After Russia
Also by Marina Tsvetaeva in Christopher Whyte’s translations

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Marina Tsvetaeva

After Russia

(Paris 1928)
The Second Notebook

translated from the Russian by
Christopher Whyte

Shearsman Books
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After Russia
(Paris, 1928)

Second Notebook

Souviennent-vous de celuy à qui, comme on demandoit à quoi faire il se peinoit si fort en un art qui ne pouvoit venir à la connaissance de guère des gens, –

Montaigne
SAMPLER
Hamlet and His Conscience Talking

She lies at the bottom, in the sludge and weeds… She went there to sleep – Even there she’ll get none!
– But I loved her as forty thousand brothers cannot!

– Hamlet!

She lies at the bottom, in the sludge: sludge!… Her last wreath surfaced by the riverside logs…
– But I loved her as forty thousand…

– Less, however, than one single lover.

She lies at the bottom, in the sludge…
– But I –

(perplexed) – loved her??

June 5th 1923
Mariner

Starry craft, rock me to sleep!
My head has had enough of waves!

I’ve hunted for moorings too long –
it’s had enough of feelings, too:

of laurel leaves, odes, hydras, heroes,
my head has enough of games!

Lay me amidst green grass and pines –
my head has had enough of wars…

June 12th 1923
The Fissure

Neither love nor friendship can explain what it was led that affair to end. With every day your answer’s quieter, with every day you’re more completely lost.

And so, indifferent to one and all – nothing more than a tree ruffling twigs – as if into a fissure lined with ice – behind ribs that collided so with you.

From a whole treasure house of likenesses, fortune-telling – here are some – at random: you sleep inside me like inside a crystal coffin, like far down inside a wound –

the crack inside a block of ice is tight! Ice floes are jealous of the dead they hold: the ring, the coat of mail, the seal, the belt… No hope of coming back, of a response.

No point in piling curses upon Helen, widows! This is no fire from Helen’s burning Troy! Fissures in ice are palest blue, where they end you can find a resting place…

You plus me is like Empedocles plus Etna… Visionary, fall asleep! And tell them back at home that there’s no point: inside me’s jealous of the dead it holds.

June 17th 1923
I won’t arrive on time for the appointment. But I’ll bring along an extra something picked up on the way – spring. I’ll be grey. The meeting place you fixed on was sublime!

I’ll get there across years – Ophelia’s fondness for bitter rue was unabating! I’ll get there across mountains – across squares, I’ll get there across souls – and across hands.

Earth needs time for living through! The blood’s a cavern and each drop is a backwater. Ophelia’s features, though, are to be seen in bitter grass by every brook you pass.

Having drunk her fill of passion, she drank sludge next! Like a sheaf on the detritus! The way in which I loved you was sublime: the sky’s the place I made myself a grave!

June 18th 1923
Too early – not to be!
Too early – not to burn!
Tenderness! Savage lash
of otherworldly meetings.

Tightly though you may cling,
the sky’s vat’s bottomless!
For a love such as this
too early – without wounds!

Jealousy makes life live!
And blood longs to spill out
on soil. What widow gives
up her right to the sword?

Jealousy makes life live!
May injury done hearts
be blessèd! Does grass give
up its right to the scythe?

Grass thirsting secretly…
Each stalk murmuring: “Break me…”
When I’m reduced to rags,
my wounds will still be – mine!

Until you yourself stitch
our common seam – I’ll pour!
Too early for ice floes
in otherworldly lands!

June 19th 1923