

Classic Poetry Series

Joseph Brodsky
- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Joseph Brodsky(24 May 1940 – 28 January 1996)

Joseph Brodsky was born in 1940, in Leningrad, and began writing poetry when he was eighteen. Anna Akhmatova soon recognized in the young poet the most gifted lyric voice of his generation. From March 1964 until November 1965, Brodsky lived in exile in the Arkhangelsk region of northern Russia; he had been sentenced to five years in exile at hard labor for "social parasitism," but did not serve out his term.

Four of Brodsky's poems were published in Leningrad anthologies in 1966 and 1967, but most of his work has appeared only in the West. He is a splendid poetic translator and has translated into Russian, among others, the English metaphysical poets, and the Polish emigre poet, Czeslaw Milosz. His own poetry has been translated into at least ten languages. *Joseph Brodsky: Selected Poems* was published by Penguin Books in London (1973), and by Harper & Row in New York (1974), translated by George L. Kline and with a foreword by W.H. Auden. A volume of Brodsky's selected poems translated in French has been published by Gallimard; a German translation, by Piper Verlag; and an Italian translation, by Mondadori and Adelphi. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux published Brodsky's acclaimed collection, *A Part of Speech*, in 1980.

On June 4, 1972, Joseph Brodsky became an involuntary exile from his native country. After brief stays in Vienna and London, he came to the United States. He has been Poet-in-Residence and Visiting Professor at the University of Michigan, Queens College, Smith College, Columbia University, and Cambridge University in England. He currently is Five College Professor of Literature at Mount Holyoke College. In 1978, Brodsky was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters at Yale University, and on May 23, 1979, he was inducted as a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1981, Brodsky was a recipient of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's award for his works of "genius".

In 1986, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux published *Less Than One*, a collection of Mr. Brodsky's essays on the arts and politics, which won the National Book Critic's Award for Criticism.

In 1988 Farrar, Straus, and Giroux published a collection of his poetry, *To Urania*, and in 1992 a collection of essays about Venice, *Watermark*.

1 January 1965

The Wise Men will unlearn your name.
Above your head no star will flame.
One weary sound will be the same—
the hoarse roar of the gale.
The shadows fall from your tired eyes
as your lone bedside candle dies,
for here the calendar breeds nights
till stores of candles fail.

What prompts this melancholy key?
A long familiar melody.
It sounds again. So let it be.
Let it sound from this night.
Let it sound in my hour of death—
as gratefulness of eyes and lips
for that which sometimes makes us lift
our gaze to the far sky.

You glare in silence at the wall.
Your stocking gapes: no gifts at all.
It's clear that you are now too old
to trust in good Saint Nick;
that it's too late for miracles.
—But suddenly, lifting your eyes
to heaven's light, you realize:
your life is a sheer gift.

Joseph Brodsky

A List Of Some Observation...

A list of some observation. In a corner, it's warm.

A glance leaves an imprint on anything it's dwelt on.

Water is glass's most public form.

Man is more frightening than its skeleton.

A nowhere winter evening with wine. A black porch resists an osier's stiff assaults.

Fixed on an elbow, the body bulks like a glacier's debris, a moraine of sorts.

A millennium hence, they'll no doubt expose a fossil bivalve propped behind this gauze cloth, with the print of lips under the print of fringe, mumbling "Good night" to a window hinge.

Joseph Brodsky

A Polar Explorer

All the huskies are eaten. There is no space
left in the diary, And the beads of quick
words scatter over his spouse's sepia-shaded face
adding the date in question like a mole to her lovely cheek.
Next, the snapshot of his sister. He doesn't spare his kin:
what's been reached is the highest possible latitude!
And, like the silk stocking of a burlesque half-nude
queen, it climbs up his thigh: gangrene.

Joseph Brodsky

A Song

I wish you were here, dear,
I wish you were here.
I wish you sat on the sofa
and I sat near.
The handkerchief could be yours,
the tear could be mine, chin-bound.
Though it could be, of course,
the other way around.

I wish you were here, dear,
I wish you were here.
I wish we were in my car
and you'd shift the gear.
We'd find ourselves elsewhere,
on an unknown shore.
Or else we'd repair
to where we've been before.

I wish you were here, dear,
I wish you were here.
I wish I knew no astronomy
when stars appear,
when the moon skims the water
that sighs and shifts in its slumber.
I wish it were still a quarter
to dial your number.

I wish you were here, dear,
in this hemisphere,
as I sit on the porch
sipping a beer.
It's evening, the sun is setting;
boys shout and gulls are crying.
What's the point of forgetting
if it's followed by dying?

Joseph Brodsky

Belfast Tune

Here's a girl from a dangerous town
 She crops her dark hair short
so that less of her has to frown
 when someone gets hurt.

She folds her memories like a parachute.
 Dropped, she collects the peat
and cooks her veggies at home: they shoot
 here where they eat.

Ah, there's more sky in these parts than, say,
 ground. Hence her voice's pitch,
and her stare stains your retina like a gray
 bulb when you switch

hemispheres, and her knee-length quilt
 skirt's cut to catch the squall,
I dream of her either loved or killed
 because the town's too small.

Joseph Brodsky

Bosnia Tune

As you pour yourself a scotch
Crush a roach or check your watch
As your hands adjust your tie people die

In the towns with funny names
Hit by bullets, caught in flames
By and large not knowing why people die

And in small places you don't know of
Yet big for having no chance to scream
Or say good-bye people die

Chorus: La, la... Let me know

People die as you elect
New apostles of neglect, self restraint
Whereby people die Too far off to practice love
For thy neighbour, brother Slav
Where your cherubs dread to fly people die

Chorus...

While the statues disagree
Cain's version, history for its fuel tends to buy
Those who die

As you watch the athletes score
Or check your latest statement
Or sing your child a lullaby people die

Time, whose sharp, bloodthirsty quill
Parts the killed from those who kill
Will pronounce the latter tribe
As your type.

2nd Version:

As you pour yourself a scotch,
crush a roach, or scratch your crotch,

as your hand adjusts your tie,
people die.
In the towns with funny names,
hit by bullets, caught in flames,
by and large not knowing why,
people die.
In small places you don't know
of, yet big for having no
chance to scream or say good-bye,
people die.
People die as you elect
brand-new dudes who preach neglect,
self-restraint, etc. -whereby
people die.
Too far off to practice love
for thy neighbor/brother Slav,
where your cherubs dread to fly,
people die.
While the statues disagree,
Cain's version, history
for its fuel tends to buy
those who die.
As you watch the athletes score,
check your latest statement, or
sing your child a lullaby,
people die.
Time, whose sharp bloodthirsty quill
parts the killed from those who kill,
will pronounce the latter band
as your brand.

Joseph Brodsky

Daedalus In Sicily

All his life he was building something, inventing something.
Now, for a Cretan queen, an artificial heifer,
so as to cuckold the king. Then a labyrinth, the time for
the king himself, to hide from bewildered glances
an unbearable offspring. Or a flying contraption, when
the king figured himself so busy with new commissions.
The son of that journey perished falling into the sea,
like Phaeton, who, they say, also spurned his father's
orders. Here, in Sicily, stiff on its scorching sand,
sits a very old man, capable of transporting
himself through the air, if robbed of other means of passage.
All his life he was building something, inventing something.
All his life from those clever constructions m from those inventions,
he had to flee. As though inventions
and constructions are anxious to rid themselves of their blueprints
like children ashamed of their parents, Presumably, that's the fear
of replication. Waves are running onto the sand;
behind, shine the tusks of the local mountains.
Yet he had already invented, when he was young, the seesaw,
using the strong resemblance between motion and stasis.
The old man bends down, ties to his brittle ankle
(so as not to get lost) a lengthy thread,
straightens up with a grunt, and heads out for Hades.

Joseph Brodsky

Dutch Mistress

A hotel in whose ledgers departures are more prominent than arrivals.
With wet Koh-i-noors the October rain
strokes what's left of the naked brain.
In this country laid flat for the sake of rivers,
beer smells of Germany and the seaguls are
in the air like a page's soiled corners.
Morning enters the premises with a coroner's
punctuality, puts its ear
to the ribs of a cold radiator, detects sub-zero:
the afterlife has to start somewhere.
Correspondingly, the angelic curls
grow more blond, the skin gains its distant, lordly
white, while the bedding already coils
desperately in the basement laundry.

Joseph Brodsky

Elegy

About a year has passed. I've returned to the place of the battle,
to its birds that have learned their unfolding of wings
from a subtle
lift of a surprised eyebrow, or perhaps from a razor blade
- wings, now the shade of early twilight, now of state
bad blood.

Now the place is abuzz with trading
in your ankles's remnants, bronzes
of sunburnt breastplates, dying laughter, bruises,
rumors of fresh reserves, memories of high treason,
laundered banners with imprints of the many
who since have risen.

All's overgrown with people. A ruin's a rather stubborn
architectural style. And the hearts's distinction
from a pitch-black cavern
isn't that great; not great enough to fear
that we may collide again like blind eggs somewhere.

At sunrise, when nobody stares at one's face, I often,
set out on foot to a monument cast in molten
lengthy bad dreams. And it says on the plinth "commander
in chief." But it reads "in grief," or "in brief,"
or "in going under."

Joseph Brodsky

Folk Tune

It's not that the Muse feels like clamming up,
it's more like high time for the lad's last nap.
And the scarf-waving lass who wished him the best
drives a steamroller across his chest.

And the words won't rise either like that rod
or like logs to rejoin their old grove's sweet rot,
and, like eggs in the frying pan, the face
spills its eyes all over the pillowcase.

Are you warm tonight under those six veils
in that basin of yours whose strung bottom wails;
where like fish that gasp at the foreign blue
my raw lip was catching what then was you?

I would have hare's ears sewn to my bald head,
in thick woods for your sake I'd gulp drops of lead,
and from black gnarled snags in the oil-smooth pond
I'd bob up to your face as some Tirpitz won't.

But it's not on the cards or the waiter's tray,
and it pains to say where one's hair turns gray.
There are more blue veins than the blood to swell
their dried web, let alone some remote brain cell.

We are parting for good, my friend, that's that.
Draw an empty circle on your yellow pad.
This will be me: no insides in thrall.
Stare at it a while, then erase the scrawl.

Joseph Brodsky

From A School Anthology

1. E. Larionova

E. Larionova. Brunette. A colonel's
and a typist's daughter. Looked
at you like someone studying a clockface.
She tried to help her fellow mortals.
One day when we were lying side by side
upon the beach, crumbling some chocolate,
she said, looking straight ahead, out
to where the yachts held to their course,
that if I wanted to, I could.
She loved to kiss. Her mouth
reminded me of the caves of Kars.
But I wasn't scared off.
I hold
this memory dear, like a trophy won
on some unintelligible battle-
front, from enemies unknown.
That lover of plump women, that lurking tom,
D. Kulikov, then hove in sight --
he married her, did Dima Kulikov.
She joined a women's choir,
while he toils in a classified establishment --
a great bony engineer...
But I can still recall the long corridor
and my struggle with her on the chest-of-drawers.
Dima at the time was an ugly little pioneer.
Where did it all go? Where's the reference point?
And how can one, today, hope to discover
that which has transfigured all these lives?
A strange world lurked behind her eyes
she could not understand herself. Or rather,
she did not understand it even as a wife.
Kulikov is living. I am living. She is living.
But what happened to that world?
Perhaps it is keeping them awake?
I keep mumbling my words.
Snatches of a waltz come to me through the wall.
And the rain rustles on broken bricks.

2. Oleg Poddobry

Oleg Poddobry. His father was
a fencing coach. He was familiar with
it all -- thrust, parry, lunge.
No ladies' man, nevertheless
he used to score, as sometimes happens
in the world of sports, from offside.
That was at night. His mother was sick,
his little brother wailing in the crib.
Oleg picked up an axe and when
his father entered, battle began.
But the neighbours arrived in the nick
and four of them got the better of the son.
I remember his face, his hands;
next, the foil with a wooden grip.
Sometimes we practised fencing in the kitchen.
He got hold of a ring with a whopping stone;
used to splash around in our communal bath...
He and I left school together; then
he joined a cookery class, while I
worked as a milling operator in the Arsenal.
He baked pancakes in the Taurid Gardens.
We had a good time carting firewood,
on New Year's Eve sold fir trees at the station.
Unfortunately, in association
with some low character,
he did a shop -- he got three years for that.
He warmed his ration up over the bonfire.
Was released. Survived some heavy drinking.
Did factory-construction work.
Got married to a nurse it seems.
Began to paint. Wanted, apparently,
to take up art. His landscapes were,
in places, not unlike
still-lives. Then he got pinched
for playing tricks with medical certificates.
Now all there is, is silence.
I haven't seen him now for years.
Was inside myself but didn't run into him.
Now I am free. But even out of gaol
I never see him.
Somewhere
he is surely strolling through the woods, breathing in

the wind. Neither kitchen, gaol, nor college could
absorb him. And he vanished. Like Jack Frost
he managed to disguise himself.

I hope he is alive and safe.

Now he excites my interest,
like the other characters from out of childhood.
But he is more unreachable than they.

3. T. Zimina

T. Zimina; a delightful child.

Her mother was an engineer, her dad
a tally-clerk -- I never knew them.

She was not easily impressed. Although
a frontier pilot married her.

But that was later. Her trouble
started earlier than that. She had
a relative. A district committee man.
With a car. Her folks were separated.
Evidently, they had problems of their own.

A car was quite unheard of.

Well, it all began with that.

She was upset. But later, things
seemed to be improving, as it were.

A gloomy Georgian came on the scene.

But suddenly he landed up in prison.

And then she gave herself
to the counter in a large haberdashery.

Linen, fabrics, eau-de-Cologne.

She loved the whole atmosphere,
the confidences and her friends' admirers.

Passers-by goggling through the window.

In the distance, the officers' Club. And officers
flocking like birds, with a mass of buttons.

The pilot, returning from the skies,
congratulated her on her good looks.

He gave her a champagne salute.

Marriage. However, in the Air Force
a high value is placed on chastity; it
is raised to the level of an absolute.

And it was this scholasticism that
accounted for her almost drowning.

She had already found a bridge, but winter'd come.

The canal was covered with an icy crust.

And again she hurried to her counter.
A fringe edged her eyelashes.
Onto her ashy hair the neon
lights poured their radiance.
Spring -- and by the doors flung wide,
the current of customers seethes.
She stands and gazes from the piles of linen
into the murky channel, like a Lorelei.

4. Yu. Sandul

Yu. Sandul. Sweet-tempered as a polecat.
With a face that sharpened towards the nose.
Informed on people. Always wore a collar.
Went into raptures over caps with peaks.
Made speeches in the lavatory about
whether the badge should be pinned on the jacket.
Pinned it on. Generally enthused
over all kinds of emblems and insignia.
Loved ranks and titles to distraction.
Styled himself `PT Instructor',
though was as old as Jacob to look at.
Considered furunculosis as his scourge.
Was susceptible to colds,
stayed at home in bad weather.
Mugged up his Bradis tables. Was bored.
Knew chemistry and yearned for the institute.
But landed in the infantry after school --
those secret underground forces.
Now he is drilling holes. It's said,
in the Diesel works. That may not be so accurate.
But perhaps accuracy is irrelevant here.
Of course, it's a speciality, a status.
What's important is, he's doing a correspondence course.
At this point we will lift the curtain's edge.
At dusk, besides absorbing Marx, he leafs
through The Strength of Materials. Such books,
incidentally, give off
a special scent at night.
Doesn't consider himself to be
a simple worker. In fact, looks to the next class.
At dusk he strives for new
horizons. Metal's resistance
is pleasanter in theory! He is bursting

to be an engineer, to get at blueprints.
And, come what may, he will be one.
Like this... the amount of labour,
surplus value... progress...
And all this scholasticism about the market...
He makes his way through dense thickets.
Would like to marry. But hasn't the time.
And he prefers parries, casual
relationships, addresses.
'Our future -- smiling -- engineer'.
He remembers the sombre mass
and gazes past the girls, out of the window.
He is lonely in his own manner.
He is a traitor to his class.
Perhaps I am overdoing it. But
the utilization of a class for hire
is more dangerous than the perfidy of men.
'Youth is sinful. Blood is hot,' he says.
I even remember that plain-speaking poster
that dealt with casual relationships.
But there is no clinic and no doctor
to guard you against these déclassé ones, to
protect you from the inflammation.
And if the age we live in is no wife to us,
then it's so as not to pass on the infection
from this generation to the next.
That is a baton we can do without.

Joseph Brodsky

Galatea Encore

As though the mercury's under its tongue, it won't
talk. As though with the mercury in its sphincter,
immobile, by a leaf-coated pond
a statue stands white like a blight of winter.
After such snow, there is nothing indeed: the ins
and outs of centuries, pestered heather.
That's what coming full circle means -
when your countenance starts to resemble weather,
when Pygmalion's vanished. And you are free
to cloud your folds, to bare the navel.
Future at last! That is, bleached debris
of a glacier amid the five-lettered "never."
Hence the routine of a goddess, nee
alabaster, that lets roving pupils gorge on
the heart of color and the temperature of the knee.
That's what it looks like inside a virgin.

Joseph Brodsky

I Sit By The Window

I said fate plays a game without a score,
and who needs fish if you've got caviar?
The triumph of the Gothic style would come to pass
and turn you on--no need for coke, or grass.
I sit by the window. Outside, an aspen.
When I loved, I loved deeply. It wasn't often.

I said the forest's only part of a tree.
Who needs the whole girl if you've got her knee?
Sick of the dust raised by the modern era,
the Russian eye would rest on an Estonian spire.
I sit by the window. The dishes are done.
I was happy here. But I won't be again.

I wrote: The bulb looks at the flower in fear,
and love, as an act, lacks a verb; the zer-
o Euclid thought the vanishing point became
wasn't math--it was the nothingness of Time.
I sit by the window. And while I sit
my youth comes back. Sometimes I'd smile. Or spit.

I said that the leaf may destroy the bud;
what's fertile falls in fallow soil--a dud;
that on the flat field, the unshadowed plain
nature spills the seeds of trees in vain.
I sit by the window. Hands lock my knees.
My heavy shadow's my squat company.

My song was out of tune, my voice was cracked,
but at least no chorus can ever sing it back.
That talk like this reaps no reward bewilders
no one--no one's legs rest on my shoulders.
I sit by the window in the dark. Like an express,
the waves behind the wavelike curtain crash.

A loyal subject of these second-rate years,
I proudly admit that my finest ideas
are second-rate, and may the future take them
as trophies of my struggle against suffocation.

I sit in the dark. And it would be hard to figure out
which is worse; the dark inside, or the darkness out.

Anonymous Submission

Joseph Brodsky

I Threw My Arms About Those Shoulders

M.B.

I threw my arms about those shoulders, glancing
at what emerged behind that back,
and saw a chair pushed slightly forward,
merging now with the lighted wall.
The lamp glared too bright to show
the shabby furniture to some advantage,
and that is why sofa of brown leather
shone a sort of yellow in a corner.
The table looked bare, the parquet glossy,
the stove quite dark, and in a dusty frame
a landscape did not stir. Only the sideboard
seemed to me to have some animation.
But a moth flitted round the room,
causing my arrested glance to shift;
and if at any time a ghost had lived here,
he now was gone, abandoning this house.

Joseph Brodsky

Letter To An Archaeologist

Citizen, enemy, mama's boy, sucker, utter
garbage, panhandler, swine, refujew, verrucht;
a scalp so often scalded with boiling water
that the puny brain feels completely cooked.
Yes, we have dwelt here: in this concrete, brick, wooden
rubble which you now arrive to sift.
All our wires were crossed, barbed, tangled, or interwoven.
Also: we didn't love our women, but they conceived.
Sharp is the sound of pickax that hurts dead iron;
still, it's gentler than what we've been told or have said ourselves.
Stranger! move carefully through our carrion:
what seems carrion to you is freedom to our cells.
Leave our names alone. Don't reconstruct those vowels,
consonants, and so forth: they won't resemble larks
but a demented bloodhound whose maw devours
its own traces, feces, and barks, and barks.

Joseph Brodsky

Letters To The Roman Friend

From Martial

Now is windy and the waves are cresting over
Fall is soon to come to change the place entirely.
Change of colors moves me, Postum, even stronger
Than a girlfriend while she's changing her attire.

Maidens comfort you but to a certain limit —
Can't go further than an elbow or a kneeline.
While apart from body, beauty is more splendid —
An embrace is as impossible as treason.

I'm sending to you, Postum-friend, some reading.
How's the capital? Soft bed and rude awakening?
How's Caesar? What's he doing? Still intriguing?
Still intriguing, I imagine, and engorging.

In my garden, I am sitting with a night-light
No maid nor mate, not even a companion
But instead of weak and mighty of this planet,
Buzzing pests in their unanimous dominion.

Here, was laid away an Asian merchant. Clever
Merchant was he — very diligent yet decent.
He died suddenly — malaria. To barter
Business did he come, and surely not for this one.

Next to him — a legionnaire under a quartz grave.
In the battles, he brought fame to the Empire.
Many times could have been killed! Yet died an old brave.
Even here, there is no ordinance, my dear.

Maybe, chicken really aren't birds, my Postum,
Yet a chicken brain should rather take precautions.
An empire, if you happened to be born to,

better live in distant province, by the ocean.

Far away from Caesar, and away from tempests
No need to cringe, to rush or to be fearful,
You are saying procurators are all looters,
But I'd rather choose a looter than a slayer.

Under thunderstorm, to stay with you, hetaera, —
I agree but let us deal without haggling:
To demand sesterces from a flesh that covers
is the same as stripping roofs of their own shingle.

Are you saying that I leak? Well, where's a puddle?
Leaving puddles hasn't been among my habits.
Once you find yourself some-body for a husband,
Then you'll see him take a leak under your blankets.

Here, we've covered more than half of our life span
As an old slave, by the tavern, has just said it,
«Turning back, we look but only see old ruins».
Surely, his view is barbaric, but yet candid.

've been to hills and now busy with some flowers.
Have to find a pitcher, so to pour them water.
How's in Libya, my Postum, or wherever?
Is it possible that we are still at war there?

You remember, friend, the procurator's sister?
On the skinny side, however with those plump legs.
You have slept with her then... she became a priestess.
Priestess, Postum, and confers with the creators.

Do come here, we'll have a drink with bread and olives —
Or with plums. You'll tell me news about the nation.
In the garden you will sleep under clear heavens,
And I'll tell you how they name the constellations.

Postum, friend of yours once tendered to addition,
Soon shall reimburse deduction, his old duty...
Take the savings, which you'll find under my cushion.
Haven't got much but for funeral — it's plenty.

On your skewbald, take a ride to the hetaeras,
Their house is right by the town limit,
Bid the price we used to pay — for them to love us —
They should now get the same — for their lament.

Laurel's leaves so green — it makes your body shudder.
Wide ajar the door — a tiny window's dusty —
Long deserted bed — an armchair is abandoned —
Noontime sun has been absorbed by the upholstery.

With the wind, by sea point cape, a boat, is wrestling.
Roars the gulf behind the black fence of the pine trees.
On the old and wind-cracked bench — Pliny the Elder.
And a thrush is chirping in the mane of cypress.

Joseph Brodsky

Love

Twice I awoke this night, and went
to the window. The streetlamps were
a fragment of a sentence spoken in sleep,
leading to nothing, like omission points,
affording me no comfort and no cheer.
I dreamt of you, with child, and now,
having lived so many years apart from you,
experienced my guilt, and my hands,
joyfully stroking your belly,
found they were fumbling at my trousers
and the light-switch. Shuffling to the window,
I realized I had left you there alone,
in the dark, in the dream, where patiently
you waited and did not blame me,
when I returned, for the unnatural
interruption. For in the dark
that which in the light has broken off, lasts;
there we are married, wedded, we play
the two-backed beast; and children
justify our nakedness.
On some future night you will again
come to me, tired, thin now,
and I shall see a son or daughter,
as yet unnamed -- this time I'll
not hurry to the light-switch, nor
will I remove my hand; because I've not the right
to leave you in that realm of silent
shadows, before the fence of days,
falling into dependence from a reality
containing me -- unattainable.

Joseph Brodsky

Love

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to the window. The streetlamps were
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and I shall see a son or daughter,
as yet unnamed -- this time I'll
not hurry to the light-switch, nor
will I remove my hand; because I've not the right
to leave you in that realm of silent
shadows, before the fence of days,
falling into dependence from a reality
containing me -- unattainable.

Joseph Brodsky

May 24, 1980

I have braved, for want of wild beasts, steel cages,
carved my term and nickname on bunks and rafters,
lived by the sea, flashed aces in an oasis,
dined with the-devil-knows-whom, in tails, on truffles.
From the height of a glacier I beheld half a world, the earthly
width. Twice have drowned, thrice let knives rake my nitty-gritty.
Quit the country the bore and nursed me.
Those who forgot me would make a city.
I have waded the steppes that saw yelling Huns in saddles,
worn the clothes nowadays back in fashion in every quarter,
planted rye, tarred the roofs of pigsties and stables,
guzzled everything save dry water.
I've admitted the sentries' third eye into my wet and foul
dreams. Munched the bread of exile; it's stale and warty.
Granted my lungs all sounds except the howl;
switched to a whisper. Now I am forty.
What should I say about my life? That it's long and abhors transience.
Broken eggs make me grieve; the omelet, though, makes me vomit.
Yet until brown clay has been rammed down my larynx,
only gratitude will be gushing from it.

Joseph Brodsky

Moscow Carol

In such an inexplicable blue,
Upon the stonework to embark,
The little ship of glowing hue
Appears in Alexander Park.
The little lamp, a yellow rose,
Arising -- ready to retreat --
Above the people it adores;
Near strangers' feet.
In such an inexplicable blue
The drunkards' hive, the loonies' team.
A tourist takes a snapshot to
Have left the town and keep no dream.
On the Ordynka street you find
A taxicab with fevered gnomes,
And dead ancestors stand behind
And lean on domes.
A poet strolls across the town
In such an inexplicable blue.
A doorman watches him looking down
And down the street and catches the flu.
An old and handsome cavalier
Moves down a lane not worth a view,
And wedding-party guests appear
In such an inexplicable blue.
Behind the river, in the haar,
As a collection of the blues --
The yellow walls reflecting far
The hopeless accent of the Jews.
You move to Sunday, to despair
(From love), to the New Year, and there
Appears a girl you cannot woo --
Never explaining why she's blue.
Then in the night the town is lost;
A train is clad in silver plush.
The pallid puff, the draught of frost
Will sheathe your face until you blush.
The honeycomb of windows fits
The smell of halva and of zest,
While Christmas Eve is carrying its

Mince pies abreast.
Watch your New Year come in a blue
Seawave across the town terrain
In such an inexplicable blue,
As if your life can start again,
As if there can be bread and light --
A lucky day -- and something's left,
As if your life can sway aright,
Once swayed aleft.

Joseph Brodsky

Odysseus To Telemachus

My dear Telemachus,
The Trojan War
is over now; I don't recall who won it.
The Greeks, no doubt, for only they would leave
so many dead so far from their own homeland.
But still, my homeward way has proved too long.
While we were wasting time there, old Poseidon,
it almost seems, stretched and extended space.

I don't know where I am or what this place
can be. It would appear some filthy island,
with bushes, buildings, and great grunting pigs.
A garden choked with weeds; some queen or other.
Grass and huge stones . . . Telemachus, my son!
To a wanderer the faces of all islands
resemble one another. And the mind
trips, numbering waves; eyes, sore from sea horizons,
run; and the flesh of water stuffs the ears.
I can't remember how the war came out;
even how old you are--I can't remember.

Grow up, then, my Telemachus, grow strong.
Only the gods know if we'll see each other
again. You've long since ceased to be that babe
before whom I reined in the plowing bullocks.
Had it not been for Palamedes' trick
we two would still be living in one household.
But maybe he was right; away from me
you are quite safe from all Oedipal passions,
and your dreams, my Telemachus, are blameless.

Joseph Brodsky

On The 100th Anniversary Of Anna Akhmatova

The fire and the page, the hewed hairs and the swords,
The grains and the millstone, the whispers and the clatter --
God saves all that -- especially the words
Of love and pity, as His only way to utter.

The harsh pulse pounds and the blood torrent whips,
The spade knocks evenly in them, by gentle muse begotten,
For life is so unique, they from the mortal lips
Sound more clear than from the divine wad-cotton.

Oh, the great soul, I'm bowing overseas
To you, who found them, and that, your smoldering portion,
Sleeping in the homeland, which, thanks to you, at least,
Obtained the gift of speech in the deaf-mute space ocean.

Joseph Brodsky

Part Of Speech

...and when "the future" is uttered, swarms of mice
rush out of the Russian language and gnaw a piece
of ripened memory which is twice
as hole-ridden as real cheese.

After all these years it hardly matters who
or what stands in the corner, hidden by heavy drapes,
and your mind resounds not with a seraphic "doh",
only their rustle. Life, that no one dares
to appraise, like that gift horse's mouth,
bares its teeth in a grin at each
encounter. What gets left of a man amounts
to a part. To his spoken part. To a part of speech.

Translated by Author

Anonymous submission.

Joseph Brodsky

Seaward

Darling, you think it's love, it's just a midnight journey.
Best are the dales and rivers removed by force,
as from the next compartment throttles "Oh, stop it, Bernie,"
yet the rhythm of those paroxysms is exactly yours.
Hook to the meat! Brush to the red-brick dentures,
alias cigars, smokeless like a driven nail!
Here the works are fewer than monkey wrenches,
and the phones are whining, dwarfed by to-no-avail.
Bark, then, with joy at Clancy, Fitzgibbon, Miller.
Dogs and block letters care how misfortune spells.
Still, you can tell yourself in the john by the spat-at mirror,
slamming the flush and emerging with clean lapels.
Only the liquid furniture cradles the dwindling figure.
Man shouldn't grow in size once he's been portrayed.
Look: what's been left behind is about as meager
as what remains ahead. Hence the horizon's blade.

Joseph Brodsky

Seven Strophes

I was but what you'd brush
with your palm, what your leaning
brow would hunch to in evening's
raven-black hush.

I was but what your gaze
in that dark could distinguish:
a dim shape to begin with,
later - features, a face.

It was you, on my right,
on my left, with your heated
sighs, who molded my helix
whispering at my side.

It was you by that black
window's trembling tulle pattern
who laid in my raw cavern
a voice calling you back.

I was practically blind.
You, appearing, then hiding,
gave me my sight and heightened
it. Thus some leave behind

a trace. Thus they make worlds.
Thus, having done so, at random
wastefully they abandon
their work to its whirls.

Thus, prey to speeds
of light, heat, cold, or darkness,
a sphere in space without markers
spins and spins.

Joseph Brodsky

Stone Villages

The stone-built villages of England.
A cathedral bottled in a pub window.
Cows dispersed across fields.
Monuments to kings.

A man in a moth-eaten suit
sees a train off, heading, like everything here, for the sea,
smiles at his daughter, leaving for the East.
A whistle blows.

And the endless sky over the tiles
grows bluer as swelling birdsong fills.
And the clearer the song is heard,
the smaller the bird.

Joseph Brodsky

TÖl;Rnfallet

There is a meadow in Sweden
where I lie smitten,
eyes stained with clouds'
white ins and outs.

And about that meadow
roams my widow
plaiting a clover
wreath for her lover.

I took her in marriage
in a granite parish.
The snow lent her whiteness,
a pine was a witness.

She'd swim in the oval
lake whose opal
mirror, framed by bracken,
felt happy broken.

And at night the stubborn
sun of her auburn
hair shone from my pillow
at post and pillar.

Now in the distance
I hear her descant. She sings "Blue Swallow,"
but I can't follow.

The evening shadow
robs the meadow
of width and color.
It's getting colder.

As I lie dying
here, I'm eyeing
's Venus;
no one between us.

To Urania

Everything has its limit, including sorrow.
A windowpane stalls a stare. Nor does a grill abandon
a leaf. One may rattle the keys, gurgle down a swallow.
Loneliness cubes a man at random.
A camel sniffs at the rail with a resentful nostril;
a perspective cuts emptiness deep and even.
And what is space anyway if not the
body's absence at every given
point? That's why Urania's older than sister Clio!
In daylight or with the soot-rich lantern,
you see the globe's pate free of any bio,
you see she hides nothing, unlike the latter.
There they are, blueberry-laden forests,
rivers where the folk with bare hands catch sturgeon
or the towns in whose soggy phone books
you are starring no longer; farther eastward surge on
brown mountain ranges; wild mares carousing
in tall sedge; the cheekbones get yellower
as they turn numerous. And still farther east, steam
dreadnoughts or cruisers,
and the expanse grows blue like lace underwear.

Joseph Brodsky

Tornfallet

There is a meadow in Sweden

where I lie smitten,

eyes stained with clouds'

white ins and outs.

And about that meadow

roams my widow

plaiting a clover

wreath for her lover.

I took her in marriage

in a granite parish.

The snow lent her whiteness,

a pine was a witness.

She'd swim in the oval

lake whose opal

mirror, framed by bracken,

felt happy, broken.

And at night the stubborn

sun of her auburn

hair shone from my pillow

at post and pillar.

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I hear her descant.

She sings "Blue Swallow,"

but I can't follow.

The evening shadow

robs the meadow

of width and color.

It's getting colder.

As I lie dying

here, I'm eyeing

stars. Here's Venus;

no one between us.

Joseph Brodsky

Tsushima Screen

The perilous yellow sun follows with its slant eyes
masts of the shuddered grove steaming up to capsize
in the frozen straits of Epiphany. February has fewer
days than the other months; therefore, it's more cruel
than the rest. Dearest, it's more sound
to wrap up our sailing round
the globe with habitual naval grace,
moving your cot to the fireplace
where our dreadnought is going under
in great smoke. Only fire can grasp a winter!
Golder unharnessed stallions in the chimney
dye their manes to more corvine shades as they near the finish,
and the dark room fills with the plaintive, incessant chirring
of a naked, lounging grasshopper one cannot cup in fingers.

Joseph Brodsky