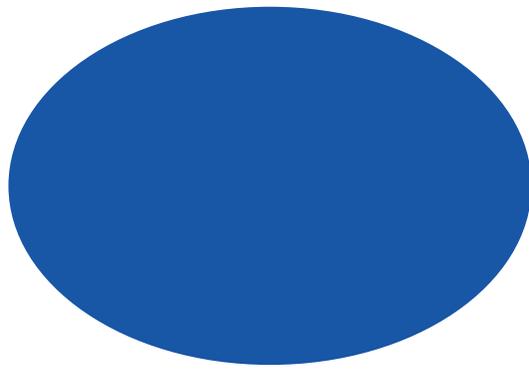


FOUR CENTURIES

Russian Poetry in Translation



11

2015



Four Centuries

Russian Poetry in Translation

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David Shraye-Petrov

Давид Шраер-Петров

Snow On the Ground

Verses about War, Blimps and Poets of the Past Century

Translated by Maxim D. Shraye*

Translator's Prefatory Note

The Russian original, a cycle of 5 short poems by David Shraye-Petrov (Давид Шраер-Петров, b. Leningrad, 1936), was published in Moscow's *ExLibris/Nezavisimaya Gazeta* in 2012; earlier versions of the individual poems had appeared in the poet's ninth collection of verse, *Line-Bodies-Figures* (2010).

The originals of the 5 included poems are composed in: Ia5; An4/An3; Ia4; truncated An4; and An4/An3, respectively. Shraye-Petrov employs patterns of alternating feminine and masculine rhymes or masculine rhymes alone. The rhyming is imaginative and frequently paronomastic. There is no punctuation or capitalization.

The principal challenges of translating these poems into English stem from the Russian originals' versification and their faintly surreal, doubly ironic, lyrical quality. An additional challenge lies in the way they capture, through intonation, idiomatic diction, and layers of cultural references, the receding memory of Soviet culture. Consider also the way the originals preserve echoes of the Russian émigrés' daily living in New England.

My approach here is simultaneously one of *organicism* and *literalism*. Having preserved the originals' rhythmic contours, I have allowed for a greater number of truncated metrical lines, as well as for a greater degree of "sprungness" and variability. I have also sought creative rhyming solutions, especially when it comes to English feminine rhymes, and in places I have resorted to shadow end rhymes and anagrammatic assonances.

I would like to thank my colleagues Andrew Sofer and J. B. Sisson for their insightful comments on the drafts of these translations.

M. D. S.

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Wild Turkeys in Boston

what happened to the wild turkeys
they used to wander in the morning grove
wasn't i thinking such pure malarkey
enmeshed with something so morose
i realized autumn had approached
i wasn't prepared for the fruitless frost
the cloudless blue sky was treacherous
bare branches without leaves the yellow froth
i was among those two or three regular walkers
round the circle eyes madly jutting into the air
i could've even chosen a girlfriend
if I had not been absently strolling there
if I had stopped to make a witty comment
say aren't those ostrichlike creations something else
so cozy in their particolored coats
enveloped by the warmth of caring earth
first bundled up in leaves then clad in snow
which keeps a blanket on their plaited nests
alas the pretty ones who could've shared my sorrow
followed not me but the fellow who was next
to me though not a crazy dreamer
he swept aside my fanciful mirage
in which the losses and the gains aren't real
in which the joy and tears are enmeshed
but wait this way i could end up like isakovsky tvardovsky
composers of lyrics for the crowd
it was a luminous autumn day in Boston
i wasn't sure which path i should try

Blimp in the Clouds

i looked up and noticed a blimp in the sky
pushing bodies of clouds apart
words life or gold you would pay with
to find your lost heart
and to do this you must sail across the sky
pushing words and bodies apart
what of bravery baroque the gallant old times
when the tablesaw lies through its teeth
when the tablesaw lies as it sings of the term
which has ended forever go home
throw off your quilted coat and hum as you roam
with your marmot a child's open palm
here and there with the marmot please wait for me blimp
my celestial magnet so deft
i can't keep up with you the earthly path limps
as it sings something softly of death

Poets of the Past Century

poets of the past century
we are all of us unbidden brothers
because the past century
won't let go its clutches
we argued bitterly in the snake pit
in the main hall of the house of writers
while in the billiards room we shared
publishers' secret plans and contacts
traded editorials ploys and gossip
the revolutionary century that birthed us
has vanished without a trace yet
we go on living we're still around
recalling the fights of bygone days
remembering our departed enemies
with good words and with wine

Snow on the Ground

i awoke when the snow had covered the ground
the pond the shrubs and the streets
i thought this was so akin to
forgotten notes on runaway sheets
i thought of all sorts of wonderful trifles
that pose as marks of serious life
a person lost amid high desert sands
mistakes saxaul for a blooming white rose
if we believe that on waking we instantly lead
a new life amid those who have aged by one day
then the reservoir glued to the edge of the road
and the snow's primordial shadow on the limbs
only an attempt to escape from the care
of your tensing eyes your honeyed lips
o forgive me a nonfawerell sounds bare
frozen pond your shoulder sloping off
and the wind-shattered ice of December
that we tread after cancelling love

Off to War

in a dream off to war i was seeing
my radiant son
i kept muttering something about victory spring
but the rapid stream carried him on
charred poles of inglorious banners
fluttered over the infantry regiment
where i stood i could hear wild banter
mixed with tears and scraps of men's names
drum's basso trumpet's seafaring shadow
trailed off while ahead the draftees

disappeared and columns of black smoke
rushed off like ships out to sea
i stood all alone charred like a stump
in the grove of impending bloodshed
all day long i could hear the drum's distant thud
notes of guilt in the voice of the trumpet

David Shraye-Petrov (Давид Шраер-Петров), poet, fiction writer, memoirist, and medical scientist, was born in Leningrad in 1936. He has published twenty-five books in his native Russian, most recently the novel *Istoriia moei vozliublennoi* (*The Story of My Beloved*, Moscow, 2013) and the 4th edition of his epic novel *Gerbert i Nelli* (*Herbert and Nelly*, Moscow, 2014). Shraye-Petrov's books of fiction in English include *Jonah and Sarah: Jewish Stories of Russia and America*, *Autumn in Yalta: a Novel and Three Stories*, and, most recently, *Dinner with Stalin and Other Stories*. He lives in Brookline, Mass. with his wife of over fifty years, the translator Emilia Shraye. Visit his webpage: <http://fmwww.bc.edu/SL-V/Dsp.html>

Maxim D. Shraye, bilingual author and translator, was born in Moscow in 1967. He is Professor of Russian, English, and Jewish Studies at Boston College and a 2012 Guggenheim Fellow. Shraye has translated the works of over thirty Russian authors, among them Pavel Antokolsky, Eduard Bagritsky, Ilya Ehrenburg, Samuil Marshak, Ilya Selvinsky, and Yuri Trifonov. His recent books include *Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story* (2013) and *Bunin i Nabokov. Istoriia sopernichestva* (*Bunin and Nabokov. A History of Rivalry*, 2014). Visit his website at <http://www.shraye.com>