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After the War by Arseny Tarkovsky

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I

Like a tree on top of forest grass
Spreads its leafy hands through the leaves
And, leaning on a shrub, propagates
Its branches sideways, widthwise—
So I shot up gradually. My muscles
Swelled, my rib cage expanded. From the blue
Goblet with prickly alcohol, my lungs
Filled to the smallest alveoli, and my heart
Took blood from the veins and veins
Returned the blood, and took the blood again
And it was like a transfiguration
Of simple happiness and simple grief
In a prelude and fugue for organ.

II

I would be sufficient for all living things,
Both plants and people,
Who'd been dying somewhere near
And somewhere at the other end of the earth

In unimaginable suffering, like Marsyas,
Who was flayed alive. If I'd given them my life,

I would not become any poorer
In life, in myself, in my blood.

But I myself became like Marsyas. I'd long lived
Among the living, and became like Marsyas.

III

Sometimes, when you lie in the summer heat
And look at the sky, and the hot air
Rocks like a cradle above you, you
Find a strange angle of senses:
There is a gap in the crib, and through it
An outer cold penetrates, as if
Some icy needle...

IV

Like a tree splashes the earth
Above itself, collapses from a steep
Undermined by water, its roots in the air,
The rapids plucking at its branches,
So my double on the other rapids
Travels from the future to the past.
From a height, I follow myself with my eyes
And clutch at my heart.

Who gave me
Trembling branches, a powerful trunk
And weak, helpless roots?
Death is vile, but life is worse,
And there's no bridling its tyranny.
Are you leaving, Lazarus? Well, go away!
Behind you, half the sky still blazes.
Nothing holds us together. Sleep
Vivacious one, fold your hands
On your chest, and sleep.

V

Come by, take this, I don't need anything,
What I love I'll give away, and what I don't
I'll give away. I want to replace you,
But if I say that I'm going to turn into you,
Don't believe me, poor child, I'm lying...

O these hands with fingers like vines,
Open and wet eyes,
And the shells of small ears,
Like saucers full of a love song,
And wings, curved sharply by the wind.

Don't believe me, poor child, I lie,
I'll try to break away like one condemned to die,
But I cannot transgress this strangeness
Can't flap your wings or touch your eyes
With your little finger, or look
With your eyes. You're one
Hundred times stronger than me, you are
A song about yourself, and I'm
A deputy of the tree and God,
And by your judgment, sentenced for my song.

1969

Commentary

Arseny Tarkovsky (1907–1989) spent most of his life as a well-known translator of Turkmen, Georgian, Armenian, Arabic, and other languages. During the Second World War, he worked as a war correspondent until he was wounded in a German attack, which would cost him his leg. His first book of poems had been accepted for publication in 1946, but in the wake of Zhdanov’s attack on Anna Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoschenko, the book was never released. Tarkovsky’s first published volume, *Before the Snow*, was published in 1962, at the age of 55, to the acclaim of Akhmatova, who called his work “both contemporary and eternal.”

In a time when official Russian poetry was anything but independent, Tarkovsky’s verse maintained its resolute allegiance to a poetic sound and vision that hearkened back to the masters of Russian poetry. Akhmatova called Tarkovsky the one “real poet” in the Soviet Union. In her words, “of all contemporary poets Tarkovsky alone is completely his own self, completely independent. He possesses the most important feature of a poet which I’d call the birthright.” In his spiritual and poetic independence, he outlasted the dross of totalitarianism.

Vividly musical, rich in Biblical and folk echoes, Tarkovsky’s poems exude a poignant gratitude for living on earth, and a childlike wonder in nature, even though they are often set in the backdrop of terrible heartbreak of one of the most miserable centuries in Russian history.

The most difficult aspect of translating Russian poetry is carrying across the richness of its music—the diversity of meters, rhythms, and rhyme: Tarkovsky’s poetry is, in the end, a poetry that lives through its music. Any simple literal translation misses the collision of sound and meaning that makes poetry *poetry*. In “After the War,” Tarkovsky often employs unrhymed blank verse; unrhymed poetry remains unusual in Russian poetry. As importantly, Tarkovsky alludes to the mythical satyr Marsyas, whose arrogant challenge of Apollo to a musical contest led to his being flayed to death.

Dima Psurtsev and I began working together in 1992, when I lived in Moscow on a Watson Fellowship, studying contemporary Russian poetry. Dima suggested that I read Tarkovsky, and we did some basic translations of a handful of his most well-known poems. In 2009, back in Russia, I proposed that we might formalize our collaboration and translate a full-length collection of

Tarkovsky in English translation, since none had been published. Often, the process involved either my sending Dima a first draft, after which he would provide an annotation which would point out translation errors or particularly complex and allusive phrases, for future revision. We'd trade the poem back and forth until both of us were at peace that we had created something alive enough to let it into the world. The present translation was a product of this collaboration.