly around.

I used to wear gloves  
When gardening—to prevent the nettles  
From stinging me. Now  
I don't wear them any more.  
Nettles don't sting me  
Either in my garden,  
Or in my dreams.

And no hand touches me:  
The handless realities.

There are so many of them:  
A hundred, a thousand.

A thousand realities:

Arabian nights,  
Russian days.

**ANOTHER PIECE OF INFORMATION**

Ah, these birds and their shouts!  
They shout as if celebrating a victory.  
A victory over what? Over whom?  
Over humans? They shout  
As if something could answer them,  
Something or somebody—  
Either destiny or humans.  
But destiny has no ear  
Either for music or for shouts.

Too many thoughts resound in my brain—  
No time for shouts in the street. I wish I could  
Silence my thoughts and live with my five senses  
Which encompass the world. I don't need  
The sixth sense and whatever lies  
Outside the world. What is it? A kind of residue?  
The future? Not a thing,  
Nor a thought?

I listen to the birds and to the silence  
Which punctuates their shouts. For once  
I'm not sure silence is more important  
Than sounds.

## HAMLET THE STORYTELLER

Hamlet tells his friend, Horatio, a new ghost story. Horatio  
Doesn't dare contradict the royal prince  
And agrees with him on every point. He tells the story  
To Marcellus and two sentinels who have no choice  
But to side with the royal prince and his best friend. Accordingly,  
They spread the rumour about  
The late king's ghost and everybody believes them:  
They're above suspicion, for they cannot profit  
From the appearance of the ghost.

I don't think Hamlet bribed them into collaboration: his royal word  
Was weighty enough to convince everybody around him  
Except his mother who didn't see her late husband's ghost  
In her room. Besides, Hamlet needed all the money  
He had inherited from his father  
To purchase jewellery for his beloved Ophelia.

So the audience are biased against Claudius  
From the very start. And Hamlet  
Is given carte blanche by the masses who,  
'Dipping all his faults in their affection,  
Work like the spring that turneth wood to stone,  
Convert his gyves to graces—' in Claudius's words.

## AFTER A SEPARATION

Now I've more time to think about you:  
Your absence helps me. Your presence was  
So overwhelming and tyrannical  
I had no time to think about anything, not even  
About you, about us. I discovered  
The blissful state of thoughtlessness,  
The blissful sensation of the void.  
You had a knack of annihilating  
Not only the world but myself,  
The greater part of my body and mind.  
And you would leave only the part  
That could admire you.

Now

I admire you more fully, more egoistically.  
I admire you through myself, allowing my thoughts  
To analyse your eyes, your arms, your repartee.

Now I realise we should have  
Redecorated the bedroom:  
The carpet and wallpaper  
Are hopelessly mismatched.



## LOOKING FOR THE ANSWER

Works of art are inspired and structured;  
So is life, apparently. (I, for one,  
Don't see this structure.) Is life inspired? Is it  
A work of art, in other words?

Another work of art  
Should be created to find out how  
The matter stands.

Our thoughts are  
Works of art, a philosophical treatise.

Whatever we touch is a work of art.

Why not just look around?

**IN A PRISON**

He struggled with a prison guard  
And made a sudden bid for freedom.  
All of a sudden he realised  
He was struggling with himself.

And when he asked himself  
About his future plans,  
All he got was flim flam.

'I'm the prisoner and the guard.  
I'm the one who asks questions  
And the one who answers them.  
I'm trapped in a vicious circle.'

But his ingenious theory  
Lent itself most readily  
To bubbling obfuscation.

**‘THE PROBLEMS HAVE IN ESSENTIALS BEEN FINALLY SOLVED’**

How many times did Wittgenstein  
‘Hit the nail on the head’?

For all his logic, nails in our bridges  
Work themselves loose.

So we cannot get  
From a *Sachverhalt* to the world,  
From language-games to the mind,  
From the mind to the body,  
From the body to the heart,  
From the heart to others,  
From others to ourselves.

And often the world is  
*Nothing* that is the case.  
And there are so many cases  
Which make up other worlds.

And other worlds are all that is the case.

## WATER

A loss of bodily fluids, for example  
By getting too hot and not drinking enough,  
Can lead to dehydration and death.

The world is a body, a human body.  
As long as it lives, it will be fluid.

‘To wipe the slate clean.’  
A meaningless expression:  
There’s no slate available  
And nothing can be written  
On water.

## HISTORIES

My cat has always liked  
This armchair of mine.  
I bought it seven years ago—  
A Louis XV armchair.  
My cat recognised it at once.  
What did she recognise?  
The smell of the French Revolution?  
The smell of a gallant conversation?

I'm no thrill-seeker  
But I do like a bit of excitement  
In my life. And I get excited  
When I sit in this armchair.  
(I don't recognise it.)  
What kind of history  
Does it have?

Do armchairs have a history?  
Even we don't have one.  
Every day is the first day  
And the last day. Our history  
Lasts for a day only  
And sometimes for a few hours.

This armchair does have a history—  
Not the history of its owners  
But its own history.  
My cat has a history too.  
And, for some reason, her history  
Is inextricably intertwined  
With that of the armchair.

## THE WORLD

Dawn, afternoon, night.  
 There are several stages in our life;  
 And every stage seems different.  
 Shakespeare thought so;  
 And Oedipus.  
 But a morning is an evening  
 And any night is partly a dawn.  
 Sometimes it is a dawn;  
 Or an evening.  
 I wake at four in the afternoon  
 And go to sleep at eight in the morning.  
 I was old at the age of fourteen.  
 At the time I wished to be old  
 And always added three or four years to my age  
 Whenever speaking to girls. Now  
 I deduct a few years from my age.  
 But that's not the point.  
 The point is life is a mixture  
 Of ages and years and seasons.  
 In this world, where time is  
 An elastic concept,  
 There are neither timetables  
 Nor spacetables.  
 There are only dinner tables  
 And many bottles of wine.

### COMMENTARY:

I often say 'our world'.  
 It sounds rather pompous  
 And vague. What's our world?  
 My writing desk is our world.  
 This poem is our world.

And even my blunders are  
Our world. So,  
Instead of saying 'our world',  
I might say 'my blunders'.  
Or 'my ecstasies'.  
My age is our world.  
(And yet I'm publicity-shy.)  
Your beauty is our world,  
Not only *my* world.

**ETERNITY**

They say, 'It's over, it's over.'  
But everything goes on.  
Nothing ever stops in its tracks.  
Nothing ever dies.

'I've no wish to go to the moon, although  
I like it very much. Besides,  
I adore my friends and none of them  
Has the slightest intention  
Of living on the moon.' A young lady  
Talked to me thus the other day.  
Strange words, surrealistic words.  
She died last night.  
She's on the moon now;  
And also on the earth.  
Forever.



**BARBARIANS**

The Berlin Wall, the Great Wall of China...  
Hadrian also built a Great Wall—  
Across the North of England,  
From Tyne to Solway. He ordered its construction  
In AD 121-122  
On one of his first provincial tours.  
A symbol of his defensive policy.  
Less than three centuries later  
Hadrian's Wall stood deserted,  
And the country could no longer be held  
Against the Picts, Scots and Saxons.

Over forty years I've built many walls:  
Against busybodies, against my body,  
Against *idées reçues*. It's high time  
I opened my forbidden city  
To barbarian hordes.

**BRUGGE AND A BOX OF CHOCOLATE**

Why should you think twice  
About anything?  
Do your second thoughts  
Differ from your first ones?  
Do you become wiser  
After thinking a lot?  
Wiser and sadder?  
You might become sadder  
But certainly not wiser.  
The situation you think about  
Is so far away  
No thought can ever reach it;  
Nor can intuition.  
It's on the Moon, on Venus;  
And you're on Earth.  
You can still enjoy yourself  
On Earth: Brugge  
Was untouched by the industrial revolution  
That ravaged other European cities  
In the nineteenth century.  
You can visit Brugge  
And eat a box of chocolates.

## HOMAGE TO NIETZSCHE

Try as I may  
I won't write anything today.  
An occasional rhyme won't help.  
I'm not in the mood for writing poetry.  
Or perhaps I am in the mood,  
But inspiration isn't *au rendez-vous*,  
As the French say.

I've never had any appointments  
With inspiration: it's neither a doctor  
Nor a lawyer. And my moods  
Are under control, under *my* control.  
And I *am* in the mood for writing today.

I've willed myself to write these lines.  
They're not inspired, not at all;  
But it's my will that counts,  
My will to power.

This poem is an expression of my will,  
A tangible proof of its existence;  
Of my existence.

A good poem is a proof  
Of the existence of God.

**HER PERFUME**

I won't write anything  
If I think only about this poem.  
I must think about something else  
In order to write it.  
I must concentrate on my pains,  
On my memories, on my happiness,  
On the whiff of perfume I caught  
As she swept past me.

### THE NUMBER OF FEELINGS

I haven't got a sufficient number of feelings.

How many of them am I supposed to have?

(A human being worthy of his name.)

In accountancy it often helps

To have a mathematical mind.

**INSENSIBILITY**

I'm not insensible  
To other people's distress.  
I'm insensible to my own distress.  
In the evenings I often  
Show signs of distress: I can see them  
In my mirror. I feel nothing.

## DANCING

Maiden. An old-fashioned word; literary usage.

Maidens perform graceful dances.

Where?

People are walking down the street;

Their movements don't look like a dance.

An old-fashioned word:

Nobody dances any more.

People just walk or run.

There are some women among them.

Have they forgotten how to dance?

Only maidens can dance,

Gracefully.

## DEAD CHILDREN

How to account for the death of children?

Priests used to say something  
About God being short of angels.

Dead children.  
They stand on the firmament,  
Their heads downwards.  
And they wave to us,  
Their hands oscillating like pendulums.

And we contemplate their eternal salutation.



## THE MEASURE OF HAPPINESS

Why am I always on the move?

Why did I leave Moscow?

I might have drunk a lot of tea

On the terrace of my dacha.

The measure of my happiness—

The quantity of tea

I would have drunk on that terrace.

(Why go to Damascus?)

The river of tea, the tea-river.

My friends, our conversations.

We would have talked of this and that;

All talk and no action.

The measure of happiness.

**GOING TO THE DOGS (AND TO THE DONKEYS)**

Man is bred and educated  
To be blissfully content  
With his pre-destined role.

I'm educationally disadvantaged.

I look at the dogs and ask myself  
If they're content with their role—  
With the role assigned to them  
By some human languages.  
Do they lead a dog's life?

Anyway I don't mind  
Going to the dogs;  
Nor do I mind  
Going to the gods.  
Let the English language  
Determine my life.

## A BRIEF SURVEY OF HELL

What creatures are they?  
 They only receive a miserly,  
 Beggarly, begrudging pittance.

An icy rain falls on souls of the gluttonous,  
 Watched over by Cerberus.

The combination of recession and record unemployment.

The economy is in crisis. The world is facing  
 An agricultural crisis  
 Which may lead to serious food shortages.

The staple diet here is mutton, fish  
 And boiled potatoes.

I'm sorry I've spoken out of turn, but I thought  
 Everybody had already been told.

She's always putting the knife  
 Into her former colleagues.

Sad to say, the ring was never found.

When mistakes were made,  
 There was much finger-pointing.

Reverse discrimination.

Cynicism is his stock-in-trade.

Don't say anything about the football match—

It's a sore point with him  
Because they lost rather badly.

Waiting till the cows come home.

He duly rose to the bait.

A middle-aged man to his daughter: 'I don't attempt to take advantage of your naïveté, do I? And yet Chrysippe raises no objection to this particular form of relationship. Anyway he doesn't use the word "incest". My caresses and kisses remain within the bounds of paternal affection. I never allow myself to press my fingers against your breasts, notwithstanding their budding beauty.'

There's a glut of large, expensive houses  
Lying empty and unsold.

A whispering campaign.

With something as delicate as brain surgery,  
There's little margin for error.

Steering a course  
Through a minefield of ethical problems.

Her pay rise brought her into a new tax bracket.

Two sides of the same coin.

It's a Catch-22 situation.

By the end of the week  
I'm usually dead.

I felt honour bound to tell him his wife  
Was having an affair with his best friend.

The politicians of the day are just self-seeking opportunists.

An idle dream.

## A BRIEF SURVEY OF PARADISE

She glossed over the company's fall in profits,  
Focusing instead  
On her plans for investment.

The human brain continues to develop  
Almost until its demise.  
A work in progress!

The new president was greeted by an ecstatic crowd.

I was so happy and excited  
As I was writing that poem,  
But it came out trite, dull and ridiculous.

The company managed to fight off a hostile takeover bid.

Poking fun at philistines.

Small mercies, small joys.  
James Joyce.  
Yes.

The taste of Proust's *madeleine*.

Quoting Heidegger.

Meeting unexpectedly  
The woman you have lost.  
But do not prolong  
The pleasure of the postscript:  
You'll lose her again!

Writing postscripts,  
Doodling in margins.

Thinking about the people you'll never meet.

Reading about Sei Shonagon's pleasures.

Win the house of your dreams in our fantastic competition!

A teacher to his pupil: 'For two years I've shielded you from our disastrous epoch, haven't I? You might have become impregnated with it. Instead you've dwelt in beautiful old times, listening to Socrates and Egyptian rulers.'

In the art of coronation, by means of various visible motions and signs, are manifested those mystical, invisible bonds between the Tsar's authority and the Will of the Most High, establishing the authority; the Tsar's ties with the State and with the Church, the latter sanctifying the life both of the State and of the people; and finally, those ties which bind the Tsar with his people, to whom he is a Father, Head and Ruler in all their best aspirations, endeavours and undertakings.

A glass of champagne on a hot day.  
A glass of champagne in bed.  
A glass of champagne after a kiss.  
A bottle of burgundy on a sleepless night.

She was propped against me  
And I had one arm round her.

A goldfish bowl with only one goldfish in it.

## A FLAT INFINITY

You're beside me. The end of infinity is so near  
I can touch it.

I touch it.  
Again and again.

Let no one remind me  
There are plenty more fish in the sea.  
A goldfish bowl with only one goldfish in it.

Life is just a goldfish bowl painted by Matisse,  
Your favourite artist.

Anyway, Moscow is a long way from the sea.



## POETS

What can poets do?

They can celebrate

The energy and enthusiasm

Of the young

And the patience of the old.

They can sing the praises

Of a marathon man.

They can inform you New York

Is full of the damnedest eccentrics.

They can tell you a secret

You don't need to know.

They can recount their date

With a femme fatale.

'Her dark good-looks, her slightly wicked charm...'

They can proclaim self-confidence

Is the lifeblood of real democracy.

They can describe a sunset—

'One of the most beautiful sights in nature'.

They can point out grandchildren

Might give you a new lease of life.

They can make a few indirect remarks

About the need for change.

They can be in hysterics.

They can confess their suicide

Is motivated in part by a sense of despair.

They can kill the gods

Or resurrect them.

**ODE ON A GRECIAN URN**

Her lips gently brushed my cheek  
And she was gone.

I collect endings.  
Some of them are happy;  
All endings are happy.

An ending can't be ill-starred:  
No presentiments, no bad omens.  
Bodyguards go on holiday.  
No storage, no stories;  
No promises, no farewells;  
No make-or-break situations.

And if you drop the Grecian Urn  
It will not break, never.

Her lips are gently brushing my cheek.



**TWO DARK LADIES****(November 2001)**

**TWO DARK LADIES**

1

The dark is the other side of light.

No, it's the other way round.

It's not round at all:

Square and unfair.

Last night I found myself

Wedged between two old ladies

On a bus. That's how

The matter stands with light:

It's wedged between two dark spaces,

Between two dark ladies.

(If you eat carrots

Does it really

Help you see in the dark?)

I love two young women.

One is younger than the other.

But neither is older, as it were:

Both are young and beautiful.

Two dark ladies.

And I'm a ray of light.

Am I?

Is there such a thing

As a ray of darkness?

Or a wedge of darkness?

What does Alec Guinness say

In *Star Wars*?

'Don't give in to hate

Because it leads to the dark side.'

(This doesn't prevent me

From hating *Star Wars*.)

What if you give in to love?

2

Is private poetry out of fashion?

Is all poetry private?

What's the difference between

Private and personal poetry?

And public poetry?

Is there any difference between them?

Is there any difference between

A poem and a poem?

Do all poems

Written in iambic pentameter

Sound alike?

And what about free verse?

And constrained verse?

Do all love poems

Sound alike?

Is love indivisible?

Perhaps it is.

But when you cease

Loving someone,

Do you deduct anything

From the love you experienced

Once upon a time?

Towards that person?

(All past loves

Take place

Once upon a time.

They don't go any further

Than the time they're pinned to:

They happen only once.)

Has breaking off  
 Gone out of fashion?  
 It hasn't gone  
 Out of my life.  
 So many things  
 Get broken  
 Every second.  
 That's their second nature.  
 (I've nothing to do with it.)  
 They break as soon  
 As I leave them alone.  
 I left her alone  
 And she broke up.  
 There are only broken toys  
 We can play with.  
 And we can't even play with them.  
 They don't play with us either.  
 That's something else:  
 Neither work nor play.  
 Neither life nor death.

3  
 I used to love A.  
 Now I love B.  
 And the reader knows  
 Neither A nor B.

Perhaps  
 I don't know them either.

So why should anybody  
 Try to understand  
 What happened  
 Or find out

Who's who?  
 Nobody's nobody.  
 At least A isn't B  
 And I am just C—  
 The right training grounds  
 For the ABC of love.

4  
 Personal and public are synonyms:  
 A time-honoured cliché.  
 I don't mean everybody  
 Knows what happens  
 In my room  
 Whenever I stay at home.  
 (Actually nothing happens in my room  
 Whenever I stay at home.)  
 I mean the world is like the crockery  
 Which stays in one piece  
 Despite travel sickness,  
 Despite travel agencies  
 And chasms  
 And bumps  
 And bombs.

I mean the world is just one word.  
 This word is uttered daily.  
 This word belongs to no language.  
 This word is a language in itself,  
 A language in its own right.  
 But what right does it have to exist?

5  
 I considered the matter closed,  
 But the matter disagreed with me.



The matter was open, as a matter of fact.  
 The matter was wide-open  
 And I went into the matter:  
 I couldn't do otherwise.  
 Actually the matter was so wide  
 That nothing existed outside the matter.

Everything was the matter.  
 Two dark ladies.  
 Does the world have enough room  
 For two beautiful women?

The world doesn't have enough room  
 For one woman.

6  
 What did I use to say to poets?

'Don't be too personal!  
 Only details should be put  
 In one's writings:  
 One's tie, for instance—  
 The colour of one's tie,  
 Not the tie itself,  
 Let alone one's life.'

This poem is the dress  
 She was wearing last night.

7  
 Our love collapsed like a house of cards,  
 A palace of cards,  
 A city of cards.  
 St Petersburg collapsed

When I fell in love with another woman.  
 St Petersburg:  
 The native city of my parents,  
 Of my genes.

You are not my native city.  
 (Not my City of God.)  
 Nor are you my native woman.  
 And you don't speak my native tongue,  
 Nor any tongue I know of.

You're point A.  
 And point A understands  
 Neither Russian nor English  
 Nor French.  
 A understands only point D.  
 And I don't know  
 What D stands for.  
 Dutch? *Deutsch*?

Why should I blacken her image?  
 There's no image to speak of, anyway.  
 Not any more.

How easy it is  
 To forget a woman  
 You loved only once—  
 Once upon a time.

## ALTERATIONS

One sound can change a lot  
In one's life. Not necessarily a cry for help,  
A scream, a moan, the rattle of machine-gun fire.

Just a note played on the piano,  
One single note.  
And one's soul alters.

Immortality doesn't mean status quo.  
Some alterations to the soul  
Might be in order.

**HANGING IN THE AIR**

The sound of the bells  
Hung in the midnight air.

The same sound hung  
In the fresh air of dawn.

The temperature of the air  
Did not alter the sound;  
Nor did the light and colours  
Have any effect on it.

It was rather heavy,  
But it did not fall.

## **BOTTOMLESS SILENCE**

Listening to silence.  
A multitude of sounds  
Arise from its depth.

But bottomless silence is truly silent,  
However long one may listen to it.  
Nothing ruffles its surface:  
It has no surface.

And even your shouts  
Wouldn't cause ripples  
To spread across it,  
Let alone waves.

Once I heard it in my car;  
The traffic was creeping along  
At a snail's pace.

I also heard it in a concert hall;  
An orchestra was playing fortissimo.

## LONG STORIES

A long story is a long story:

You can't cut it short.

Nor can it be summed up:

You have to follow its thread

Until it leads you somewhere.

Even if it leads nowhere

You have to follow it,

Whatever the consequences.

You often get lost on the way:

It's the nature of long stories

To lead astray.

But however often you get lost,

A long story never becomes short:

It just stops for a few minutes

To catch its breath.

And yet a long story

Is never short of breath.

**IDIOTS**

What if a tale is told  
By a wise man?  
Is there any difference?

A tale might be different—  
The telling of it.  
But, on the whole,  
It's the same tale  
Told by the same man,  
By the same woman,  
By the same transsexual.  
Even silence is full  
Of sound and fury.

What does that signify?  
Someone's born,  
Someone dies,  
Someone falls in love,  
Someone gets killed.  
There are idiots in it  
And Nobel Prize winners.  
A man buys a cupboard  
On the understanding  
He can return it  
If it doesn't fit his living room.  
A woman says: 'I don't think  
Newspapers ought to be allowed  
To print full-frontals.'  
What does that signify?  
There are lots of cupboards  
And living rooms;  
And lots of shops

And shop assistants;  
And lots of naked bodies;  
And lots of bodies  
Wearing suits and dresses;  
And lots of newspapers.

A new drug is discovered.  
'This discovery is of great significance  
To people suffering from heart problems.'  
What does that signify?  
Nothing.  
Just a story  
Told by a journalist.



**SOMETHING**

*Give me some wine because life is nothing.*

Fernando Pessoa, *There Are Diseases*

How easy it would be to live  
If life were nothing!

No vain hopes,  
No ill-grounded fears,  
No ill-gotten gains,  
No feelings of guilt,  
No painful memories,  
No regrets of any kind  
(Edith Piaf's spirit),  
No wrong decisions,  
No right decisions—  
No decisions at all:  
Why should you choose  
Between nothingness  
And nothingness?  
And what would you get?  
Another nothingness.

Or another cup of wine  
Which is something:  
Paradise, Hell,  
The past, hopes, fears.

**ONE SIDE**

This urge to look for something,  
To find a solution to one problem at least.

If you find a solution to one problem,  
All other problems will be solved.

(The reasoning behind this conclusion  
Is impossible to fault.)

As if the lights had gone out  
And I had to grope towards the door.

The lights are on: they've always been on.  
And the door is wide-open.

So why do I pretend I'm in a dark room  
And all I have to do is turn on the lights?

And why do I look for symbols everywhere,  
For symbols and hints?

There are no symbols anywhere;  
And hints speak at the top of their voices.

And two sides of the same coin  
Are actually one.

So why do some people  
Have the firm conviction  
There's a better life  
After death?

**THE WINDOW**

Not far from my window,  
A nightingale is singing.

The same bird  
Will sing its song  
When I am gone.

But what will the bird sing about?  
Only my life is worthy of its song.  
(Even my death isn't worthy of it.)

And there's only one window in the world.

*APRES UNE LECTURE DE DANTE*

No daimonion has ever guided me.  
I do hear a voice now and then,  
But it's my own voice  
Telling me what I know already.  
I must be talking to myself  
Without opening my mouth.  
Nor is it an interior monologue:  
It comes from the outside.  
What if I live in several places  
At the same time?

I follow neither the right path  
Nor the wrong one: there's no path  
In front of me. Or behind me.

It's not a wasteland either—  
Just a nondescript landscape.  
There are trees in it,  
And some of those trees  
Are men and women.

*APRES UNE LECTURE DE BORGES*

An irresistible urge:  
To cover everything with words.

Why not turn the world  
Into a wall covered in graffiti?

Anyway the world is a circular wall  
And I can't stand confined spaces.

Why not turn the world  
Into a reading room?

## THE PROOFS

The fuel gauge dropped swiftly  
Towards zero.  
But the engine didn't stall.  
The car continued to glide  
Along the motorway.

Could that be accepted  
As proof of a future life?

If yes, there are other proofs:

The scent of roses  
That persists in your room  
For all your efforts to get rid of it.  
(For some reason you hate roses.)

A shooting star that doesn't move.

A smile on her face in spite of sadness.

Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*.

## UNBORN SOUNDS

How intense and beautiful are the sounds  
That come from nowhere.  
Unborn sounds.  
They're not like stillborn children.  
They're *unborn*: no mother  
Bore them in her womb.

Motherless sounds are gorgeous.  
They're not orphans, however.  
They seem to be related  
To almost everything.  
At least they tell us more  
About the universe  
Than any other sounds.

But I've no wish to know anything  
About the universe.  
I just listen to these sounds  
And no knowledge burdens my mind.

Even my body grows light  
In the presence of these sounds.

**PAUL CELAN**

Why do so many people  
Who know nothing about poetry  
Like Paul Celan?

One word is more powerful  
Than many words. And Celan  
Creates a space around his words  
So they seem to stand on their own.

And sometimes  
They lower themselves  
Into a crouch, hoping  
They won't be seen.

So you first read between the words  
And then beyond the words.

And even the illiterate  
Can read beyond the words.



**REVELATION**

How little I know my memory.  
(Perhaps it's the other way round.  
Does my memory know me enough?)

I thought I'd forgotten you:  
My memory reminded me neither  
Of your eyes nor of your voice.

I might have another memory,  
Another consciousness.  
(I wouldn't put it down to my unconscious,  
To its clandestine labours.)

Why did you glance at me  
Backstage as I talked  
To an old woman?

Now  
I've got only one consciousness,  
One memory.

What's another memory for?  
And another consciousness?  
And the unconscious?

## MIRACLES

Why does my life  
Depend so much on miracles?  
I wait for them, but they never happen.

Perhaps a miracle is something so natural  
We don't notice it.

Perhaps the world is so unnatural  
There's no room for miracles in it.

Even nature is unnatural.

## PEACE AND WAR

In these troubled times of war and famine...

In these peaceful times of war and famine...

Times are always troubled...or peaceful...

War and peace are interchangeable.

Many words are interchangeable.

Take the ending of Celan's poem:

'Light was. Salvation.'

(*'Licht war. Rettung.'*)

Let us change it thus:

'Darkness was. Salvation.'

Or:

'Light was. Damnation.'

Or:

'Light is. Damnation.'

Light is not different

From darkness. So Conrad

Could have entitled his story

*Heart of Light.*

Sounds better, anyway.

Tolstoy could have entitled his novel

*Peace and War.*

Or just *War.*

Damnation is not different

From salvation.

## THE DARK LADY OF POETRY

So many poems:  
One after another.  
I wish I could write one poem  
In which all others poems  
Might be included.

But one poem  
Contains only one poem,  
However huge.

And one poem is not enough  
To describe my love.

Even you were too small  
For my feelings.

So now you impersonate  
All the women I've ever loved.

And men,  
And animals,  
And plants.

You even contain  
This poem;  
And all other poems  
I've written;  
And the ones I haven't written.  
(I haven't written thousands of poems.)

And the poems of other poets:  
You're the dark lady

Of Shakespeare's sonnets.

My dark-haired lady,  
My dark-eyed lady.

Is there anything  
Outside you?  
Even I am part of you,  
Small, insignificant part.

**FEELINGS, FEELINGS, FEELINGS**

Words, words, words.  
Feelings are like that:  
A sound dying away.  
And often no echo  
Resounds inside you—  
Not the slightest echo.  
(Worse still, you can't  
Note your feeling down.)  
The feeling is gone  
As if you'd uttered it;  
And nothing remains  
Save a vague memory,  
A memory of something  
That can't be described  
And yet is akin to words.

In Ancient Greece  
Words were so tangible  
Many mistook them  
For objects. A feeling  
Is neither an object  
Nor a subject.

## THE BOOK

Schopenhauer wrote that life and dreams  
Were pages from the same book,  
And that to read them in their proper order  
Was to live,  
But to scan them at random  
Was to dream.

I, for one, never read these pages  
In proper order; I always  
Scan them at random.  
Or perhaps  
I'm not reading the same book—  
The Book of Life, that is.

I must be reading  
The Book of Chance,  
Or the Book of Impermanence,  
Or the Book of Inconstancy,  
Or the Book of Irresolution,  
Or the Book of Chaos.  
Who knows?

The pages I'm reading are half-torn;  
Some words are illegible  
And others are underlined in red.  
Often I read just one word  
Written on a tiny sheet of paper  
And I've no idea  
From which book the word comes.

Perhaps it comes  
Not from a book

But from a love letter.

It doesn't look like a word of love.

Out of context, nothing looks

Or sounds like love.

And only a book can provide this context,

A book you read from beginning

To end.



**HER IMMOBILITY**

*She spoke in a voice vibrant with emotion.*

Why can't I say that about her?  
Though beautiful, her voice  
Is never vibrant with emotion.  
It is emotionless, almost motionless.  
Only her words betray a motion—  
A direction her voice takes.

*She often seems quite cold and harsh,  
But her smiling eyes betray her true nature.*

Why can't I say that about her?  
She smiles rather often  
And her dark eyes begin to sparkle  
Whenever I come into her room.  
But is it her true nature?  
Isn't immobility her true nature?  
Somehow those sparkles are also immobile.

## THEORIES

My plan is excellent in theory,  
But it won't succeed in practice.  
Nothing succeeds in practice  
Except unimportant things  
Such as business deals.  
No work of art  
Succeeds in practice.

Euphemistically we call works of art  
'Unfinished'.  
Or 'open'.  
They're just imperfect.  
But so many theories are beautiful,  
Perfect,  
Finished,  
Closed.  
Some of them are  
Genuine works of art.

To preserve them in their purity  
You shouldn't express them,  
Let alone put them into practice.

*THE CHISTĚ PRUDĚ*

A boulevard in Moscow. And a pond.

A few swans, a boat.

I wish I could live in this area for a while,  
For many years.

I wish I could be in this boat today.

And tomorrow.

A man and a woman are sitting in it.

They don't look happy.

And the swans don't look  
Like their brothers and sisters  
Described by Yeats.  
Yet I wouldn't mind  
Living in this area.

The swans  
Might change with the passing  
Of the years. And I'll be sitting  
In that boat.

## MOSCOW

Moscow.  
Why do you welcome me?  
A prodigal son.  
I'm not your son either  
Spiritual or poetical.  
I should have been born  
In St Petersburg, in Kyoto.  
I might have been born  
In St Petersburg and in Kyoto—  
Several times.  
The place of my birth  
Is a mistake, a miscalculation—  
An unpardonable oversight  
On the part of Fate.  
So is the *date* of my birth.

Why do you welcome me?  
Are you my father, my mother?  
Why are you so kind?  
I hated you for many years.  
Even now I'm not quite sure  
I love you.

But you're so warm-hearted.  
And you look like a wounded animal;  
And you scream like the hare my father  
Wounded in your suburbs  
Forty-seven years ago.

For all that you're beautiful. Often  
I interrupt my walk, unable  
To cope with my tears.

But who's supposed to shed tears  
On this occasion?  
The father or the prodigal son?  
Or both?

Moscow is feminine in Russian.  
Russia herself is feminine.

**DOPPELGÄNGERS**

What a pity doppelgängers  
Live inside us, not outside.  
Only we know they exist;  
And some of our friends  
Who think we're mad.  
They can't live another life,  
Being stuck within us  
Like an internal organ,  
Like another soul.  
(Do we need a second soul?)  
My doppelgänger won't go  
And tell her I'm in love  
With another woman.  
Nor will he tell her  
I love her still  
In spite of everything.  
We need to love two women:  
One is not enough.  
Just one hemisphere.

## SCEPTICISM

1

What would I do if I were  
To live another life?  
I'd rather not return to earth  
In any shape or form:  
Even plants are unhappy here.  
(The voiceless and the underprivileged.)  
Even stones are tired.

Another planet might suit me.  
But I'm too sceptical  
To look for another planet,  
And even eternity wouldn't cure me  
Of scepticism.

2

Am I sceptical?  
No idea. And I'm too lazy  
To look the word up in my dictionaries.

I don't desire to have the truth in a more  
Concrete, effective, perfect form  
Than what's granted to me.

But truth and scepticism are incompatible.  
Are they?

## SPEAKING ON THE PHONE

You sound so different on the phone.  
Everybody does of course;  
Proust wrote about that.  
But even Proust didn't know  
One might lose love over the phone.  
So many things get lost  
During a long-distance call;  
As if one were going all this way  
On foot.

Now I doubt if you love me or not.  
I even question my love,  
My own love.  
And Proust seemed to have *found* love  
Over the phone—at least  
A new aspect of life.

I find only old aspects of life  
When I speak to you through the receiver:  
Loneliness, weariness;  
As if I had crawled all the way  
From Paris to Moscow.



**CROSSING A ROAD**

Many inhabitants of India don't look from side to side  
Before they cross a road.  
Their eyes, their ancient eyes,  
Seem to reach beyond life and death.  
To them death is no more than a passing car,  
A traffic light. And what does it matter  
If it's red or green.

All colours are white  
Beyond life and death.

## THE GENETIC PROGRAMME

Chomsky employs the terms ‘innate’  
 When speaking of how children learn  
 Their native tongues. The child is believed  
 To have a genetic programme, a sort of blueprint  
 Which comes into use when the child is mature.  
 Well and good. But there’s another blueprint  
 In the child’s genetic programme—  
 That of incomprehension: we understand  
 Neither each other nor ourselves. Moreover,  
 We don’t speak the language of birds.  
 And why should birds be excluded  
 From our genetic programme?

Chomsky also employs the expression ‘Universal Grammar’.  
 (Why don’t we limit our ambitions to ‘District Grammars’?)  
 ‘What reflect the human mind are the things  
 Which all languages have in common.’

Even one language is a litter bin  
 Overflowing with rubbish. (Doesn’t  
 A litter bin reflect the human mind?)

No point in arranging anything alphabetically,  
 Morphologically, logically or otherwise:  
 Someone will come and muddle words up.

**FURY**

Languages are fakes.  
The matter stands differently  
With paintings:  
Some of them *are* fakes  
But they're painted  
By gifted people.  
Languages are created  
By lynch mobs.  
Whatever you write  
Is a murder.

**GOING ON**

Why are we supposed to go on  
While the going is good?  
How do we know it is good or bad?

While going we can look  
Only under our feet  
For fear of tripping over a root;  
We have no opportunity  
To look at landscapes.  
And they portend no good.

And we can hardly look  
Ahead of us.  
What's ahead of us?  
Roots, roots, roots.  
And they're not *our* roots:  
Gnarled roots, square roots, cube roots.

**THE SIGN**

I go daily to the woods  
But trees are foreign to me.  
I muddle up their names  
And sometimes I wonder  
If they have names at all.  
What do they need names for,  
Trees and flowers?  
I don't need a name, do I?  
What does a name  
Add to my substance  
Or to my essence—  
To my body and my soul  
In common parlance?  
Nothing at all.  
Just a password  
That grants access  
To my privacy;  
And a sign permitting  
To identify me  
On the Day of Judgement.

## SELF-CENSORSHIP

An abuse of power.  
 How to apply this notion  
 To myself?  
 (Why should I bully others?)

I can't stare at myself  
 With an almost hypnotic power;  
 I can stare like that at others.

I have the power to know  
 What other people are thinking;  
 I don't know what *I* am thinking.

*The army has been given full powers  
 To take whatever action is necessary  
 To restore order.*

But no army  
 Can restore order within myself.  
 Only God can do that.

*She is continually abusing her authority  
 By getting other people to do things for her.*

I can't abuse my authority  
 By getting myself to do things for myself.

I always abuse the trust  
 I place in myself.

And I can be abused by myself—  
 Mentally.

And emotionally.

**DER TOD UND DAS MÄDCHEN**

How to make words sound  
 Like Schubert's music?  
 In what language could I  
 Achieve this result?  
 But the word 'result'  
 Doesn't sound like Schubert.  
 (It doesn't even sound  
 Like his name.)  
 No amount of time I spend on this poem  
 Will get it nearer to Schubert.  
 And what's the use of writing poetry  
 If you can't make it sound  
 Like his music?  
 Even German words  
 Are foreign to it;  
 Even the words he used for his *lieder*.  
 And poetic meters and rhythms  
 Have a different ring to them;  
 And they dance a different dance—  
 Not his *ländler*, not his *Totentanz*.  
 Falling in love with a maiden  
 Wouldn't serve the purpose either.  
 Nothing short of death  
 Could get me nearer to Schubert.  
*Death and the Poet.*  
 At least the first word  
 Is the same,  
 Though in another language.  
 The first melody.  
 The last harmony.



**TOTENTANZ**

Does every dance

Lead to death?

Is every dance

*A Totentanz?*

Is every gesture

*A Totentanz?*

Every smile,

Every nod,

Every grimace?

You waved me away

With an operatic gesture.

You didn't know

It was our farewell.

The lightning flashed and

Distant thunder rolled.

**A BREAK**

It's just a coffee break;  
Yet I don't drink coffee.

A respite.  
Nothing happens.

This poem means nothing.  
I'll write another one  
In a few minutes.

This poem does mean something.  
It means God is away.

He's not dead;  
He's just away.

Had he been dead  
I wouldn't have written this poem—  
The poem that means nothing.

## A POEM

She's innocent—end of story.  
She *is* innocent or she's *not*,  
But it's not the end of *my* story:  
Long stories have no endings,  
Going on for ever.  
They're novels,  
Proustian novels.  
And in those novels  
You're unfaithful to me.  
At this point Pasternak  
Would have said something  
About the snow,  
About candles.  
I don't like Pasternak,  
But I agree with him  
About the snow  
And about candles—  
About short-lived things.  
Our love.  
The snow-capped peaks  
Of the Himalayas.  
(They're eternal.)  
No one has ever been  
So close to me.  
Never have I been  
So 'high on love'.  
No one has shared my body  
To such an extent;  
My body, my heart, my soul—  
They're synonyms.  
Nobody has ever  
Made me cry

Except you.  
Now I love another woman.  
And you might have loved  
Several men  
Over ten years.  
Let me shorten this poem  
For the future edition  
Of my selected poems.  
Let them print:  
Nobody has ever  
Made me cry  
Except you.  
Or:  
Nobody has ever  
Made me die  
Except you.

**THE SNOW**

Another book. Above it  
There hangs the sky  
And the moon. They keep  
Silent.

Below,  
Under my feet,  
The earth is throbbing with  
Impatience; my work  
Has brought her pulse up  
A beat or two.

The snow  
Has banked up in the centre  
Of my garden.

**CORRECTIONS AND COMMENTS**  
**(JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2002)**

# REPETITIONS

Even Beckett  
 Went on talking  
 And moving  
 In spite of everything.  
 And *everything*  
 Is a sledgehammer argument.

Even *anything*  
 Is a sledgehammer argument.

I don't know  
 What 'nothing' is or means:  
 There's no such thing on earth  
 Or elsewhere.

So Beckett  
 Went on talking  
 And moving.  
 And writing letters.  
 (He wrote one to me.)

I move as well.  
 (I seldom write letters.)  
 I sit down and get up  
 And talk to myself.  
 I write the same poem  
 Over and over again.

Once I met a man  
 Who proposed to write  
 One novel.

According to him,  
Only Dostoevsky could write  
Several novels without  
Repeating himself.

I think that Dostoevsky  
Repeated himself many times.

And his novels have been repeated  
Through the history of Russia.

And his admirer died  
Before he could write anything  
Except a few essays in which  
He repeated himself.

Repetition is the only means of survival;  
And the only cause of death.



**ATONEMENT**

I think I know what a caress is.  
Whenever a woman strokes my body  
I know what she does,  
And I feel it.  
But no caress can atone for the past.

What can atone for the past?  
Certainly not the future  
Which is another past,  
A future past.

Time can't atone for Time.

Even a promise  
Can't atone for the future because  
A promise is a thing of the past.

**CALLING**

There are names

I wish to repeat

Day in, day out.

I do repeat them

But nobody

Answers the call. Perhaps

I don't call anybody.

Perhaps I just call myself.

I don't answer the call.

## THE MAP OF LIFE

I wish to say farewell to Moscow.  
When one says farewell  
Something disappears from the world.  
But Moscow is still on the maps I come across  
In libraries and elsewhere.  
Moscow exists, so do I.  
Farewells mean nothing.  
Whatever you say,  
The world remains the same.  
So do I.  
So do you, whoever you are,  
Whoever I'm in love with at this moment.  
Perhaps I'm not in love.  
I don't even tilt at windmills,  
Which is my favourite occupation.  
I'm just on the map of life.  
And somebody points to me;  
And somebody prods me  
With their finger.  
Somebody lives in me.

**GOOD TIMES**

A rainy day, a glass of champagne;  
Many glasses of champagne.  
And death is around the corner.  
And that corner is around the corner,  
And so on and so forth. That is why  
Death comes so slowly.  
So does life.  
Does it ever come?  
It may appear on the horizon;  
And it may rise  
Above the horizon  
Like the moon.  
So what?  
Horizons are distant;  
So is the moon,  
No matter how often  
You travel to it.

And the sun never rises  
Above the horizon.

But I don't care.  
Why should I care  
About the sun,  
About the horizon?

Why should I care about the people  
Who write to me: 'Everything  
Is a bit depressing at the moment  
But I carry on in the belief  
Good times are just around the corner.'

And above the horizon.

And below the horizon.

They scan the horizon

With their binoculars.

And they see a row of camels

Silhouetted on the horizon.

**GEOMETRY**

Day in, day out.  
Round the clock.  
My friends tell me  
I use these expressions  
Too often.  
They're not expressions—  
Just hours  
I spend in the woods  
And in front of my computer.  
Everyone's life  
Goes round the clock;  
And the clock  
Goes round one's life.  
Either you die  
Or you live for a few years,  
For a few round years,  
For a few triangular years.  
Life may be a square,  
For all I know—  
At least my room  
Is a square-shaped room.  
Is my life square?  
Not at all. My life is  
Round. Or shapeless.  
My life doesn't look  
Like my room; yet  
I spend most of my time  
In my room.

Actually  
I spend most of my time  
In another room—

An adjacent room.

In a long corridor

Leading nowhere.

In a long corridor

Leading somewhere.

(Two parallel lines.)

In a spherical kindergarten.

**WEARINESS**

It's always the other way round:  
London is weary of you,  
Life is weary of you.

My life must be weary of me—  
My life or life in general.  
We are both weary.  
So is the sun  
Which doesn't really shine today  
In spite of cloudless sky.  
So is a sheet of paper  
On which too many words are printed.



**THE EYES**

There are birds that cannot fly.

There are rivers that are dry.

There are eyes that never wink.

**WHIFFS AND WHIMS**

Last night I caught a whiff of perfume  
But nobody turned up.

Thirty years ago  
There was a whiff of revolution in the air,  
The distant threat of civil disobedience.  
Did anything happen? Or was it just  
A whim of the air?

Threats are too distant; so are friends.  
And perfumes dwell in the air  
On their own.

**TO VLADIMIR MARTYNOV**

Our conversations are a luxury.  
And luxury needs comparisons  
To remain what it is—a luxury.

In other words  
Luxury needs mediocrity, just as  
Celebrations need everyday life.

This means  
We cannot meet every day.

How often *can* we meet?

## MY SCHOOL

Every year I used to visit the school  
Where I studied in my childhood.  
Sometimes I just walked around it  
Without going inside.

One day it disappeared.  
Now I just walk around the spot  
Where my school used to stand.  
I walk as long as necessary  
To accomplish my ritual.

**THE DESK**

I've left so many things behind.  
But whenever I turn back  
I see a cluttered desk,  
Nothing else.

I don't even see  
My mother's face.  
And my father  
Sits at the desk  
Writing his works,  
Writing my works:  
My published works,  
My unpublished works  
And the works I've not written,  
Not yet.

**HUMAN ENDURANCE**

How often do they say,  
‘I can’t bear it any longer’?  
But they do bear it: only a few  
Go mad or commit suicide.  
They bear it stoically  
And with great determination.  
They’re a guiding light  
And a shining example  
For generations of sufferers  
Who’ll go around repeating,  
‘I can’t bear it any longer’.  
Repeating this sentence  
And eating ice creams.

**SPACE**

Space is important in poetry.  
There must be a lot of space  
Between a stanza and a stanza,  
Between a flower and a flower,  
Between lines, between words.  
Only letters can remain as they are:  
Rather cramped for space.

I look at my walls.  
I might be a letter  
In my own poem,  
In someone else's poem.

I don't recognise the poem.  
Why didn't I learn it by heart  
In my childhood?

My memory is also  
Cramped for space:  
All the flowers I've ever seen  
Are on my writing desk.

**THE ENDLESS NIGHT**

What's the difference  
Between a long poem  
And a short one?

There are short poems  
Which are smaller  
Than one word, one letter.  
Yet they're endless.

There are long poems  
Which are as endless  
As William Blake's night.

Yet they're as thin  
As a laser beam.



## SOMETHING ABOUT HER

Love is nothing: I easily  
Forget it. Knowledge is  
Nothing: so many saints  
Have proved that.  
Their proofs are nothing.  
And what I'm typing now  
Is nothing; yet it pertains  
To almost everything:  
To the stars, to women,  
To death, to inspiration,  
To love, to scepticism,  
To apathy, to hope.  
How often do I use the words  
'Everything' and 'nothing'?  
All the time. And what I write  
Is actually something in between  
'Nothing' and 'everything'.  
Perhaps it's just 'something':  
Something inarticulate,  
Something vague.  
'*La Nouvelle vague*',  
As the French might put it.  
A new wave in an old sea.  
An old wave, an old man.  
Another wave, another pebble  
Stirred by that wave;  
Another old man  
Stirred into life.  
'Don't just sit there,  
Do something!' I hear.  
Accordingly, I do something.  
And this something

Results in a poem—  
A ludicrous outcome.  
Why do I write?

There's something about her  
Which I find appealing.  
I try to describe it  
And fail pitifully;  
But she triumphs.  
She triumphs.

**FLYING**

Only the butterfly that Lord Henry  
Captures in Lewin's film  
Is not pointless.

It's pointless all the same:  
Butterflies are like humans.  
What's the difference between them?  
Humans can also be captured  
By other humans or gods.

And some humans can fly.

**PURITY**

A landscape you see  
When looking out of the window.

One landscape is enough,  
Provided it's just a landscape.  
No strings attached, no metaphors;  
No stories attached, no morals.  
Just a landscape.

A few strollers can spoil it.

Anything can be spoilt.

Words are immaculate,  
Provided they're just words  
And no one uses them.

## THE RIVER

Doing nothing is an honourable occupation.

People who have nothing to do  
Are busier than clerks and scientists.  
They're always going somewhere.

They cross the same street  
And walk over the same bridge,  
Staring at the same river.

And the river flows  
Along the same banks,  
Under the same bridges.

Why does it flow?  
Is the sea an ultimate goal?  
There must be such a thing  
As a motionless river,  
A suspended river,  
A suspension line.

## A DISNEYHOUSE

There are many rooms in this house,  
And every room is another life.  
Yet all these rooms  
Are part of the house,  
A huge hospitable house.

Walking from one room to another  
Is a pleasant pastime:  
Even the corridors are alive.  
They're crammed with horror stories  
Which look like flowers  
And taste of candy.

And the humans you meet there  
Are soft clockwork toys.  
And they're all like a child  
With a new toy—a huge child.

**RUSSIA**

My last visit to Russia.

Whatever happens in Russia  
Happens inside me.

And I just can't have been  
So awkward,  
So undiscerning,  
So narrow-minded,  
So impertinent,  
So impolite,  
So dull.

At least I don't remember  
Anything of the sort.  
But Russia reminds me of myself.

And I just can't bear myself  
For a long period of time.

## THE INS AND OUTS

Some are quick-witted  
And can talk their way  
Out of difficult situations.  
Others are slow-witted.  
What's the difference?  
The situation is the same.  
There's no way out perhaps;  
Or there are too many ways.  
How to choose the right one?

Anyway  
I don't wish to find myself outside.  
Whatever the situation is,  
I'll stay in—  
Whatever the cost.



**THE METAMORPHOSIS**

The truth is protean  
And, according to Nietzsche,  
Can't be found anywhere.  
Yet Nietzsche and Foucault  
Would have found it  
In your eyes,  
At the bottom of your eyes.  
And on their surface.

But your eyes  
Have lost their truth.  
And I can't accept  
The stripped-down version  
Of your questions and answers,  
Of your monologues.

Every gesture of yours  
Is vulgar now. And your voice,  
Which used to remind me  
Of Saint-Saëns, of his Delilah,  
Is hoarse—as if you were  
On a round-the-clock drinking binge.  
You don't like wine.

What do you like?  
Eurhythmics, cigarettes,  
Coffee, sleeping  
For ten hours at a stretch.

And what about love?  
I'm not even sure  
You love yourself.

Love is a protean feeling.  
I no longer find it in your eyes,  
In your voice.

Love isn't omnipresent.

**ORIGINALS AND FAKES**

1

You can go towards the past  
And you can reach it, provided  
You walk as long as necessary.  
But you can't stay in the past:  
The past is inhospitable.

Only the present is hospitable—  
To some extent.

2

Living in the past.  
What does that mean?  
Meeting the same people,  
Talking in the same way.

Meeting them in the right place  
Which has grown wrong  
Over the intervening years.

The words are wrong as well,  
The same words. Perhaps  
They've never been right.

Only things are right,  
And places—sometimes.

3

The past is overloaded  
With originals: no room left  
For copies. And whatever  
We see for a second time

Is a copy. All our friends  
Are copies of themselves.  
Only strangers are originals—  
Total strangers.

4

No longer can I stay  
In London, let alone  
In Moscow or Paris.

I can only fly to them.  
The air is an original.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Are there any racy books  
Left in the world?

We have seen so much  
Nothing can arouse us from sleep.  
Even a beautiful young woman  
Is a racy old book.  
Sex appeal is a half-torn page.  
Is sex appeal just a matter of anatomy  
These days? Not even  
A matter of anatomy.

And anatomy is an illustration  
In a dictionary.

Luckily for us,  
Our books have lots of  
Beautiful illustrations.

**THE PRISONS**

Fish are more helpless  
Than kittens. Let them adorn  
Japanese gardens,  
Those beautiful prisons.

**THE FRAGMENTS**

I don't think reality lies  
Beyond the objects  
We see around us.

I don't think reality hides  
Inside those objects:  
No use breaking them.

When your heart is broken  
You don't discover the truth—  
Only some fragments of it.

And you're bound to realise  
No reality exists  
Outside these fragments.

## INSPIRATION AND NOSTALGIA

I'm not much of a traveller.  
And what I see through my window  
Doesn't inspire me.

And what I see inside myself  
Doesn't inspire me either.  
Do I need to be inspired?  
What for?

A stanza is a stanza.  
A line is a line.  
Why should they sparkle  
In the light of inspiration?  
Let them remain in darkness.

Or rather  
Let them bathe in a warm glow  
Of nostalgia.

The nostalgia for other lines and stanzas.  
The nostalgia for unwritten poems—  
For the poems that can't be written.

The nostalgia for the ideal poem.



## CHILD-REARING

Creative work is like child-rearing:  
An endless treadmill of feeding,  
Washing and nappy-changing.

And yet the child isn't born yet.  
It's in the making, as it were.

A woman doesn't have  
To do anything special  
When a child grows in her womb.  
Perhaps a poet isn't supposed  
To do anything either.  
Why not let the child grow?

Let the reader wash and feed it.

**A MAGNOLIA***Nell'ombra della magnolia*Montale, *Nel parco*

Why describe a magnolia?

Why bother about its shade?

We haven't seen any magnolia together.

And what I care about is our failure—

The failure of our love, its cause.

It's not to be found in the shade of a magnolia,

Nor in any other shade, however huge.

Nor in any shape or form.

It's shapeless and hence more frightful

Than concrete, material causes.

Thus healthy people die in their sleep.

And we go on living.

Some day we might have a talk

In the shade of a magnolia.

**SELF-SUFFICIENCY**

I used to think every poem  
Encapsulates the world.

Poems are self-sufficient.

I exclude from my poems  
Whatever is extraneous to them.

## THE LENGTH OF A POEM

1

A short poem is useless:  
 It speaks of one moment only.  
 (I don't care whether this moment  
 Is eternity or not.) And I continue  
 To live and think and speak.  
 I am extremely talkative.  
 A short poem can't mirror  
 What I'm talking about.  
 A brief résumé won't do!  
 My poems should be  
 As long as my monologues,  
 Both interior and exterior. My poems  
 Should be as long as my body,  
 Let alone my senses and feelings.  
 And my feelings are very long. At least  
 They're much longer than my short poems.  
 And others also have their feelings  
 And their bodies. Why do I shorten them  
 By writing short poems?  
 (I prefer tall women.)  
 And I often speak of others  
 In my poems. I often  
 Speak of you:  
 A woman I loved,  
 A woman I met.  
 Are you a woman?  
 What does it matter?  
 I speak of you—  
 That's what counts.  
 And why should I speak of you  
 Briefly?

Are you so prosaic?

2

I'd better be silent:

Silence is as long

As the longest poem.

I *can* live without writing.

And poems can live without me—

At least someone else's poems.

(Other poets don't use me

As fodder for their fantasies.)

I can live without writing;

At least I can survive.

And what's the difference

Between living and surviving?

What's the difference

Between a long poem

And a short one?

A short poem lives;

A long one survives.

## ON TRAVELLING

1

You go on a journey. In the evening  
You write about the places you went to  
In your diary. Occasionally  
You speak of your travelling companions  
And the meals you had together.  
You may go so far  
As to enumerate the dishes you ate.

But the aim of a journey  
Is motion itself.  
And nobody speaks of this motion.

(It's not enough to complain  
About motion sickness.)

2

My father used to say  
All monuments are dead  
Unless somebody stands beside them.  
I think it's the other way round:  
Some people look alive  
When standing inside the Pantheon,  
Inside the Ranakpur temple.

3

We don't travel together:  
You're my most exciting journey  
And I can't make two journeys  
At the same time.

# ORIGINALS AND TRANSLATIONS

The more you look at the world  
The more redundant it becomes.

My friend said I should avoid statements  
In the Russian versions of my poems.

Well, I'll exclude the first stanza  
From the Russian version of this poem.

I might even exclude it from my life  
So as to enjoy myself *thoroughly*.

In Arabic the same word designates  
'House' (or 'home') and 'poetry'.

The world is not a poem—far from it.  
It is perhaps a novel or a long story.

I'll exclude the preceding stanza  
From the Russian version as well.

What will stand in the Russian version?  
'Home is synonymous with poetry.'

That is also a statement, isn't it?  
Besides, Russian life is not poetic.

A 'long story' will remain in Russian.  
A never-ending story of desolation.

(The more I look at Russia  
The more clichéd it becomes.)

From now on I'll write only poems.  
And poems are never redundant,  
However long you may look at them.



**SECURITY**

Confucius advises us  
To withdraw from the world  
If our opinions differ  
From those of others.

Accordingly  
I withdrew from the world—  
Into myself.

But some of my opinions  
Were different from others.

Accordingly  
I withdrew from myself—  
Into myself.

I kept on  
Withdrawing into myself—  
Deeper and deeper.

I must have reached  
The bottom of my being  
A long time ago.

A long time ago  
I must have got  
Beyond myself.

All in all,  
The road to a secure future  
Is strewn with awkward obstacles.

By now  
I must be far from myself.

And I count on others  
For love and security.

## A ROLLING BALL

Adam and Eve set the ball rolling  
Under the Tree of Knowledge,  
Under the Bush of Ignorance.

No wonder I'm subjected  
To pain and suffering.

But beside original sin  
There's also eternal laughter:  
Adam was a versatile man.  
(And the world is so funny.)

Adam and Eve. As actors,  
They would have been happy  
Both in horror films  
And in TV comedies.

Whatever poets say,  
Life is not theatre.

And she wasn't an actress,  
Although playacting  
Was her favourite pastime.

Why do I always bring her into it?

Because I still love her.

Because she told me once:  
'Only after my death  
Will you realise  
What I meant to you.'

Because she told me once:  
'It wouldn't take very much  
To break you.'

I'm not an actor.

I'm a toy perhaps—  
Like Adam.

## THE UNQUENCHABLE TEAM SPIRIT

So many books are devoted  
To bonding human beings  
Into a closely-knit team.

So many people  
Look like me  
As if they were  
My brothers and sisters.

They are not.

An optical illusion.

Even I don't look like myself:  
I'm not my own brother.

I'm not my own keeper.

## A HABIT

I don't think I have a goal in life.  
And if I had one, I wouldn't do anything  
To achieve it: a goal worthy of its name  
Can't be achieved—within the bounds  
Of a human life. And all other goals  
Don't deserve one's attention.

To get up in the morning  
Is a goal of sorts.

To fall in love isn't a goal  
But a habit of the heart.

**ROLLING IN THE VOID**

Your absence affects  
Neither my heart nor my thoughts.  
I still think about you—exactly as I did  
When you walked by my side.  
But often I don't think about anything.  
And the absence of thoughts  
Makes my heart grow fonder  
Of absence as such.  
It's better to roll in sand than in money.  
It's better to roll in the void—  
Like a planet.

And planets  
Don't grow fonder of comets.  
They don't notice their absence.

**THE ENDLESS NIGHT II**

Can we make up for lost time,  
For anything lost?  
Time's never lost anyway.  
Something's done all the time:  
Good actions, bad actions,  
The mixture of both.  
Many things are done  
Beyond good and evil.  
Nothing's done beyond Time.  
(The texture of Time is so dense  
We can't see beyond it.)  
I also have done my bit, otherwise  
I wouldn't be here.  
And what's Time for?  
It secures my presence somewhere;  
Or my absence.  
And I don't lose anything  
By being where I am.  
Why should I walk around  
The Taj Mahal,  
In the moonlight,  
In the company of a beautiful woman?  
(The moon is full.)  
Why should I turn my life  
Into a honeymoon?



## THE CODES

1

Each person's genetic code  
Is said to be unique  
Except in the case of  
Identical twins.

There are a great many  
Identical twins in the world—  
Identical dozens, identical millions.

And even those  
Whose genetic codes are unique  
Seem to have lost them.

It's so easy  
To lose a genetic code—  
One conversation is enough,  
One handshake,  
One glance.

2

Does Time have a genetic code—  
Any code at all?

As a child, I visualised Time  
In the shape of a middle-aged man  
Walking steadily along our garden path—  
Down to the river.

Time never goes down.

Do days and months have their codes?

Love can obliterate them.

And anguish.

And boredom.

## GHOSTS

In Japanese plays and films  
Men often fall in love with ghosts.  
A late princess comes back to life.  
What does she look for on earth?  
The pleasures she didn't know  
In her lifetime. What pleasures  
Do we know in our lifetime?  
Only ghosts can offer us pleasures;  
Only weightless, impalpable things  
Can invite us to a dance.  
But we are afraid of ghosts.  
We are afraid they might  
Drag us off to death.  
But death is just another ghost  
Dancing so beautifully.

## HAPPINESS

Only the happy know  
What happiness is, but they never  
Talk about it, being engrossed  
In their felicity. Indeed  
Why should they analyse their smiles?  
(Why should *I* analyse their smiles?)

The unhappy often talk to us  
About their miseries. And they think  
Happiness is just the opposite  
Of sorrow: they don't know  
The first thing about happiness which is neither  
The opposite of sorrow nor its absence.  
(If given a million, a hungry person  
Just goes and has a meal.)

Happiness is in a class by itself.  
(I can't stand confined spaces.)

## VISITORS

'Legion live in us,' says Pessoa.  
Sometimes I get the feeling  
Nobody lives in me—  
Not even myself.

But most of the time  
I'm inhabited  
By lots of people:  
My former selves,  
Roman emperors.

My legions march through France  
And into Britain.

But what can I conquer?  
I can't be defeated either.  
And it's better to be defeated  
Than to lie in one's bed,  
Complaining about the world,  
About the spread of yob culture.  
(Am I also inhabited  
By those loud-mouthed yobs  
With shaven heads?)

At least my former selves  
Have been defeated many times.

**FLOWERS**

Only Ophelia might have taught me  
The names of flowers.  
Why should I learn them from a dictionary?

Even gardens are cold:  
They haven't suffered,  
Nor have they been in love.

## OUTLINES

The mountain was visible only in outline.  
I interrupted my walk and returned to the hotel.  
I never saw the mountain clearly,  
That mountain near Lucerne;  
It reminded me of a Chinese painting  
I'd come across at the National Palace Museum.

I was planning to write a long story;  
I did an outline and was about  
To flesh out the plot and characters.  
However, I changed my mind  
Keeping the outline only.

**STATUS QUO**

Rules should be observed,  
But they change all the time.

There are people  
Who observe the same rules  
Through their lives.

They do things by the rules,  
But the rules are different now.  
They don't know that.

Even games are different now;  
They play the same games.

And their games are not games:  
They are rites.  
And rites do not change.

They do not change either:  
The same eyes have looked at me  
For years and years.  
For centuries.



**THE END OF THE WORLD**

The end of the world is out of reach:

The earth is neither a rectangle,

Nor a sheet of paper.

Besides, I'm feeling a bit

Under the weather.

## THE PROPERTIES OF WATER

The Seine reminds me of the Neva.

The Neva reminds me of Lethe.

Water is the same everywhere.

And everywhere water helps us

Either forget or remember.

Or both.

We often forget ourselves

When looking at our reflections.

## THE FIFTH ACT

I used to laugh at the communist leaders—  
Those grey-suited doddering old men  
Talking of the future.  
Now I too am a bit unsteady on my feet  
And I talk of the future;  
But I talk of it disparagingly.  
Never mind—I *talk* of it.  
Only a few ecologists and green campaigners  
Talk of the future nowadays.

They paint the future in green;  
The communists paint it in red.  
I paint it in grey and black.  
I wish I could paint it in blue.  
Why doesn't the future look  
Like Fra Angelico's paintings?

But his colours are independent  
Of our aspirations, of our free will.

Actually I've nothing against the Green Party:  
A leafy green stage would impart  
A feeling of tranquillity  
To the fifth act of the tragedy.

**MY BLOOD**

I closed all the windows  
To shut out the din of the traffic.  
I heard it despite the closed windows.  
Was it the traffic I heard?  
I might have heard my room  
Or my blood.  
I'm not interested  
In macrocosm and microcosm.  
The world is not reflected  
In my body, in my brain:  
They reflect something else.  
And I'm not likely ever to find out  
What they reflect.  
Perhaps I've always heard  
Only my blood.

**LOSING THE SOLAR SYSTEM**

*Après tant de soleils qui ne reviendront plus.*

Leconte de Lisle, *Les hurleurs*

More and more often  
I have an itch to lose something.

In my childhood I played with planets,  
Taking them out of my pockets  
And putting them back again. Now  
I wouldn't take them out of my pockets.  
I would undress and hide my suit  
In an old trunk. Or I might  
Shed them in the woods,  
Like leaves: there are many holes  
In my pockets.

Ants might settle on Jupiter.

I wouldn't mind  
Dropping your photograph somewhere.  
Let a handsome young man  
Pick it up.

## CORRECTIONS AND COMMENTS

The Book of Life. Its every page  
Has many corrections and comments on it;  
The original text is virtually unreadable.  
Why should we *read* the Book of Life?  
Let us *live* it!  
But we correct our life too often, making it respond  
To our fluctuating needs  
And to the stock exchange.  
And our life becomes  
A comment on itself.

**THE DAWN**

Another sleepless night.

Waiting for the dawn.

The dawn will break

Even if the sun doesn't rise.

The birds have woken already.

(Nothing prevents *them* from sleeping.)

And the clouds are already prepared

For the rosy fingers

That will touch them shortly.

I'm not prepared for the day to come.

Another day. In every point similar

To yesterday. Yet different somehow.

I'm not prepared for this difference,

For these subtle nuances.

I'm not even prepared

For an exact replica of yesterday.

And yesterday

Was a happy day,

More or less.

## GETTING OLD

My German friend told me: 'Last year  
I suddenly felt  
At one with the world. I was in love  
With everybody and everything. I realised  
I was getting old.'

In the long run  
We get used to everything.

And everything  
Gets used to us.

Everything, not everybody.

Let's hope humans are things.  
And vice versa.

### COMMENTARY:

Humans are not things in themselves:  
They're just things.  
And things are all-too-human.



**WALKING AROUND**

Nature won't remember me after my death:  
Many poets have enlarged  
Upon nature's propensity for amnesia.  
But even in my lifetime  
Nature doesn't care about me.  
She cares about the pyromaniacs  
Who set fire to the woods.  
She cares about the industrialists  
Who pollute lakes and rivers.  
But she doesn't care about someone  
Who just walks here and there.  
Even my shoes  
Leave no imprints on the ground.

**THE END OF THE ROAD**

'It is the end, it is the end, my soul.'

A quotation, a misquotation.

I don't remember what it is.

I just remember the end.

And the soul must remember

It will never come

To the end of the road:

There's no road for it—

Just one point.

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**Dictations**

(2004)

## TRANSLATIONS

I suppose at this stage  
 I'm only fit to translate my own stuff  
 From one language to another.

One thought,  
 Another thought. How many  
 Thoughts are there?  
 No matter: all of them  
 Await translations which are in need of  
 Translations.

My job  
 Won't be finished. It was  
 Begun, however.

I'm translating  
 My impulses into the thoughts  
 Which are couched in English.

No, I've skipped one stage—  
 That which permits a naked thought  
 To don a linguistic garment.

And then I translate my English  
 Into my English,  
 My joy  
 Into my anguish.

And then I translate my anguish  
 Into my English.

And then again my English into my English.

**THE TUNE**

Why was Michelangelo so afraid  
Of death? Was he really  
Afraid of it or did he wish to explore  
Eternity which doesn't yield its treasure until  
You get involved  
With death? Somebody said  
You can't hope unless you know despair.  
Have I known it? Perhaps not.  
But I don't need hope so I can do  
Without despair  
Or without eternity. Can I? What do I know about  
My needs and wishes? Time comes and  
Goes; what remains is a tune  
I can't hear.

**THIS MORNING**

This morning might have been  
Another morning  
Or an afternoon or a stretch of Time  
Unrelated to mornings  
And evenings. But is there  
Any stretch of Time unrelated to mornings and  
Evenings? What about Cleopatra's smile?  
Was it related to anything except  
The man she was looking at? Anyway  
I can't turn this morning and your smile into lifelong  
Happiness.

**IN MEMORY OF MICHAEL MEZHLUMOV**

Eternity can't rely on our  
Memory that enlists  
The aid of paper, tapes  
And discs. Librarians  
Are entrusted with immortality.

The genes of your pupils  
Take care of it.

I had no chance to say  
I loved you.

Love  
Doesn't always need  
Words. A nocturne  
Is enough.

Love  
Doesn't need life.

I am your fingers now.



**THE FAREWELL**

This time it's over.

Nothing is ever finished  
So we'll take up where  
We left off.

When?  
In four hundred years.

You won't be different:  
You do not seem  
To lose your beauty.

I'll grow older and wiser.

**A REPLY TO NABOKOV**

*There's one misprint—not that it matters much:  
Mountain, not fountain. The majestic touch.  
Nabokov, *Pale Fire**

Once more I heard the word 'damned'  
On TV. Was it in German?  
*Verflucht.*  
In all languages this word sounds  
Alike. It doesn't sound at all  
As a matter of fact. It's the absence of sounds  
Strikes you under the circumstances.  
You hear nothing; yet  
You know you're damned.  
A rhyme hammers the message home—  
A lame rhyme to boot.

**YOUR DISAPPEARANCE**

How long will my thoughts dwell on your  
Disappearance, my Albertine  
*Disparue?* You might be dead  
Or married:  
One gets married so easily.  
You might have left the country  
Because you couldn't  
Stand the pace. How should I  
Know? What I do know is Haydn's quartets  
Resound in my flat. I said  
I wished to hear them on my deathbed.  
This armchair  
Might be my deathbed.

**HOMAGE TO CAVAFY**

On the phone I didn't say what I felt  
During our last parting. Was it  
Real? Time and Space  
Might have stopped. Did they? I just  
Left Moscow  
And you stayed there. That's how  
It always happens: I go back and you stay where  
You are—in our motherland. We never  
Quarrel, although we may  
Criticise each other. Nothing matters when  
We're together.

Everything goes  
The other way round.

Even this way brings me  
To your jokes, your  
Dogmatism.

**ALL IS WELL**

Just another complaint.  
Not a different point from which  
One could see the universe  
*Differently.*  
No vantage points.  
Just another statement which doesn't differ  
From what I said  
Yesterday and last month.  
I don't remember what I said  
Last month. Was it different from what  
I'm saying now? I might have been  
Different when playing  
With a box of matches on  
Windowsills. I *was*  
Different in my teenage years.

'All is well' doesn't sound  
Convincing, yet all is well.

All is well.

**THE MOMENT**

1

Another moment. It stays and  
Has no wish to depart. Is it  
A moment then? Every moment  
Is fleeting. But this one  
Doesn't disappear beyond a pillar or another  
Thought: there are no thoughts,  
No pillars. There's a pillar in a desert  
And a man beside it.  
I don't know him.

2

The reader's  
Attention span  
Is poor today:  
A few seconds.  
There are no other  
Times or seconds  
Or millennia.  
Should I split him  
In two, in three?  
What about  
The pillar?  
Let it stand.

## THE DEFINITION OF POETRY

1

Like Hölderlin, you look out of the window  
 And write a poem. But there are no poems outside—  
 Only the grass, some trees,  
 A few passers-by paying no attention  
 To poetry. They're outside it. I am inside.  
 Am I?

What do I see inside poetry which has its rhymes and reasons?  
 A few beggars who tend to play on one's feeling of guilt  
 And compassion by having a baby  
 Or a young child with them. A few passers-by;  
 They don't care about me.

Yet poetry is neither compassion nor  
 A feeling of guilt. What is it?  
 Why should I define  
 Poetry?  
 Let it define itself.

2

So many poets have come before me. I write  
 What I'd have written without them;  
 Their lives don't concern me. Every word is  
 The first word or the last. Some poets  
 Might have been born, but poetry doesn't  
 Depend on them, on their  
 Inspiration and leisure hours,  
 On their mistresses, on the wine  
 They drank.

3

Rhyme and meter are the framework of poetry  
And poetry is ineluctable: if no one  
Wrote poems they would be written by  
A ghost poet, the Holy Ghost. Jesus Christ wrote  
Only a word or two on the sand that didn't preserve  
His literary heritage. Yet it has been preserved by Time which  
Always destroys something. Time  
Doesn't destroy poetry. One might say  
Time itself is poetry. It is not. There are too many stories  
In it: long stories, short stories.  
And only one poem.



## THE ABSOLUTE

A small amount of happiness. Why does it  
Have to be great? How can we measure  
Our state of mind? A stream flowing downward  
Doesn't know whether it's happy  
Or not.  
Nor does it know where it flows. And a salmon struggling upstream  
Has another duty to fulfil. I sit in my room and have  
No idea whether  
I'm going upward or downward. Perhaps I just remain  
Where I am, happy to realise I've been left  
In peace. But my peaceful mind  
Struggles upstream. Does it? I'm tired.  
I can't smile in the face of adversity. Besides,  
The direct contemplation of the Absolute  
Is difficult.

**IN MEMORY OF ALEXANDER NEMCHINA**

A perfect crime is so perfect  
It can't be envisaged in everyday life  
Which is full of inaccuracies. A perfect life is also  
Out of the question: we fall in love,  
Out of love, and only a straight line or a sphere reflects  
Our idea of perfection. We don't know what  
Perfection is due to our ignorance  
Of the basic laws of the universe. I know what it means  
To lose a dear friend. This loss is perfect  
In terms of grief and melancholy. I suppose  
My life wouldn't be harmonious  
Without a perfect balance between gains and  
Losses. In other words,  
It wouldn't be perfect without your death.

## THE CEMETERY

A true poet writes his poem somewhere  
And shows it only to his  
Friends to be recognised in a narrow  
Circle. But what's admired?  
A word, an idea, an image. The rest is  
Forgotten. But my love is not  
Tristan's love and I'm older than Romeo. Even  
Our quarrels are not *their* quarrels.  
Actually  
They quarrelled very seldom, letting death take care  
Of everything. We'll just walk along  
The Moscva River  
Until we reach the *Novodevichye* Cemetery  
Where only illustrious people  
Are buried.

## NIGHTS AND DAYS

Another night.  
I'm not transfigured. Transfiguration—just a word,  
A piece of music. Schoenberg's  
*Verklärte Nacht*. A memory,  
Nothing but a memory which is enough  
To transfigure me. Why talk to anybody  
Far into the night?  
Why share my bed with a woman who doesn't  
Care about this night? She cares  
About me. That's not enough: I'm nothing in comparison  
With this night, any night.  
Karajan's last concert in Paris. The *Verklärte Nacht*.  
Every day is a concert—the *Verklärte Tag*.  
Night and days transfigured. Why should I do it  
On my own?

## YOUR DRESS

I read you more and more, not caring much  
About your identity. Words come  
Automatically, 'My Lord',  
'My Beloved'.  
Time is flowing past  
And there are no words in it except  
'Time'.

And Time isn't a word but a number of  
Letters strewn around my life.  
If woven together, they might make  
A temporary shelter.

They are  
Embroidered on your dress.

**THE CARPET**

A carpet bought in Cappadocia. A hand-made  
Carpet. Does it look  
Like the hands that made it? Or like  
The owner of the shop,  
The rocks around? Like the frescoes I saw  
Inside the rocks? Does it look  
Like myself? After all *I* chose it. A gene,  
An amoeba—  
That's what it looks like. Life  
Might have begun in this carpet.

### A PINK TIE

Why are they so keen on races? In Hollywood movies

Horses run and whips are cracked.

In everyday life

There are horses and whips

But nobody wins. A lawn mower

Moves beyond a window. No horses canter

Down the road. Passers-by stop to watch

The funeral procession.

It's not comme il faut to wear a pink tie to a funeral.

**THE HANGING GARDENS**

Had I been born in Alexandria  
I might have spoken of the Greeks  
Or Egyptians; of Caesar and  
Cleopatra. I speak of churches, of the courtyard  
I used to wander about  
In my youth, of you who deserve not a poem  
But lifelong worship. My poems are more exciting than  
My caresses: the older one grows  
The better one writes. All these equations  
Don't help me understand what's going on. Perhaps  
Nothing goes on: nobody can rely on  
Time,  
On history. A courtyard will do—the courtyard I used to moon  
Around. Four benches,  
Some people playing dice, a terrace  
In midair—  
Like the Hanging Gardens.



**YOUR DANCE**

Why add something to a poem which is short  
And self-sufficient? In Russia they often speak of those  
Who don't need anybody. They're self-sufficient,  
Are they? I might add myself  
To some poems and essays: they're not  
Self-sufficient. I might add myself to men and women,  
To the flowers in our garden,  
To the sky. You danced  
So beautifully on a stone in the woods  
Your dance was self-sufficient. Yet it needed my  
Presence. And I need your dance,  
Your half-awoken words. My poems are short; your life  
Prolongs them beyond their bounds,  
Beyond anything I can think of.

## AN ESSAY

When was it composed? Before or after  
The major turning point in our author's existence?  
Did our author unearth these stanzas  
From the dust of his archives,  
From the bowels of his desk, or was his masterpiece  
An ordinary on-the-spot report?  
Was our author a verist, like Puccini and  
Mascagni? He suffered a lot and translated his sufferings  
Into rhymes and rhythms so I might  
Understand them  
And carry their message through Space and Time.  
Is the poem prophetic?  
Is it realistic? These rhythms and rhymes  
May have been surrealistic at first. But they came true  
And grew real. Unconsciously and unwillingly,  
Our author held the mirror up to nature.

### THE RELIABLE PAST

The past is unavoidable and yet it's difficult  
To come to terms with it. The sounds you heard thirty years  
Ago are the same, providing  
You listen to birds or Beethoven's *Fifth*. There are  
Sounds you haven't heard. There are other  
Sights. If you run your fingers gently down  
Your friend's cheek, feeling the surface of his skin,  
You find neither the same cheek, nor  
The same skin. But there are memories you can  
Rely upon: a woman  
Getting out of a car, her legs revealed,  
A poem you memorised as a child, a garden  
Where you lost a toy, your first  
And last teacher,  
The hunger you suffered from when trying  
To keep your pocket money for  
Something 'important', unanswered  
Phone calls and love letters, a gypsy foretelling  
Your happiness, your immortality.

### PASSING A TORCH

I was born when someone died. I don't know this man  
Or woman. Several people might have died  
At the moment of my birth. Passing torches is a ritual we take part in  
Without knowing it. I know I've handed down something  
To future generations; yet my poetry  
Remains unknown and I look at this sunrise from a different  
Point of view—from my window by which  
No one's standing except myself. It's enough  
To die in a hospital, at home, in a car crash, or walk in our park where  
I come across many couples and the women who roll  
Perambulators and shake rattles. It's enough to walk by, listening  
To Yeats' poems. Those women never say,  
'This man's been to Hell.' They often  
Look in the opposite direction or talk to their babes  
Who go on crying, screaming  
Or sleeping.

## NORMALITY

You talk to some people and they don't  
 Understand you. You know  
 Something's wrong. They're smiling.  
 That's normal. Lively behaviour  
 Is normal for a four-year-old child. What's normal  
 For a fifty-six-year-old man?  
 Talking to those who laugh and say everything's all right;  
 Talking to nobody. Everything's normal.  
 People have a longing for normality; so does nature.

A cherry tree grows outside my window. Why did it choose  
 My window? It's a normal working  
 Day. The sky's normal too. In the eighties  
 We often met in Munich and Paris to talk about our past  
 And the present of Russia. We discussed  
 Brezhnev's senility  
 And Gorbachev's reforms. Our ideas  
 Of what was going on in Russia  
 Had little in common with the actual events.

Another glass of wine. You don't call me;  
 Your line's engaged. Another film on TV; a beautiful  
 Actress. Another *Götterdämmerung*. Another poem by Czeslaw  
 Milosz. Another sleepless night.  
 Working such long hours has drained me. Another  
 Nightingale.

**THE HORSE**

(Homage to W. B. Yeats)

The sun, the moon. They're not symbols.  
What are they? The light you need to read something,  
To meet somebody.

Xerxes punished the water  
Which had destroyed one of his bridges. Why not blame the air  
For your shortness of breath? Why not punish Time  
For the brevity of life? How to punish it? Space might be given  
500 lashes: after all, it prevents us  
From reaching the stars.

Time is elusive. No point  
In breaking watches or trying to stop the sun in its tracks.  
Indifference is our only weapon.  
Cast a cold eye on the past, present and future, on  
Habits and symbols.

A horse, a tower. You ride  
As far as the horizon to reach a tower where  
Somebody awaits you.

No one  
Awaits you anywhere. So you go on riding until  
Time is forgotten.

## THE MASKS

Everyone wears a mask. But where are  
These masks? I've never seen any of them—  
Only faces. The only mask you wear is yourself:  
A few smiles hiding pain, fatigue or  
Indifference. You drive a car and salute a driver who  
Brakes and lets you through. You salute an old  
Lady whom you've met only once. King Arthur  
Is a shadowy figure but why should you care about him?  
A few pages in a book. A few miles to go.  
There's nothing beyond except a hotel  
Where you can stay overnight, watching a film—  
One of the very few art films  
To break through to the mass audience. You're alone.  
Nothing breaks through.  
You put on the mask of sleep.  
A sleepless night.

## STATUES AND TOMBSTONES

They talk about some heroes who live  
In a book one can borrow from  
A library. I wish I could borrow my life from  
A pedestrian. Why create  
All this nonsense? It's been created many times.  
But it's a nonsense to suggest life is  
Nonsensical. Life has a meaning, they say. (I feel it  
Sometimes.) You can borrow its meaning from  
A book or a brook, from a sunset,  
From a phone call, from a nonsense poem,  
From a nursery rhyme, from a piece of music,  
From an anonymous letter. I wish I could borrow it  
From a statue.

They push you around;  
Your statue gets broken. So does  
Your tombstone.

They don't leave you  
In peace; yet they talk about peace.  
You can't borrow peace from them.



**TRYING TO FORGET YOU**

Was our love a pleasure? Perhaps. And pleasures  
Don't think: they never see themselves  
From the outside. (Nor does love.) They never judge  
Their own behaviour. It's easy to say,  
'Pleasures never behave—only sufferings are  
Wise.' Are they? It depends on one's point  
Of view that is as changeable as the weather in Moscow.

If one looks at a mandala, one's point of view  
Doesn't shift ground:  
There's no view but a point, one  
Point: a face, an arm,  
A triangle. Not your face but  
An abstract face.

I'll meditate on the face of a pedestrian,  
On triangles and pentagons—  
To be on the safe side.

My wallpaper  
Has a geometric design of overlapping circles.

**A MONASTERY**  
(Homage to Pink Floyd)

Mountains are plains and plains  
Mountains. Last night  
I was watching a game on TV—one of those games  
Where three or four answers are given  
To the same question. The candidate must choose  
The right one. ‘What did our forefathers build  
To reach God?’ Among the answers they suggested was  
‘The road to Damascus’. Why not? This road is  
The Tower of Babel. What’s the difference between  
A tower and a well, darkness and light?  
A saint on a white horse, a devil  
On a black horse. All colours look alike to those  
Who look beyond colours.

I got lost in Moscow, driving  
My friend’s car. All of a sudden I saw  
A few churches and a huge wall  
Which separates black and white horses,  
Plains and mountains.

## DICTATIONS

How often do we take dictations? I couldn't bear them  
At school. Don't I take one when playing  
Beethoven? Any memory is a dictation. (Any sight,  
Any thought.) The mistakes I make  
When recalling our meetings! I saw a dictation  
In my dream. Was it a dream?  
Something in between: I was half-awake. I saw  
The primary school I went to. I was taking  
A dictation. A happy memory, a happy morning. The past  
Can't be regained, redeemed, sublimated. You just  
Take dictations. The present creates itself or yourself.  
Why should I create anything? Let me fall back  
On what I know already, on these episodes which are  
More than episodes. They're not the past either. They're my  
Life—the only life I want to live. Sitting in our classroom,  
Looking at the girl who scribbles something  
On the blackboard. Looking at her legs, at her arms.  
At her dance.

## HOMAGE TO HERODOTUS

What can we learn from history? Xerxes loved  
His brother's wife and shortly after fell in love with her  
Daughter, his brother's daughter. In my childhood  
I fell in love with an actress and her daughter;  
They lived next door. At the time I knew  
Nothing about Xerxes except he'd lost a few battles.

I lost my battles: neither the actress nor her daughter  
Reciprocated. What can I learn from Xerxes?  
Should I fall in love with daughters only? Or with my brothers'  
Wives? I've no brothers. And I'm used to losing  
Battles. So I'm thinking of his warriors  
Who fought the Greeks with conspicuous valour. They loved  
Beauty and perished for the sake of wrong ideas. Pausanias said,  
'The Persians had everything but came to Greece  
To rob us of our poverty.' What can I learn from Pausanias?  
Should I leave the past alone?  
Have I got everything?

## A MONUMENT

You danced on a stone in the woods. Should I  
Remove this stone from the path where I walk every day  
To put it on my terrace? A monument  
To our love. How you danced on it! A TV host said,  
'I'm paid for not thinking.' He meant he couldn't disclose the answer  
To the question he'd asked. I wish I couldn't think  
When looking at this stone. A mandala. I wish I could hear  
A Mahler melody. Many questions have been  
Asked; I've answered some of them. This stone is the answer to  
One of those questions; or to a question I know nothing  
About. It's something between a question  
And an answer. It might be the truth which is always between  
A question and an answer. It might be the Bolshoi  
Or a disco. It's just you. Rodin's *La danseuse*. I saw you  
In his museum's garden, walking around.  
His sculpture.

**THE TWILIGHT**

'I wish I were a big question, not a great  
Thought,' said a Japanese poet. There are many questions  
In my works, but I wonder if I'm a question myself.  
This dawn is a question; my mood is an answer. I wish  
My state of mind was open-ended. Every answer is  
An end or the beginning of the end. But there's no beginning  
Beyond it. There's such a thing as a definitive answer  
And this answer is neither a big question  
Nor a great thought—just a small answer to everything:  
A dawn, a twilight.

**AN OBJECT LESSON**

The longer you live

The more you cling to life. All pleasures are gone:

Sex, wine, *menus dégustation*. Yet something remains: a thought,

A ludicrous desire, a memory. And this memory makes death

Intolerable. Another lesson. Why not fall back on bad

Memories? Who needs them? Who needs

Such a lesson? An old town. A walk through the woods.

A glass of water in a café. A friendly talk. A few young men

Beyond the windows.

## OUR PARK

One doesn't have to read the Ten Commandments  
To know what's wrong and right. Murder isn't  
Easy: selecting your victim, carrying  
A knife or a revolver in your pocket. Your hands aren't  
Strong enough to strangle anybody.

### People

Fall out of windows. Why bother about their lives,  
Their deaths? Everything's taken care of.  
Let's adopt a sensible, middle-of-the-road policy.

No one falls out of the windows. Life  
Goes on. No one marries their mother  
Or kills their father.

### Children

Play in our park, falling now and then.



## HOMAGE TO EGON SCHIELE

You can't play with Death if he has no wish  
To play with you.

Yet Socrates  
Played with him, putting forward  
The arguments that refuted nothing, not even  
Life.

The game of chess,  
The game of bowls, the game of  
Skittles. You can lose  
Or win. There are other games.

A tree  
Can't win or lose: it knows nothing about  
Games. Nor can a work of art lose a game—or anything  
For that matter.

Schiele's watercolours and drawings  
Meet in the void. Why should they  
Play together?

## HELEN OF TROY

Old men living with young women.  
How do they live with them? Do they live with them  
At all? What does 'living with someone' mean?  
Let's forget dictionaries: they talk of  
Ideal people. We're not ideal and there's nothing wrong  
With our lives except they don't fit into  
Dictionaries or public opinion  
Or common sense. They're normal all the same.

Beauty is what it was a long time ago. Helen of Troy  
Is still in our midst, walking around, wearing  
A mini skirt. She smiles and crosses the street  
In front of you; or crosses her legs. She may sit next to you  
In a café. What does it matter how old  
You are? You're young enough to admire her  
Beauty and invite her to a restaurant. She might  
Refuse of course. That's what they often do, those young  
Ladies. Still, you may have your dinner  
In that restaurant alone. You may dream of Helen:  
No one will ever forbid you to dream of her.

## THE VICTORY

When everything is lost, everything is won. How often  
Did I hear this maxim? Many philosophers  
Speak of the coincidence of the opposites. Actually  
Nothing meets either in Space or in Time which remain  
Impervious to meetings. And when I do meet  
Someone or something, it happens  
On the spur of the moment. And this moment isn't subject  
Either to Time or Space. It's subject to  
Itself. It can be victorious; not very often. What about  
An hour? Can it be victorious?

I spent an hour at an exhibition devoted  
To an emperor of China. I don't remember his name.  
An enlightened tyrant interested in mathematics,  
Poetry, astronomy and calligraphy.  
He was victorious. Was he?  
What's victory? Four is more than zero?  
The earth is spherical? A beautiful sentence?

A girl I didn't like. Suddenly she burst into a song.  
I liked her voice. I didn't know she had  
Such a beautiful voice.

## HOMAGE TO JOHANN STRAUSS

The film I saw after a sleepless night: Strauss  
Refused to compose an operetta. Then he changed  
His mind. A strange libretto; a man  
Trying to seduce a woman who is his wife.  
Vampires. He didn't like it at first but he liked the woman  
Who brought it.

Where are the people who inspire  
Composers and poets? Why don't they ask us to do  
Anything? Coming and stripping their  
Clothes off. They make love to us. They don't  
Ask for anything: either for a poem or a sacrifice. They may ask  
For money. They put their clothes on and  
Depart. No poems await them on their return:  
No poems, no operettas.

A bat flew around my room  
Back in the fifties. I was scared to death. Where  
Was it? At the Black Sea. Did it ask for  
Anything?

**IN MEMORY OF BORIS PERGAMENSCHIKOV**

Why are they so fond of telling stories?  
What's there to tell? Why not get straight to the point?  
What's the point? What's the point in getting  
Straight to the point? The sky is blue,  
The wine is red. My friend died a week ago.  
Another friend of mine  
Spoke about his death. Is it a story  
Or a point? Why play with words? In another language  
There are no points. This poem can't be  
Translated. What could I say  
In Russian?

I'd have spoken to him in Russian. Now  
I speak to myself in English. The word 'together' crops up  
When we recall the dead.

We could have played Mozart, Schubert, Brahms and talked  
Far into the night. This night is far away; so are  
The days we could have spent together. Only words  
Are near: 'together', 'night', 'days'.  
I'm used to living with them. I'm used  
To playing with them. What do we play? Mozart, Schubert,  
Brahms, Beethoven, Haydn.

## YOUR BATHROOM

I remember what I find  
In my memory. What do I find in it? Your body. What else  
Could I find in my life? Your body in your  
Bathroom. I remember every curve, every nuance,  
Every melody. Do I take part  
In your beauty?

                    The weather is fine. I might  
Take part in it if I went  
Out.

                    I won't go out;  
Nor will you go out.

I'll die in peace.

**THE SHOW**

I saw you in a classroom. I should have married you  
At once, but I was reading Nietzsche; I had  
Other aspirations. Now I see you in my dreams  
Which know what's right. I was wrong;  
So many things went wrong.

I must end this poem. You remain  
Outside it. I must go on.

A dream.

Your body in minute  
Detail, moving in time  
To music.

## AFTER A VISIT TO VIENNA

My trip to Vienna. I saw  
Museums, exhibitions, and realised Kandinsky painted  
A few Moscow cityscapes after becoming  
An abstract painter.

He didn't paint Tatiana or  
Natalya. Why didn't he paint  
The women I loved? He was Russian. For a while  
He lived in Russia. Why didn't he paint  
Your figure, your face, the way you moved? A painting  
Can depict a movement, can't it? Why didn't he  
Depict your voice? A painting can depict  
One's voice. Why didn't he paint my  
Past, my dreams, my despondency, the anatomy  
Of my melancholy?

Why didn't Schiele paint  
My skeleton?

He might have painted your skeleton.



## THE NOSE

What can be lost? Everything. The woman  
I'm speaking to on the phone  
Is lost already:  
She's leaving tomorrow.

Not everything  
Can be lost. A book I'll never read  
Is on display in every bookshop. The face  
I look at in a mirror is my face. I wish  
I could lose it. I wish I could  
Lose my brain.

Someone might  
Find it: so many people found  
Gogol's nose.

## THE CASTLE

The building where I lived for twenty years.  
A Moscow skyscraper. I might have lived in London  
Or in Paris. I lived in Moscow and many people  
Paid me a visit. Did they really  
Come to my flat? An illusion? My life is  
Different now. I haven't lived anywhere. My flats  
Are empty or full of people  
I know nothing about.

I stand on a beach  
Where a girl builds a castle  
Out of sand. A little girl,  
My George Sand. She smiles  
At me. I wish she were my daughter;  
She's not. The castle she builds  
Is not my castle: I'll never  
Live in it.

I'll never listen to the waves  
Crushing against the shore.

## THE DEAD WORLD

Another day in your company;  
A few words exchanged.  
Love's a sentiment one can get rid of easily.  
Don't think about her!

What's there  
To think about? A plant, a cat, another  
Woman. The world is like the palm of one's hand.  
Don't read it! Just look at it. So many lines,  
So many lives.

Your life is on a hand  
You know nothing of; you think about it.

Can't you think about your life? One thought is enough  
To create a world.

Life is  
Different: a world can be dead.

## THE GLASS

I'll never forget you because you're in another  
Memory of mine. I've no idea  
Where it is. It does exist, otherwise I wouldn't write  
This poem or any other poem. What could I write without *that* memory?

You can't forget something you don't  
Remember. I don't remember the glass I hold; I do remember  
The wines I pour into it. You're not these wines, for all your  
Colours and bouquets. The comparison is adequate,  
But you're not the wines I drink; you're the glass. How many things  
Have I touched? Books, trinkets, various pieces  
Of clothing. I've touched many photographs;  
I remember *some* of them.

You're not a photograph. You're the glass from which I drink—  
The original. I remember the wines.  
I don't remember the glass. Why should I?  
I'm holding it.

**THE STREETS**

Those passers-by. I can't hear anything  
Except their feet and voices. Do I hear  
Their souls?

One soul is enough whatever  
It belongs to.

Our streets  
Don't walk along themselves.

## THE STORY

Silence doesn't care about our ups and downs,  
About our talks. It doesn't care about  
Our achievements, our glory. It's nice to write a novel  
At the age of seventy. You tell a story, one of the stories  
You can tell about the world and yourself. Why not  
Tell the story, an immortal story?  
Many stories are immortal, for instance,  
'In the heady days of my youth, I thought anything was  
Possible.' This story's immortal;  
You're not. So you tell another story. How could you  
Tell it? There are no other stories. There's only  
One story. You tell it in spite of everything.  
Or you listen to it.

Do you listen to silence?  
Somebody said, 'Silence listens  
To you.' Does it listen to  
This morning,  
This afternoon,  
This night?  
Does it listen to my immortal story:  
'I remember the heady experience of our love'?

### JACOB'S LADDER

Time is flowing away. Actually  
 It doesn't flow; it's a puppet. You pull  
 One of the strings and the puppet's arms jerk  
 Upwards; you pull another string  
 And the puppet's arms jerk downwards.

Time moves up and down, not  
 Horizontally. Our ups and down are a tribute to Time.  
 I wish I could always walk along the streets  
 Which go neither up nor down. I wish I could walk  
 Along the boulevards—a *flâneur* Benjamin speaks of  
 In his essay on Baudelaire.

Why do these boulevards look  
 Like Jacob's ladder?

They're tokens of our love.  
 We're walking along these boulevards  
 Up and down, up and down.

## THE BOAT

My moods change so often  
I can't follow them. What *can* I follow?  
The itinerary of a boat on the Moscva River.  
A pleasure boat. Keats listened to a nightingale beyond which  
Sang a million nightingales: the same bird, the same  
Song. I listen to my pleasure boat.  
The same song, the same life. The only proof  
Of my identity. Why do I need it? Why say, 'I am  
What I am?' I'm not what I am. This boat  
Floats down the river, up the river.  
I am one of the passengers.  
The boat floats past my house. There's a film  
Where a boy shows this building  
To his friends. I know it  
Inside out; I might show it to some  
Passers-by. The boat  
Glides along the river, stopping here and  
There.



**YOUR BEAUTY**

Yesterday you were different. Now  
You're a stranger. Some people look at you. I try  
To look elsewhere. What's elsewhere? Your  
Reflection? Hardly. You're not reflected  
In shop windows; nor are you painted by a hyperrealist,  
A lover of reflections.

I like originals  
Reflected everywhere. You're not an original. Are you  
A reflection of my longings? The woman of my life or the woman  
Of my death—the *femme fatale*? Whenever I ask questions,  
I don't know answers.

You're just a woman  
Walking by my side. Now and then  
I look at you. Today you're beautiful and beauty is  
Motionless: nothing can remove it from its pedestal, neither your dress  
Nor my mood, nor Time.

## THE UNION

What's the task of translators? Some words  
 Are replaced by others. Does this  
 Lead us anywhere? Universal language, universal  
 Grammar, peace and quiet, war and peace. I've done many  
 Translations from English into French  
 And vice versa. The world can't be translated.

Benjamin

Alludes to a union of languages. How do they  
 Unite? They're not proletarians, nor are they lovers  
 Who meet in hotels or elsewhere. No redemption  
 Awaits *them* at the end of the road. A caress is more  
 Reliable.

A caress is another language,  
 But you can't translate it from one skin  
 To another.

Love's not translatable.

Why translate my love?  
 Let it remain local. Why should it unite  
 With your grimaces, your exits, your diatribes  
 That are languages in their own right? Why should it  
 Become universal? You're not Beatrice,  
 I'm not Dante.

Are *they* universal?  
 They met in Florence and Paradise.

**OUR BED**

Another timeless day. 'What's Time?' asked  
St Augustine. Is it a day, a night, an hour, a second?  
Our first kiss is the measure  
Of Time. Why bother about Time?  
Let it flow, fly or jump. Let it do what it can.  
John Donne abolished it.

Did he abolish Space? Something *was*  
Abolished. What? I can't remember. Shall we  
Do it again? Let's start anew: our memory's too short  
To remember Europe, America, Asia, Australia,  
Poems, birds and rivers. Let's fly and flow.  
Nothing will interfere: neither a clock  
Nor a cock  
Nor a lark singing out of tune.  
Our bed is larger than the earth and the Library  
Of Congress.

*ADORÉE*

You're not Carmen. Why do I cry when Di Stefano sings  
 'Ma Carmen *adorée*'? I haven't killed you yet.  
 I never will, I suppose. Why should I? You've never been  
 Unfaithful, as far as I know: I trust your words, my intuition.  
 (A private detective and his services are not required.)  
 If you did betray me I wouldn't kill you anyway; I've betrayed you so many  
 Times. But logic is no match for passions: I *might* kill you if I learnt  
 You've betrayed me. 'Ma Carmen *adorée*.'  
 Di Stefano, Karajan, 1955. I cried on hearing  
 The final bars. At the time I knew nothing of you  
 And your deaths. I cried because Di Stefano sings these words so  
 Beautifully. Am I sensitive to the words? '*Adorée*.' In Russian,  
 José sings, '*ia tebya obozhayu*.' The meaning is the same;  
 So is the music. A corpse is lying  
 On the stage. A man bends over it. What's the difference between  
 This man and myself? How many women  
 Have I killed already? No, it's just Di Stefano's voice  
 And the beauty of the opera. Bizet knew nothing of you  
 And your departure.

**MOZART'S APOCRYPHAL MELODY**

My unconscious doesn't yield anything, as if it were  
Mute. It's also dumb: whatever I say to it goes  
Unheeded. And the history of mankind  
Doesn't say anything to it: I feel estranged  
From this history. Nor is my unconscious  
Attuned to it; nor are Haydn's quartets. They've got their own  
Tune. So has my unconscious.

Your recent conduct is beyond the pale.  
I don't listen to it. I listen to your  
Beauty, to Schoenberg's *Hanging Gardens*  
And to a melody Mozart  
Might have composed had he spent a few minutes  
In your company.

## THE TERRACE

Your departure is a word that doesn't exist: my dictionaries  
 Supply me with *my* words. Nor do *their* words  
 Speak of your departure, of our parting which is beyond  
 Words and sentiments: I don't feel anything whenever  
 You talk about your trip, our parting. You just say,  
 'I'm going to Moscow. I don't think I'll ever  
 Come back to Paris.' Well, let us go to Moscow like  
 Chekhov's sisters. Let us board a pleasure boat.  
 Let us spend several hours on the terrace where  
 I used to play in my childhood. I saw *everything* from that  
 Terrace: the Kremlin, the Moscva River  
 And our discussions. This memory won't save us:  
 No memory alters one's life when it's over.

'That may have been the finest thing in our lives.'  
*L'Education sentimentale*. An old novel.  
 What can I learn from it? An old sentiment, an old view,  
 A terrace where nobody walks any more. Your  
 Departure.

### POSTSCRIPT:

The terrace I used to play around was closed in 1955. Situated on the eighteenth floor of our  
 skyscraper, it was accessible to the curious for only three years.

## TO MARLENE DIETRICH

Am I Russian? Marlene Dietrich said  
 Her soul was German wherever she lived.  
 She lived everywhere.

I'm in my room situated outside the movies  
 I watch as I have my breakfast  
 Or dinner. You moved from Germany to the States.  
 I moved from Russia  
 To France which is on the map I've got  
 In my library. Russia's nowhere.

I find her in the restaurants where I spend  
 My nights: *skatert' samobranka* (a tablecloth covered  
 With succulent dishes). A Russian  
 Fairy tale. Anything can be found in the collective  
 Unconscious.

The letters

I got from you. Six letters. I'm writing  
 About them. It's not a song  
 Of myself.

I'm singing the woman

Who haunted humanity for years:  
 Men and women alike.

## THE UNEXPLORED SOURCES

Whenever Celan speaks of God  
He does it from afar. He never says, 'Save me!'  
He wouldn't have contributed to the Old  
Testament. But why should one contribute  
To it? It's written already. It might have been written  
Before it was written. Why should we add anything to it?  
Why comment on the Bible?  
'God needs humans as much as they need Him.' Mystics  
Know God at second hand. Some of them think  
He gets out and about, hobnobbing  
With the elect. Celan is right or wrong. Anybody can be  
Right or wrong. There's no difference between the right place and  
The wrong place. Perhaps there are no places  
To write home about. My place is  
Just a room where I read, listen to LPs and write:  
Pain has the effect of helping you tap unexplored sources  
Of aggression and strength.



## MY CHILDHOOD

My childhood must have been happy. One's childhood  
Is always happy, for one doesn't remember  
Anything.

Toys, smiles, tears.  
I don't remember them. Tolstoy grew  
Conscious of himself rather early. I was blissfully unaware  
Of my own existence.

I'm aware of it now. When did I come  
To my senses? I don't remember. I'm not a child any more. I'm not even  
In my second childhood. It's in between two childhoods  
You remember everything: your friend's despair,  
The way your cat screeched  
As you gave him injections, the feelings  
Of remorse.

People remember  
Everything. I don't. Is it a second childhood  
A third? I'm not very good  
At arithmetic.

Once I was late for school. From outside the classroom  
I could hear the children counting:  
One, two, three, four, five...

## A JUMP

The end is always near, even if the journey  
Is long. But the journey's never long—  
Just a couple of hours. The Promised Land is always  
Near because it *has* been promised. Even the land  
Nobody speaks about—neither God nor a human—  
Is very near. A few steps, a leap.

Not a Kierkegaardian leap.

A jump over a puddle. (There are so many  
Puddles in Moscow when it rains or when the snow  
Melts in the spring.)

A jump

Over life.

### A PROPHECY

I've never loved you more. Why is it so easy  
To part with you? Why should I reconcile  
These opposites or reach for Absolute where love and indifference  
Blend harmoniously? Do they? Anyway I always stumble  
Upon Contingency: your words,  
The flat you're selling,  
My obscure desires. Absolute is far away and  
Unthinkable. I wish to *think* about you;  
Or *not* to think about *you*. It's always a question of thinking  
Or feeling. And I've no idea what I feel  
Right now. Love, indifference? Joy and Time  
Meet only in the great Beyond  
Or in a non-Euclidean geometry. But I'm no longer  
Good at geometry. Nor am I good at love or  
Indifference. I'm just drifting somewhere. 'The moon  
Guides me,' I said in my juvenile poem.  
'Yesterday I died.'  
I *might* have died yesterday.

## LOOKING AT MYSELF

Only the dead appear to one  
In the shape of ghosts.

You're in the land of the living, but not in *my*  
Land. You're neither dead nor about to die: I don't feel your  
Death. Nor do I feel your life. We meet  
In my imagination which is not vivid enough  
To make me see your body  
Or hear your words.

It's *my* words I hear when thinking of you.  
Your voice is my voice; I hate  
My voice.

Why should I  
Look at *myself*?

From now on  
I'll look at myself: there are lots of mirrors  
Around me. Even my windows reflect me  
Sometimes.

## THE LAST KISS

I thought I'd never see you again. I dreamt of you  
Last night. Was it a dream? Perhaps. Reality  
Doesn't offer one images like that. Often one must choose  
Between reality and dreams. We kissed in a park no one had ever  
Visited. And then we bought an ice cream  
In a Moscow supermarket.

Was it a dream? You looked much older compared  
With the day I'd seen you last.  
That day looked older too. Only my feelings  
Were the same: no need of make-up,  
Of plastic surgery.

For a few hours  
I remembered my dream. But dreams are forgotten  
And can't be counted upon despite  
Psychoanalysts and our propensity to live  
In a dream-world. So I'm bound  
To forget you. I must already have forgotten you. Only  
The park remains, the bench on which  
I kissed you for the last time.

## HOMAGE TO ST FRANCIS

Words are leaving me. Do they  
Forsake my brain? I still remember the verb  
'To forsake'. Does that mean I am  
Forsaken?

Words are  
Going away. They move away like the people who  
Can't pay the rent. They're not banished.  
They can't pay the rent. So they move to other  
Cities, to other flats.

There are  
Other words at my disposal. But they don't  
Listen to me. Words must listen to those  
Who use them.

Do I use them?  
I talk to words. They don't listen.  
They're not the birds  
Who listened to St Francis.

They don't sing like those  
Who listened to St Francis.

**THE CAT**

Just a few asides. Space *is* important. I turn away  
From myself  
And utter some words of no importance.  
What's important is to turn away  
From myself. Looking  
At someone else or at a book in which my name  
Isn't mentioned. There are so many books  
Like that. Why not read them? But books don't provide a key  
With which I can open this door or that. I must go  
All the way to those doors  
And open them myself, otherwise  
They'll remain locked.

Everything is locked.  
Nothing will ever open;  
Nothing will ever change.

Do I need a change? I said many times I was  
Happy. Was I happy?  
Am I happy?  
The cat I played with at my friend's  
*Was* happy.

**SOARING INTO THE SKY**

Strife and love. Or is it chaos and love, chaos  
And concord? Call them  
What you wish, providing you wish  
*Something*. What do you wish actually?  
Chaos or concord? Do you think  
In these terms? There must be something in between  
Where everybody sits and thinks. There might be  
Something  
Elsewhere. I don't know where.  
There must be a place where no such questions are  
Asked. There must be  
A place  
Where no questions are asked and only  
Exclamation marks soar  
Into the sky.



## HOMAGE TO MAHLER

A few bars of a Mahler symphony I heard on  
Television.

Will I ever listen to music  
Without being plagued by the thought I'm wasting  
My time? I know music. What else could it  
Tell me?

Has it told me anything?

Talking isn't its forte. But even my body  
Doesn't seem to long for music:  
My desires can be expressed in words.

Whatever  
*Can* be expressed in words is not a desire.

So I say this and that,  
Looking at a nondescript object  
In front of me.  
What is it?  
A maiden, a boy or a book.

*SWAN LAKE*

Somebody moves in front of me. Is he a dancer?  
Is she a dancer? It depends on whom I love.  
I love them both, the dancers  
Jumping on the stage erected right in front of me. One body  
Dances on this stage. I see two bodies,  
Three bodies  
(Myself included). Shall we dance until the curtain drops  
And nothing speaks to me except  
My life?

Does it  
Speak to me? Does my life have anything  
To say to me? Perhaps. My life  
Is a body I see in front of me. This body  
Dances; so does my soul. I can't say whether it dances  
Or dies, flapping its wings like a swan  
Performed by Plisetskaya,  
The dying swan.

There are other swans in my lake.

## THE NAMES

Where do my verses land? In this life,  
In that file. I often confuse the files and have no idea  
What I've written and when.

Have I written

Anything? I must have written  
Something  
To keep myself going. My works may amount  
To one line only; one verse, one name. Your name  
Of course. I don't know your name.

A poem doesn't limit itself to one name. There are  
Many names in it: Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare,  
Pushkin and many others. My name is mentioned alongside  
Tatiana, Natalya, Lilia, Nina, Vladimir,  
Nicholas, Alexander.

I gave you a ride on my back  
Many times, so many  
Times.

**THE DRUNKARD'S SONG II**

Why should I write about the people  
I was in love with five years ago,  
Ten years ago? I'm still in love with someone,  
Am I not? Or is it some objects I love, the objects  
I can describe only when I'm not myself?  
I'm not myself very often now. Actually I've no idea when  
I'm myself. I love many people, many objects, many  
Projects that mean nothing to me.

And what about the people I'm in love with?  
I might be indifferent to them.  
Yet they're close to me. They're as close to me  
As the wine I'm drinking.

I'm forced to drink a lot of wine to gauge  
Our intimacy.

**OLDEN TIMES**

So many women fail to come when you're  
Waiting for them. They're held up at the office  
Or somewhere else. And they forget  
To come. You don't forget them. You've already put  
A lot of flowers in the room where you intend  
To receive your beloved. These flowers  
Are wilting without water,  
In her absence. There's no point in pouring  
Water in those vases. There's no point  
In pouring wine into your glass. She's nowhere to be found. And if you  
Find her  
She'll say you're too old and repulsive. She talked to you  
Out of pity. She accepted your invitation  
Out of charity. She gave you alms: in the past,  
People thought it was their religious duty to give alms  
To the poor. So she gave you alms.  
Just like in the old times, in the good old  
Days.

## THE LAST MEETING

Adieu, adieu. We'll never meet again.  
Please don't remember me: there's nothing  
To remember,  
No one to think about.

I've often said, 'Adieu.' But the people to whom I've said it  
Turn up in Berlin, in Moscow, in St Petersburg.  
I meet them in Versailles. The world is  
Very small indeed.

Why don't I meet *you*, I wonder?  
You must have died. Or you're hiding in a remote corner  
Of the universe which has no corners. I don't shout,  
'Where are you?'  
I just recall our last meeting  
And some of your words. I don't recall  
Your eyes;  
Yet they were so beautiful I thought  
I'd never forget them.

With the passing of the years  
I'll also forget your words—all of them except  
One. This word isn't 'love'  
As might have been expected.

Don't we expect too much  
From last meetings?

The word is 'mothballs'.

## THE FIVE SENSES

I must be afraid of future maladies  
Otherwise  
I wouldn't react so violently against this computer mouse  
That seems to suffer from Alzheimer's. It forgets  
Where it is and I wonder if it has ever known  
Its whereabouts. Is it  
Anywhere? Will *I* be anywhere  
In a few years' time? Even if that happens in twenty years,  
In thirty years, I'll be lost  
In every sense of the word. What a pity this word has so many  
Senses. Do *I* have many senses still?  
Five, six, seven?  
I wish I had one sense  
Designed for you only, taking care of our happiness.

I didn't call you yesterday to wish you a happy  
Birthday.

I've got only five senses.

**MY LIFE**

Russian poems. What do they tell me? Do they  
Tell me anything?  
And Russia herself? A few words are enough  
To remind me of my childhood, of my youth, of my first love,  
Of my second love. Useless memories.

All *real* memories are useless. But you become unreal  
And do whatever you've got to do. And what's done  
Is undone by something else or by the very thing  
You've done. And once again  
A useless memory comes out of nowhere  
Or from that garden where you almost  
Froze to death and, several month later, kissed the man  
Or the woman of your life. There are so many lives;  
No one can live them through. Let's live  
Only a part of life, whatever it is. It *is* something,  
Otherwise I wouldn't live it.



