

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet**

**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**

2012

**Publisher:**

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

### **Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet (5 December, 1820 - 3 December, 1892)**

The circumstances of Afanasy Fet's birth have been the subject of controversy, and some uncertainties still remain. Even the exact date is unknown and has been cited as either October 29 (old style), or November 23 or 29, 1820.

Brief biographies usually maintain that Fet was the son of the Russian landlord Shenshin and a German woman named Charlotta Becker, and that at the age of 14 he had to change his surname from his father's to that of Fet, because the marriage of Shenshin and Becker, registered in Germany, was deemed legally void in Russia. Detailed studies reveal a complicated and controversial story.

It began in September 1820 when a respectable 44-year old landlord from Mtsensk, Afanasy Neofitovich Shenshin, (described as a follower of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideas) returned to his Novosyolky estate from the German spa resorts where he had spent a year on a recreational trip. There he had rented rooms in the house of Karl Becker and fell for his daughter Charlotta Elizabeth, a married woman with a one-year-old daughter named Carolina, and pregnant with another child. As to what happened next, opinions vary. According to some sources, Charlotta hastily divorced her husband Johann Foeth, a Darmstadt court official, others maintain that Shenshin approached Karl Becker with the idea that the latter should help his daughter divorce Johann, and when the old man refused to cooperate, kidnapped his beloved (with her total consent). One thing is certain: in the autumn of 1820 the 22-year old Charlotta Foeth found herself at Shenshin's Novosyolky estate. In October (or November, depending on another source) she gave birth to a boy who was christened Afanasy Afansyevich Shenshin and registered in the local metrics as Shenshin's son (a fact which Shenshin had to concede could not be true several years later). The pair married in 1822 .

The question of Fet's ethnicity has been a matter of some debate too. People who knew Fet well (among them were the poet Yakov Polonsky and members of Leo Tolstoy's family) referred to Charlotta Foeth as 'a German Jew'; according to Tatyana Kuzminskaya (Sophia Tolstaya's sister), Fet's "greatest grievance in life was the fact that he was not a legitimate Shenshin like his brothers (who treated him as a brother) but the illegitimate son of a Jew named Foeth. He refused to understand that the name 'Fet' was now superior to that of Shenshin, and that he himself had created it - a fact that Leo Tolstoy tried in vain to convince him of. There are numerous marginal theories as to Fet's origins. One was mentioned (in a 1937 autobiography) by Igor Grabar who asserted that "...it was a well-known fact that Fet's father, a Russian 1812 army officer, who was returning from Paris through

Königsberg, met a Jewish beauty near Korchma, fell in love, bought her from her husband, took her to Russia and married her". According to another (advocated by the Russian women's magazine *Sudarushka*), Charlotta Elizabeth Becker came from an "ancient aristocratic family based in East Germany" while Johann Becker was an illegitimate son of Louis I, Grand Duke of Hesse, who insisted on Johann and Charlotta's marriage, making Afanasy Fet none other than the cousin of Maria Alexandrovna. *Sudarushka* calls Fet "the 3rd great German on the Russian Parnassus after Khemnitser and Küchelbecker".

When Afanasy Fet was 14 years old, an official request came from Germany as to the details of his birth certificate. Discrepancies were revealed, and Oryol's consistory decided that from then on the boy should go by his German father's name and be stripped of all the privileges of nobility he otherwise would have had rights to. This was quite a traumatic experience for Afanasy who by this time completely identified himself with Shenshin and not Foeth. More controversy was added to the case by the fact that, while Shenshin admitted he indeed could not possibly be Afanasy's biological father, Johann Foeth back in Darmstadt refused to consider him his own son. As a result of the long and painful Shenshin-Foeth negotiations, the boy was finally given "the true Hesse-Darmstadt citizen" name of Afanasy Foeth. Even this rather humiliating outcome was a merciful alternative: otherwise, as an illegitimate child, he'd have fallen to the bottom of the Russian social hierarchy.

#### Education and literary debut

At the age of 14 Afanasy was sent to the Livonian town of Werro, where he was accepted (allegedly through the influence of Vasily Zhukovsky) into a German boarding school owned by a man named Krummer. While there he received a letter informing him that from then on his name was Foeth and not Shenshin; without a name, a family, a nationality or anything to hold on to, the teenager felt, in his own words, "like a dog who'd lost its master". It was this cruel transformation, scholars later opined, that accounted for all the idiosyncrasies and the totally pessimistic outlook of a man who spent most of his life contemplating suicide. Once, on a trip in the countryside at Werro, close to the Russian border, young Afanasy got off his horse, ran up to where the Russian land was supposed to begin, kneeled down and started to kiss the soil. These were the years, though, when the youngster was beginning to discover a poetic gift within himself; something to shield him from oppressive reality. "In quiet moments of total carelessness I was beginning to feel flowery spirals whirling inside of me, as if some unknown blossoming was coming to the surface. Each time only stems appeared, without any flowers on them. I scribbled verses on my slate desk and wiped them off, finding them unworthy", Fet wrote in his autobiography.

In 1837 another change took place, this time much for the better. Fet's stepfather Afanasy Shenshin took the boy from the Krummer's institution and sent him to a boarding school in Moscow, owned by Mikhail Pogodin, a respected historian and professor at Moscow University. In the autumn of 1838 Fet enrolled in the University to study first the law, then philology. In his first year he started writing poetry (and produced quite a lot of it, Goethe, Heine and Yazykov being his major influences) and met Apollon Grigoriev, a fellow student and also an aspiring poet. "Aphonia and Apollosa", as the pair were known, became close friends. Soon Afansy moved to Grigoriev's house at Malaya Polyanka in Zamoskvoretchye and settled in a small room on the upper floor, often visited by friends, young Yakov Polonsky and future historian Sergey Solovyov among them. Later critics regarded Apollon Grigoriev's ideas and poetry technique (namely the romance-like structure and melodism) among Fet's major influences of the time.

In the late 1830s Pogodin received some verses from the boy and gave them to Nikolay Gogol. "Undoubtedly gifted"; such was the verdict of the writer, and it did a lot to boost Fet's creativity, and prompted him to publish a book. It was in Apollon Grigoriev's room that the two friends compiled Fet's first collection, *The Lyrical Pantheon* (1840), signed "A.F." The book, in which the

author began to develop a unique style of poetry dealing with the twin subjects of love and nature, caused only a slight stir, but was welcomed by some "thick journal" critics. In *Otechestvennye zapiski* young critic P.Kudryashov, Vissarion Belinsky's protégé, praised the debut, and his opinion was soon endorsed by Belinsky himself. For the next few years Belinsky continued to maintain that "of all the living Russian poets Fet is the most gifted".

It was in Grigoriev's house that some of Fet's better known poetry was created, now signed A. Fet. This fuller signature first appeared in late 1841 under the poem called *Poseidon*, published by *Otechestvennye zapiski*. Later historians of literature argued whether it was due to a type-setter's mistake that the Russian letter *ѣ* (as in Foeth) in the poet's surname turned into e (as in Fet), but, according to Tarkhov, "this change was significant: in just one moment the name of a 'true Hesse-Darmstadt's citizen' was transformed into the pseudonym of a Russian poet".

In 1842 Fet's poems started to appear regularly in *Moskovityanin* and *Otechestvennye zapiski* magazines, instantly making their author a literary sensation. One of the young poet's mentors was the *Moskovityanin*'s editor Stepan Shevryov, also a Moscow University professor, who often invited the young man to his home. Critics couldn't get enough of the young master, praising the "whiffs of joy" and "fragrant freshness" of his verse. Some of his poems were featured in the collection *The Best of Russian Poetry* compiled by Aleksey Galakhov in 1843. *Don't wake her up at dawn...*, put to music by Aleksander Varlamov, became the hit of the time. But for Fet those were troubled years. "Never in my life have I known a person so tormented by depression and for the life of whom I've been so worried. I greatly fear the possibility of him committing suicide. I've spent hours by his bedside, trying somehow to dispel the terrible, chaotic movements of his psyche... He had to either kill himself or become the sort of man he turned out to be later", Apollon Grigoriev wrote, referring to Fet's much talked about dichotomy, the poet and the real man coming across as totally different, conflicting personas.

#### Military Service

In 1844 Fet graduated from the University. This year he had to suffer two more heavy blows. First his uncle Pyotr Neofitovich Shenshin died. A large sum of money he prepared to transfer to the young man after his death has never been found. Later that year, after long suffering, mother Charlotta died of cancer. Early next year Afanasy Fet left *Novosyolky* estate forever: he went to the *Kherson gubernia* and on April 21, following the tradition of Shenshins, joined the Imperial Cuirassier regiment as a junior officer. Fet's goal was to retrieve the name and all the privileges of nobility he'd lost with it, and he indeed started to progress in ranking but the process was too slow: the nobility granting bar was being continuously risen too.

The one thing Fet enjoyed in the army was discipline, everything else he loathed, complaining bitterly in his letters of utter cultural isolation and financial difficulties "bordering on poverty", calling his experience "life amongst monsters" when "once an hour a <Gogol's> *Viy* appears in sight and you even have to smile". "Never before have I felt so morally destroyed", he wrote in another letter, speaking of feeling like being buried alive and comparing his 'regaining nobility' mission to the work of "joyless Sisyphus". Only in the late 1840s, after several years of silence, Fet got back to writing poetry. In 1850 *Moskvityanin* magazine published *Hearts whispering, lips breathing...*, it became very popular, was followed by a very successful *Poems by A.Fet* (Moscow, 1850) collection of poems and heralded its author's return onto the Russian literary scene.

Of many sacrifices Fet had to make on his way to realizing his social ambition, which now was more like an *idée fixe*, one was exceptionally painful and left a scar that's never been healed. In the autumn of 1848 he met and fell in love with a 20-years old daughter of poor *Kherson* landowner named Maria Lazich, a well educated and intelligent girl, who passionately loved him too. For Fet, though, marrying a penniless girl was out of question, and he

abandoned her. In 1851 Maria died. The exact circumstances of this accident remained unclear. Some sources suggest she accidentally set herself on fire; some maintain that was a deliberate move of "a proud and desperate girl who decided life was not worth it without the man she loved. She set her dress on fire with a match, and died of burns, four days later, her last words being: 'He is not guilty'.<sup>[6]</sup> But the feeling of guilt was immense, and Fet has never been able to get rid of it. This event and the image of Maria would be frequently evoked in his later verses.

While Maria Lazich with her pure love and tragic death has left a distinct mark upon Fet's poetic legacy, his military service did nothing of the sort. What it only succeeded to do was make the schism between Fet the poet and Fet the man even more obvious. In 1853 Fet has been transferred to an uhlan regiment based nearby Saint Petersburg. During the Crimean war Fet was serving in the troops guarding the Estonian coastline.

In 1853, supported by Aleksey Nekrasov, he entered the now rising *Sovremennik* circle, meeting among many new faces his old friends Ivan Turgenev and critic Vasily Botkin. It was at Turgenev's house that Fet has met later Leo Tolstoy, another young officer who just returned from Sevastopol. In the #1, 1854, issue of the magazine Nekrasov (now at the helm) informed the readers that from then on Fet would be *Sovremennik's* major contributor and that he'd provided already a wealth of brilliant material "not just on par but even superior to what's been already published". Not only did he promote Fet as a poet, but he obviously preferred his work to that of others, notably, of his own. Fet was making everybody wonder. Leo Tolstoy's saying: "What could be the source of this inexplicable poetic daring, the true characteristic of a great poet, that's coming from this good-natured, plump officer, is beyond me", expressed the general opinion on the matter.

In 1856 Poems by A.A. Fet came out which was, which was, in effect, a re-worked and cleaned-up (by Turgenev, Botkin, Druzhinin and others) version of the 1850 book.<sup>[17]</sup> According to writer and memoirist Avdotya Panaeva, Fet gave Nekrasov and Turgenev total *carte blanche* in compiling his 1856 compilation and there was much arguing among the two, the former protesting against heavy editing. The latter was insisting on drastic cuts and, in the end, has had his way. In a preface to the book, Nekrasov wrote: "Not a single poet after Pushkin would bring such a delight to anyone who understands poetry and readily opens their soul to it, as Fet does. By saying this we do not attempt to equal the two, just make another, quite positive statement: in his own field Fet is as superb as Puskin was in his own, more vast and versatile one".

It was the year of 1856, though, when collections by Fet and Nekrasov came out almost simultaneously, that the conflict of ideas was starting to strain their personal relations. Fet continued to contribute regularly to *Sovremennik* until 1859, when his being totally out of place in the magazine (now deserted by Nekrasov and Turgenev and dominated by radicals Tchernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov) became too obvious. Before that, in 1859 he published an article *On Tyutchev Poetry* which outraged many. In it Fet wrote: "The notion that poetry's social mission, of its moral value, or its relevance as superior to other aspects of it, I regard as nightmarish, and long ago I've got rid of it altogether". The rift with his former friends became obvious and Fet left *Sovremennik*.

#### Retirement

In 1857 Afanasy Fet married in Paris Maria Botkina (daughter of a rich tea-trader and brother of his good friend Vasily), described as unattractive and ashen-faced, but very kind and warm person, totally devoid of jealousy and treating her husband like a nanny treats a child. In 1858 he retired from the army and settled in Moscow. A year later, encouraged by his father-in-law and having overcome his wife's unwillingness to leave the city, Fet paid 20 thousand rubles for the totally desolate Stepanovka khutor in the Mtsensk region of Oryol gubernia and in 1860 moved to it. In the course of the next 14 years he planted alleys, dug out ponds and turned a piece of

naked (if fertile) land into a flourishing garden. Besides, he embarked upon major agricultural activities which proved to be highly lucrative. This kind of retreat confirmed Fet's reputation of a 'social egotist' and provoked fierce criticism from many people who knew him, notably Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin and Dmitry Pisarev. Reviling Fet's pro-conservative essays, Saltykov wrote: "Among those who crawled down into Earth's holes is Fet who hides in a village. In the moments of leisure he does them in turn: now a fine romance, next a human-hating piece, another romance, another human-hater". For eleven years (1867-1877) Fet was working as a local Justice of the peace and was highly respected by both peasants and fellow landowners.

Meanwhile, Leo Tolstoy who roughly at the same time retired into his Yasnaya Polyana manor, greeting Fet's decision to "sit upon land" ("Our regiment's got a fine newcomer...", he wrote in a letter) Unlike Tolstoy, though, who was looking for better working conditions, Fet stopped writing at all. "He turned an agronomist, a 'landlord in desperation', let his beard down, some improbable behind-the-ears curls plus, is unwilling to hear of literature and only damns all journals enthusiastically", Turgenev wrote to Polonsky on May 21, 1861.

In 1862 Fet's articles started to appear in Russky vestnik, dealing with issues like agricultural commerce and economy, written "from the point of view of the one eager to enter the free market". Indeed, the author found himself a perfect entrepreneur – started a horse-breeding farm, built a mill, embarked upon commercial activities. Turgenev, congratulating Fet with another mercurial success, remarked once (to the latter's enjoyment) that never in his lifetime had he met a man who'd pronounce the word tselkovy (ruble) "with such relish, as if he'd already put one in his pocket". Unrepentant, Fet wrote to K.Revelioti, one of his Army officer friends: "I used to be a poor man, a regiment's adjutant, and now, thank God, I am an Oryol, Kursk and Voronezh landowner, I live a beautiful manor with a park. And all this I've got by hard labour, not by some machinations".

Fet's two collections of essays, From the Village and Notes on Civilian Labour (1862-1871) which were being published in Russky Vestnik, Literaturnaya biblioteka and Zarya magazines, were finely written and, along with essays on very practical things, contained novellas, very much in tune with the village prose of the time. Fet wrote traditional prose too, which, unlike his poetry (and rather more in agreement with his everyday persona) was down-to-earth and realistic, the best example of it being the The Golts Family (1870) short novel which told a tragic story of an alcoholic village doctor's social and mental decline. Those were the years of his close contacts with Leo Tolstoy. Settled at the Stepanovka manor, he often visited the latter at Yasnaya Polyana.

The stigma of illegitimacy which haunted Fet all through his life, in 1873 was finally dropped, promotion in the army ranks helping him to secure the longed-for admission to Russian nobility as well. According to the special Tsar Aleksander II's decree, he's been granted his stepfather's name and with it rights and privileges that went with belonging to this aristocratic Russian family. In 1873 Fet he wrote to his wife: "You won't even imagine how do I hate this Fet name. I implore you not to ever mention it... Should one ask what is the name of all the trials and tribulations of my life, I'll answer: this name is 'Fet'". Turgenev greeted with sarcasm "the disappearance of Fet and the emergence of Shenshin". Much more understanding and sympathetic was Tolstoy who praised Fet's courage and patience in bringing this painful matter to the end. Now officially Shenshin, the poet retained Fet as a literary pseudonym.

In 1873 Fet bought (for 105 thousand) his second village, Vorobyovka, nearby Kursk. Here things started to change. "My wife just reminded me that from 1860 to 1877 while being a judge of peace and a rural labourer, I've written three poems, hardly more. Now, as I freed myself from both, in Vorobyovka my muse awoke from many years of sleep and started coming to me as often as it did at the dawn of my life", Fet wrote to Prince Konstantin Romanov in August, 25, 1891. In 1881 Fet bought a small house on

Plyuschikha, in Moscow. From then on he would spend a winter in Moscow, in April would move to Vorobyovka and remain there till last days of September. Fighting off critics, who ridiculed the incongruity of this wealthy and somewhat pompous landowner's image with that of the author of most sublime, unearthly verse, Fet claimed it was his materialistic pragmatism that provided him "total artistic freedom". Critics were unimpressed; some guessed there lurked deep inner conflict behind such rationalizations.

## Death

Circumstances of Fet's death caused almost as much controversy as those of his birth. Initial official reports (repeated by some biographers) which simply told that he died in his Moscow home of heart attack, while being formally true, concealed much more bizarre turn of events.

In October 1892, Fet moved from his Vorobyovka estate to Moscow. While visiting Countess Sophia Tolstaya, he caught cold, and later fell very ill with bronchitis. The family doctor, Ostroumov, at one point suggested to Maria Botkina that the patient, being bad as he was, should take communion, but Fet's wife replied: "Afanasy Afanasyevich recognizes none of such rituals" and told the doctor that she was ready to take the sin (of depriving a dying man of communion) upon herself.

On November 21, in the morning, the patient, ever up on his feet, suddenly sent for champagne. His wife protested, arguing that the doctor would have surely prohibited this, but was urgently sent to the doctor to get one such permission. Fet seemed to be in great haste. "Now, go on then and quickly get back", he ordered as she was entering a carriage. As Maria left, Fet told his secretary (a certain Mrs. F.): "Now, come on with me, I will dictate to you". – "A letter?" she asked. "No", came the reply. On a piece of paper Mrs. F. wrote the following: "I see no reason for consciously prolonging the suffering. Willingly I go for what would be inevitable". He signed these words: "November 21. Fet (Shenshin)", with a hand biographer Boris Sadovskoy described as "firm, certainly not the hand of a dying man".

What happened next the biographer explained by "some kind of mental storm people sometimes experience in the face of death. Only temporary madness would make him run about grabbing dinner and paper knives which were obviously not supposed to cause a man serious harm", Sadovskoy wrote. What Fet did first was grab a paper knife from the table before him. Mrs. F. disarmed him, injuring her hand. Then he started running about the house, closely followed by Mrs. F., who was bleeding and calling for help, to no avail. In a dining-room he ran up to a cabinet where table-knives were kept and started jerking the door. Then, panting, he dropped himself on a chair. According to the secretary, his eyes opened wide, as if facing some terrible sight, his hand rose as if to make a cross, then fell down. Next moment he was lifeless. The cause of his death, as it turned out later, was heart attack. The funeral service was held on November 22, 1892, in the Moscow University church. Afanasy Fet was buried on November 23 in his new family vault in the Kleymyonovo the old Shenshin family estate.

## Legacy

Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet is regarded as the greatest lyric poet of Russia. His verses were highly esteemed by Belinsky, who ranked him on par with Mikhail Lermontov. Fet's lyrical poetry, extremely sensual and melancholic, were imbued with tints of sadness and tragedy. "Such lyrical insight into the very core of the Spring and human emotion risen by it was hitherto unknown in Russian poetry", wrote critic Vasily Botkin in 1843. Osip Mandelstam considered him to be the greatest Russian poet of all time. Fet had a profound influence on the Russian Symbolists, especially Innokenty Annensky and Alexander Blok, who declared Fet his "great teacher". Fet's poetry greatly influenced Sergey Yesenin and Boris Pasternak. Tchaikovsky wrote:

Fet is an exceptional phenomenon. There is no use to compare him to other first class poets, or try and seek for common streaks with Pushkin,

Lermontov, Al. Tolstoy or Tyutchev... For, in his best moments, Fet leaves poetry boundaries altogether and ventures boldly into our field. That is why, when I think of Fet, often Beethoven comes to mind... Like Beethoven, he has this power to touch those strings of our soul which would be out of reach for artists, no matter how strong, who rely on words only. Rather than just a poet, he is a musician-poet.

Professor Pavel Kudryavtsev argued that the poet had "his very special way of producing verse, the latter having been driven not necessarily by rational thought", but by melody. "It is of musical nature and... is being realized musically, straight into <verbal> melody", the critic wrote. With his poetry, "quite unique in terms of aesthetics", Fet has proven that "that the self-sufficient spring of real verse won't ever dry out, not even in the less favourable times", Kudryavtsev wrote.

Yet Fet was never a popular poet during his lifetime. Critic Vasily Botkin remarked that while in the 1860s reviewers generally lauded Fet's poetry, "the general public looked at these praises with incredulity, refusing to see any virtues in Fet's poetry. In other words, he's success is but literary and we think the reason lies in the very nature of his talent", Botkin concluded. Others thought it was Fet's unwillingness to change. "The reason was in his being totally foreign to the spirit of times. Unlike Nekrasov, who expressed this spirit perfectly, always going with the flow, Fet never did, refusing to 're-tune his lyre's strings', wrote Soviet scholar Dmitry Blagoy.

## **By Life Tormented**

By life tormented, and by cunning hope,  
When my soul surrenders in its battle with them,  
Day and night I press my eyelids closed  
And sometimes I'm vouchsafed peculiar visions.

The gloom of quotidian existence deepens,  
As after a bright flash of autumn lightning,  
And only in the sky, like a call from the heart,  
The stars' golden eyelashes sparkle.

And the flames of infinity are so transparent,  
And the entire abyss of ether is so close,  
That I gaze direct from time into eternity  
And recognize your flame, universal sun.

Motionless, encircled by fiery roses,  
The living altar of the cosmos smolders  
And in its smoke, as in creative slumber,  
All forces quiver, eternity's a dream.

And all that rushes through the abyss of ether,  
And every ray, embodied or ethereal,-  
Is but your reflection, O universal sun,  
It is but a dream, but a fleeting dream.

Through the worldly breath of these reveries  
I fly like smoke, involuntarily disperse,  
And in this vision, in this delirium,  
I can live with ease and breathe without pain.

In the darkness and still of a mysterious night  
I see a fond and welcoming spark,  
From the chorus of spheres, familiar eyes  
Shine upon a grave forgotten in the steppe.

The grass has faded, the desert is grim,  
A lonely tomb dreams an orphan's dream,  
And only in the sky, like an eternal idea,  
The stars' golden eyelashes sparkle.

And I dream you've risen from the dead,  
Unchanged since you departed the earth,  
And I dream a dream: we both are young,  
And you've looked at me as you did back then.

Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet

## **I Always Like The Northern Birches**

I always s like the northern birches:  
Their view, so downcast and grave,  
The fever, which poor souls scorches,  
Cools like the mute speech of a grave.

But yet, the willow, which branches,  
With their long leaves, cast in a flood,  
Is closer to a dream, that scourges,  
And longer lives in our heart.

Deploring groves their own,  
Their meadows – with bitter tears,  
Tell birches to cold wind alone  
Their common sufferings and fears.

Believing that the whole ground  
Is motherland of sacred grieves,  
The weeping willow all around  
Inclines its branches with long leaves.

Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet

## **I Have Come To You Delighted**

I have come to you, delighted,  
To tell you that sun has risen,  
That its light has warmly started  
To fulfil on leaves its dancing;

To tell you that wood's awaken  
In its every branch and leafage,  
And with every bird is shaken,  
Thirsty of the springy image;

To tell you that I've come now,  
As before, with former passion,  
That my soul again is bound  
To serve you and your elation;

That the charming breath of gladness  
Came to me from all-all places,  
I don't know what I'll sing, else,  
But my song's coming to readiness.

Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet

## **My Face Turned Upwards To The Sky**

My face turned upwards to the sky  
One summer night I lay upon some hay  
A lively close-knit starry chorus  
Was flickering all around.

The mute earth, nebulous and dreamlike,  
Rushed off without a trace  
And I, like Eden's first inhabitant,  
Faced night's gaze all alone.

Was it I hurtling into midnight's depths  
Or was it crowds of stars that hurtled toward me?  
It seemed as if a mighty palm  
Held me suspended over the abyss.

And with a heart confused and stunned  
I cast my gaze into the depths,  
Whence sinking every moment deeper,  
I never will return.

Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet

## Never

I wake. Yes, it's a coffin lid.-With effort  
I reach my hands out and I call  
For help. Yes, I recall the tortures  
Of dying.-Yes, this is no dream!-  
And without effort, like a spider web  
I push aside my casket's rotting wood

And stand. How bright the winter light appears  
In the crypt's doorway! Can I doubt it? -  
I see the snow. The crypt's without a door.  
It's time to head for home. How stunned they'll be!  
I know this park, I cannot lose my way.  
But oh how different it looks now!

I hurry. Snowdrifts. Frigid boughs  
Of dead trees poke deep into the sky,  
There are no tracks or sounds. It's still.  
The realm of death in an enchanted world.  
And here's my home. But what decay!  
I'm shocked by this heartbreaking sight.

The village sleeps beneath a snowy blanket,  
There is no path in all the boundless steppe.  
Yes, there it is: upon a far-off hill  
I see the ancient belfry of the church.  
A frozen traveler in the whirling snow,  
It stands out clear against the cloudless span.

No winter birds or midges dot the snow.  
I understand: the earth has long lain chill  
And dead. For whom do I conserve  
The breath within my chest? To whom did death  
Return me? What's my mind  
Connected to? And what's its final purpose?

Where shall I go if there is no one to embrace?  
And time has lost itself in space?  
O, Death, return! And hasten to assume  
The fatal burden of this final life.  
And you, stiff corpse of earth take flight  
And bear my corpse on the eternal path!

Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet

## **Nightingales, A Sigh, A Whisper**

Nightingales, a sigh, a whisper  
In a shady nook  
And the lullaby in silver  
Of a lazy brook.

Light of night and midnight shadow  
Falling from above  
And the changing mood and magic  
Of a face you love

Through dark clouds a red rose peeping  
And an amber gleam,  
And the kissing and the weeping  
And the dawn serene!

Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet

## **The September Rose**

To sighs of morning air, that froze,-  
(With her lips opened for a say),  
How curiously has smiled the rose  
On a September fleeting day!

And how has she ever dared  
To greet, with air of springy queens,  
The single blue-tit, in the bare  
Shrubs fleshing in the orb of wings;

To bloom with steadfast dream that later,  
Just leaving her cold bed in rest,  
She'll cling, the last and dissipated,  
To a young hostess's charming breast!

Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet

## Upon A Haystack On A Southern Night

Upon a haystack in lands of South,  
I lay, while facing skies of night,  
The choir of stars, alive and couth,  
Was trembling, spread at every side.

The earth, mute as a dream half-hidden,  
Was fast receding into space,  
And I, as if the first in Eden,  
Alone met the black night's face.

Did I race to the depth profound,  
Or did the stars race strait to me?  
In mighty hands, it seemed me how,  
I hanged above abysmal sea.

With heart, so sinking and bewildered,  
I measured with my look a depth,  
Into which, every moment sighted,  
I sink, and nobody helps.

Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet

## **What Grief! The Alley's End**

What grief! The alley's end  
Is lost in snow again today,  
And once again, the silver snakes  
Are crawling through the snow.

The sky's without a patch of blue,  
The steppe's completely smooth and white,  
A single crow is struggling hard  
To beat its wings against the storm.

My soul is frozen as the land,  
There is no sign of dawning there.  
My languid thought drops off to sleep  
Above my slowly dying work.

But in my heart still glows a hope  
That accidentally, perhaps,  
My soul will once again grow young  
And see its native home once more,

A land where storms may come and go,  
Where thought is passionate and pure,-  
And where a chosen few can see  
How spring and beauty bloom.

Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet

## **When You Were Reading Those Tormented Lines**

When you were reading those tormented lines  
In which the heart's resonant flame sends out glowing streams  
And passion's fatal torrents rear up,-  
    Didn't you recall a single thing?

I can't believe it! That night on the steppe  
When, in the midnight mist a premature dawn,  
Transparent, lovely as a miracle,  
    Broke in the distance before you

And your unwilling eye was to this beauty drawn  
To that majestic glow beyond the realm of darkness,-  
How could it be that nothing whispered to you then:  
    A man has perished in that fire!

Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet

## **While Lounging In A Chair**

While lounging in a chair, I looked up at the ceiling  
Where, teasing my imagination,  
A circle hangs above the quiet lamp,  
And spins just like a ghostly shadow.

Within the flicker there's a trace of autumn sunset:  
As if, above the rooftop and the garden,  
Unable to fly off, afraid to land,  
Dark flocks of blackbirds circle. . .

No, it's not wings I hear, but hooves at the front gate!  
I hear the trembling hands . . .  
How chill the pallor of a lovely face!  
How bitter parting's whisper! . .

Lost and in silence, I survey the distant road  
Beyond the dimming garden,-  
While the impatient flock of blackbirds,  
Unsheltered, circles still.

Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet

## **With One Firm Thrust**

With one firm thrust to force the boat of living  
From off the sands, and, by a wave tossed high,  
Be toward a new life borne, a new beginning,  
To feel the wind from scented shores sweep nigh,

To wake from torpid sleep a mind turned sluggish,  
To revel in the strange and the unknown,  
To lend fresh breath to life, and joy to anguish,  
To make another's cares and griefs your own,

To speak of things it numbs the tongue to utter,  
To fire the timid heart that fierce 't may pound -  
This can the chosen songsmith do, no other,  
And 'tis for this that he is known and crowned!

Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet