

Marina Tsvetaeva

The Berlin Poems:1922

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Contents

Introduction.....	4
The Berlin Poems:1922.....	5
‘There’s an hour for such words as these’	5
‘Savage, this vale’	5
‘So, in the meagre everyday labour’	6
‘Whispering at night: silk’	7
‘Go, find yourself naïve lovers: they’	8
‘Remember the law’	8
‘When will they, too,’	9
‘For the sun-scorched – an axe and a plough’	11
‘Greetings! Neither a stone nor arrow,’	12
‘For some it’s not a rule’	12
‘So that you won’t see’	13
The Balcony	14
‘Not snaring a guest at night’	14
‘Life is inimitable’	15
‘I thought: the days would be’	15
‘Hands – and in a circle’	16
Berlin.....	18
‘You may be sure – in the end!’	18
‘There’s a pale silvery colour’	18
‘Insinuating hair’	19
‘Lethe’s sightless sobbing’	20

Introduction

In May 1922, Tsvetaeva, and her daughter Ariadna, left her beloved Moscow to escape the Soviet regime she rejected, and was reunited with her husband Sergei Efron in Berlin. There, she continued to publish her previous poetry, which appeared in Berlin and Moscow adding to her substantial literary reputation, and wrote the poems translated here. In August 1922, the exiled family moved to Prague, living there a life of poverty. In 1925 the family settled in Paris for some years, until their ill-fated return to Russia; Efron and their daughter Ariadne in 1937 via Spain, and Marina in 1939; he destined for execution, Ariadne for imprisonment, and Marina to great hardship ended by her tragic suicide in 1941, leaving her son Mur (Georgy). Ariadne was subsequently released in 1955, while Mur died in 1944 on the Eastern Front. Marina was in communication with both Rilke and Pasternak during her most productive poetic period, while Mandelstam and Akhmatova both admired her work, created with courage in the face of great adversity.

The Berlin Poems:1922

'There's an hour for such words as these'

There's an hour for such words as these.
From the depths of muffled hearing,
Life taps out
Its noble rights.

Perhaps – from a brow,
Leant on a shoulder.
Perhaps – from a ray of light,
Unseen by day.

On a bowstring's motionless
Dust – the wave of a sheet.
A tribute to the hour's fears,
And its ashes.

An hour of heated
Arbitrariness – and quietest pleas.
An hour of exiled fellowship.
An hour of the orphaned world.

11th June 1922

'Savage, this vale'

Savage, this vale.
Love afar.
Hands: salt and light,
Lips: saliva and blood.

Left breast of thunder,
The brow set above.
So – brow of stone –
Who's shown you love?

The god of invention!
The god of design!
Here: in a lark's flight,
Here: in honeysuckle
Here: in handfuls: splashed all about,
In my wildness, calmness,
My rainbows of tears,
My cunning, my prevarication...

Life, my darling!
Greedy yet!
Remember your grip
On my right shoulder.

These trills in the dark...
With the birds, I wake!
My happy instant
In your annals.

12th June 1922

'So, in the meagre everyday labour'

Thus, in the meagre everyday work,
Thus, in convulsive toil towards it,
You forget the companionable choir,
All the band of courageous girls.

Its severity is a bitter gift,
A hidden heat's frail timidity,
And the fierce unwired shock
Whose name is – distance.

All ancient words, but: *give* and *mine*,
All jealousies, but this earthly one,
All faith – in mortal struggle, too,

– How pure! – and a sigh.
Not that one. Past.
Gone.
A twitch
Of the shoulder.

Nothing
Vanity.
The end.
How not?

And, in this vanity of vanities,
This blade – dawn.

17th June 1922

‘Go, find yourself naïve lovers: they’

Go, find yourself naïve lovers: they
Won’t correct marvels by number.
I know that Venus was – hand made,
I’m an artisan, with craft encumbered.

From the highest solemnity, dumb,
To the soul almost trampled to death,
Here’s the whole celestial stair – from
My breathing – to: not one breath!

18th June 1922

‘Remember the law’

Remember the law:
No ownership here!
So then –
In the City of Friends:

In this emptiness,
In this coolness
Under Man's skies –
All made of gold –

In this realm, where the river flows backwards!
On the bank – of the river,
Take, in the phantom of a hand,
The pretence of another hand...

A weightless spark,
A tremor – an answering tremor.
(The uncertainty of hands
Concealed in a handshake!)

O the friendly splashing,
Garments flat as a blade,
Beneath the sky of Man's deities,
Beneath Man's triumphant skies!

As between adolescents,
As between firm equals,
In the fresh latitudes
Of dawn, in sun-drawn

Play, in the arid wind,
Hail, dispassionate souls!
In the air under Tarpeian cliffs,
In the air, a Spartan friendship.

18th June 1922

'When will they, too,'

When, will they, too,
Enter my life, Lord,
The calm of grey hair,

The calm of old age?

When, will the draughting
Of all these attempts
Shoulder on high
All life has endured?

You know, Lord, alone,
Alone, no one but you,
How, out of lumps of down,
I tore blue mountains.

How, behind stubborn lips,
Sleep – I listened to – grass...
(Here in the realm of the arts
I've a reputation for words!)

How, tormented by lies,
I went – slaving for rent,
How the remnants of life
Lived the tree's first tremor...

The tree's – first – tremor
The dove's – first – labour
(Isn't that *your* work,
Pride, isn't that *your* work
Faith?)

– Cease
Photography's keen arrows!
In love's cryptography
The sky – what a blank!

Were it – not – for dawn:
Stir, and trill, and leaves,
Were it not for the stir,

This stir – life

Realised so...

Not a ray, but a scourge –
To the tender honeysuckle.
To garnering the prize,
The sky – what a limit!

Dawn. The cart-horse
Takes to the road. – A start. – Let's go.
A sudden silent twitch
The shoulder remembers.

Hidden...

Morning poured
From a pail. Drawn with chalk.
In the annals of Eve,
The sky – what a blank!

22nd-23rd June 1922

'For the sun-scorched – an axe and a plough'

For the sun-scorched – an axe and a plough.
Sufficient – tribute to earthly dust!
For the hands of the craftsman,
It's early lies the path to labour.

Greetings – in Old Testament darkness,
The endless masculine handshakes!

Smoking fruits of the moss and honey –
Begone creature of the last of sleep!
Through furry heaps of slumber,
Sarah-Command, and Hagar-

Heart – abandoning...

– celebrate, at daylight,
The endless masculine handshakes!

24th June 1922

‘Greetings! Neither a stone nor arrow,’

Greetings! Neither a stone nor arrow,
I! – The liveliest of wives:
Life. With both hands,
In your drowsy slumber

Give! (With a forked tongue,
With! – a snake’s forkedness!)
All of me, bare-headed,
All my joyousness, take!

Cling! A day for sailing!
– Cling! – For skiing! – Cling! – Clinger!
I’m in a fresh skin today:
The gilded one, the seventh!

– Mine! – And what price
Eden – when in the hands, at the lips,
There’s Life: yawning joyfully,
Greet the dawn!

25th June 1922

‘For some it’s not a rule’

For some – it’s not a rule:
At the hour, when notionally
Sleep is right, almost sacred,
Some don’t sleep.

They’re peering – at the most

Secret petal: not at you!

Some folk – are not drowsy:
At the hour, when every lip
Is parched with recent woe –
Some folk still don't drink:

They're absorbed – and
Clench-fisted – in the sand!

To some – the unbending,
Life is dearly-given.

25th June 1922

'So that you won't see'

So that you'll not see into –
My life – I'll surround myself,
With strong and secret fencing.

Bound with honeysuckle,
Coated with rime.

So that you'll not hear me,
At night – with the wisdom of the old:
Concealment – I'll grow stronger.

I'll surround myself with rustling,
I'll descend to rustling-sounds,

So that you'll not bloom too much
In me – amidst thickets: amidst books,
I will disappear alive:

I'll surround you with fictions,
Put you down to my fancy.

25th June 1922

The Balcony

Oh, from the free plummet –
Down – to the dirt and tar!
Earthly love's scant weight,
Salted with tears – how long?

Balcony. Through salty downpours,
Black pitch of malicious kisses.
And inescapable enmity's
Sigh: breathed out in verse!

Squeezed to a ball in my hand –
What? My heart or a batiste rag
Of a handkerchief? These dousings
Possess a name: – the Jordan.

Yes, since this battle with love
Is savage and hard-hearted.
So, from the granite brow,
Launch – breathed out in death!

30th June 1922

'Not snaring a guest at night'

Not snaring a guest at night...
Sleep, and sleep on forever,
In the most tested of havens
This impossible light.

But if – don't think that your ear
Deceives! – loving – strays
A little, and if night sobs

And a zither's – the chest...

Then my be-laurelled lover
Has turned his steeds from
The Stadium. Then the god's
Jealous towards his favourite.

2nd July 1922

'Life is inimitable'

Life is inimitable:
Beyond expectations, beyond lies...
But in the tremor of the lived
You can discover: life!

Like lying in rye: tinkling, blue...
(Well, that is to lie in a lie!) – heat, depth:
Murmurs – through honeysuckle – hundred-lived:
Rejoice now! – Summoned!

And don't blame me, friend, so
Bewitched are we in body,
Soul – that already: the brow nods.
For – why did it sing?

Into the white book of your silences,
Into the raw clay of your 'yes' –
I quietly bow my shattered brow:
For that open palm – is life.

8th July 1922

'I thought: the days would be'

I thought: the days would be
Easy – and the closeness

Fearless – with a wave of the hand,
Friend, put an end to tenderness!

Not – late as yet!
In the species – chinks of light
(Not late!) – as yet
We birds have not sung.

Be on – the alert!
Place your last bets!
No: tomorrow, friend
Will prove too late!

The earth is weightless!
Friend, in the heart's depths!
No one, of our years,
Holds back from death.

The dead – sleep – though!
Only my sleep is not –
Sleep! With a wave of the shovel
Friend, put an end to memory!

9th July 1922

'Hands – and in a circle'

Hands – and in a circle
Of resale, redeployment!
If only lips, if only hands
I could save from confusion!

All of these
Vanities, that rob me of sleep!
Lifting my hands,
Friend, I conjure
My memories.

So that, in poetry,
(Midden of my majesties!)
You won't wither,
Won't shrink like the rest.

So that, in my breast
(My thousand-breasted, fraternal
Graveyard!) – the rains
Of a thousand years won't wash you away...

A body among bodies,
– You, the warrior lost to me!
So that, it won't decay,
Labelled: *Unknown*.

9th July 1922

Berlin

The rain calms the anguish.
Behind the downpour's shutters
I sleep. Hooves clattering
On the asphalt – like applause.

Congratulations – merging.
In this golden abandonment,
To the most fabled of orphans,
You, my barracks, show mercy!

10th July 1922

'You may be sure – in the end!'

You may be sure – in the end! –
That, cast there on her pallet,
She'd no need for fame, nor
The treasures of Solomon.

No, hands behind her head,
– With her nightingale's throat! –
Not of treasure – Shulamit sang:
But a handful of red clay!

12th July 1922

'There's a pale silvery colour'

There's a pale silvery colour
Over the ponds and thickets.
The curtain blows. Through the opening,
Hesitant, absent-mindedly,

Light – descends in a watery
Veil (no fuss, no bother!)
That’s how the faery-women sometimes
Sneak into their lover’s hearts.

For years, free of all command,
Sleep! – savour light-headedness!
Without reading my omens,
Sleep, my tender polarity!

Sleep – I’ll remain a phantasm,
Smoothing your wrinkled brow.
So, Muses for mortals, sometimes,
Turn themselves into mistresses.

16th July 1922

‘Insinuating hair’

Insinuating hair:
In its smoothness and gloss,
A longitudinal dazzling.

Midnight blue-black, fit for
A raven. Smoothed, at will,
Along its length – with your palm.

My tender one! No one’s fooled!
Thus, malicious thought’s
Smoothed over: break-up – separation.

The last creak of the stair...
So smooth, the roses’
Thorn...stabbing your finger!

I know a great deal of the life
Of hands – in their light sweep,

Stubbornly and intently

I track the lack of unruliness
That is yours: pitch-black,
Protesting under the pressure.

I feel sorry for your emphatic
Palms: in your glossy
Hair – almost across

The region of your eyes...driving within
Your obsessive thoughts: morning's
Delusions – under your skull.

17th July 1922

'Lethe's sightless sobbing'

Lethe's sightless sobbing,
Your debt forgiven: leached
Into Lethe – barely, barely alive –
In the silvery willows' babble.

Willows' silvery splashing,
Weeping... into the crypt's blind flow,
Memory – over-weary – wreathed
In willows' silvery weeping.

Shouldering – an ancient silver-grey
Cloak, shouldering dry silvery
Ivy – over-weary – lie
In incense's blind, Lethian, poppy-flower

Darkness – for red grows
Ancient, purple turns – grey
In the memory – having drained all –
Leaching dryness.

Dimness: damaged veins'
Stinginess: young sibyl's
Blindness, mind-aching
Grey-headed: leadenness.

Berlin, 31st July 1922