

Selections

Taras Shevchenko

The Girl under a Spell

The wide Dnipro roars and moans,
An angry wind howls aloft.
It bends the tall willows down,
Lifting waves as high as mountains.
And at that time a pale moon
Peeks out from behind a cloud now and then,
Like a tiny boat in a deep blue sea
It jumps up and dives down.
The cocks had yet to crow three times,
No one anywhere making a sound,
The owls in the grove called to each other,
And the ash tree creaked now and then.

Taras Shevchenko. "Prychynna" Lines 1–12 of 225.

The Haidamaks, excerpt

Everything moves, everything passes, and there is no end.
Where did it all disappear? From where did it all come?
Both the fool and the wise man know nothing.
One lives... one dies... one thing blooms,
But another has withered, withered away forever...
And winds have carried off yellowed leaves,
And the sun will rise, as it used to rise,
And crimson stars will float off as they used to,
They will float afterwards, and you, white-faced one,
Will saunter along the blue sky.

Taras Shevchenko. "Haidamaky" Lines 1–10 of 2565

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The days pass, the nights pass,
As does summer. Yellowed leaves
Rustle, eyes grow dim,
Thoughts fall asleep, the heart sleeps,
All has gone to rest, and I don't know
Whether I'm alive or will live,
Or whether I'm rushing like this through the world,
For I'm no longer weeping or laughing...

My fate, fate, where are you now?
I have none;
If you begrudge me a good one, Lord,
Then give me a bad one!
Let a walking man not sleep,
To die in spirit
And knock about the entire world
Like a rotten stump.
But let me live, with my heart live
And love people.
And if not... then curse
And burn the world!
It's horrible to end up in chains
To die in captivity,
But it's worse to be free
And to sleep, and sleep, and sleep—
And to fall asleep forever,
And to leave no trace
At all, as if it were all the same
Whether you had lived or died!
Fate, where are you, fate where are you?
I have none!
If you begrudge me a good one, Lord,
Then give me a bad one! A bad one!

1845

Taras Shevchenko. "Mynaiut' dni, mynaiut' nochi"

My Testament

When I die, bury me
On a grave mound
Amid the wide-wide steppe
In my beloved Ukraine,
In a place from where the wide-tilled fields
And the Dnipro and its steep banks
Can be seen and
Its roaring rapids heard.
When it carries off
The enemy's blood from Ukraine
To the deep blue sea... I'll leave
The tilled fields and mountains—
I'll leave everything behind and ascend
To pray to God
Himself... but till then
I don't know God.
Bury me and arise, break your chains
And sprinkle your freedom
With the enemy's evil blood.
And don't forget to remember me
In the great family,
In a family new and free,
With a kind and quiet word.

December 25, 1845
Pereiaslav

Taras Shevchenko. "Iak umru, to pokhovaite"

N. N.

The sun sets, the mountains darken,
A bird grows quiet, the field grows mute,
People rejoice that they will rest,
And I look... And with my heart I rush forth
To a dark tiny orchard... to Ukraine
I think a thought, I ponder it,
And it's as though my heart is resting.
The field blackens, the grove and mountains, too,
And a star emerges in the blue sky.
Oh star! Star! —and tears fall.
Have you already risen in Ukraine yet?
Are brown eyes searching for you
In the deep blue sky? Or do they forget?
If they've forgotten, may they fall asleep,
To keep from hearing of my fate.

The second half of 1847, Orsk Fortress

Taras Shevchenko. "Sontse zakhodyt', hory chorniut"

* * *

Thoughts of mine, thoughts of mine,
You are all that is left for me,
Don't you desert me, too,
In this troubling time.
Come fly to me my gray-winged
Doves,
From beyond the wide Dnipro
To wander in the steppes
With the poor Kirghiz.
They already are destitute
And naked... But they still pray
To God in freedom.
Fly here, my dear ones.
With peaceful words
I'll welcome you like children,
And we'll weep together.

1847, Orsk Fortress

Taras Shevchenko. "Dumy moi, dumy moi, / Vy moi iedyni"

* * *

And the unwashed sky, and drowsy waves;
And above the shore far away
The reed bends like a drunk
Without a wind. My dear Lord!
Will it still be long for me
To yearn for the world
In this unlocked prison
Above this wretched sea? In the steppes
The yellowed grass does not speak,
It is silent and bends as though it were alive;
It does not want to disclose the truth,
But there is no one else to ask.

Second Half of 1848, Kosaral

Taras Shevchenko. "I nebo nevmyte, I zaspani khvyli"

In captivity, alone there is no one
With whom to join your heart.
Alone, I'm searching for someone
To talk to.
I'm searching for God, but I find only
That God forbid I say it.
This is what the years and cruel fate
Have done to me; add to this
That my precious youth
Has passed in clouds, that there isn't
Even a single event
That's worth recalling.
But you have to comfort your soul,
For it so wants, so pleads at least
For a word of peace. You can't hear,
It's as though the snow in the field is
Drifting over a still warm corpse.

1848

Taras Shevchenko, "V nevoli, v samoti nemaie"

* * *

Once again the mail has not brought me
 Anything from my home, Ukraine...
 Maybe I'm being punished
 For my sinful deeds
 By an angry God. It's not for me
 To know why I'm being punished.
 And I don't even want to know.
 But my heart cries when I recall
 The unhappy events
 And those unhappy days
 That passed over me
 Once in my Ukraine...
 Once they swore oaths and made pacts
 Of brotherhood and sisterhood with me,
 Until, like a cloud, they scattered
 Without tears, without this sacred dew.
 And once again in old age
 I cast on mankind this... No! no!
 They've all died of cholera,
 But if only they'd send me just
 A scrap of paper

 Oh, out of sorrow and regret
 So as not to see how they read
 Those letters, I take walks,
 I stroll looking above the sea
 And console my grief.
 And I remember Ukraine
 And sing a little song.
 People will talk, people will betray you,
 But it will cheer me,
 Cheer and comfort me,
 And will tell me the truth.

Second Half of 1848, Kosaral

Taras Shevchenko. "I znov meni ne pryvezla"

* * *

It's not for people or for fame,
That I pen these
Ornate and embroidered poems.
They're for me, my brothers!
 It's easier in captivity
 When I compose them.
 It's as though words fly to me
 From beyond the far-off Dnipro River
 And spread out on paper,
 Crying and laughing
 Like children. They give joy
 To a lonely, wretched
 Soul. It's pleasant for me.
 They give me pleasure,
 The way it is for a wealthy father
 with his little children.
 And I am joyful and lighthearted,
 And I plead for God
 Not to put my children to bed
 In a far-off land.
 Let them fly homeward
 My fleeting children.
 And they will say how difficult
 It has been for them on earth:
 And in a joyous family the children
 Will quietly be welcomed,
 And the father will nod
 His gray head.
 The mother will say: "I wish these
 Children had not been born."
 And the girl shall reflect:
 "I loved them."

Second Half of 1848, Kosaral

Taras Shevchenko. "Ne dlia liudei, tiiei slavy"

* * *

I'm well-to-do
And very pretty,
But I don't have a mate.
My fate's so cruel!
It's hard to live in this world
Not having someone to love,
To wear velvet coats
When I'm all alone.
I'd fall in love,
I'd get married
To a dark-haired orphan,
But it's not my choice!
My father and mother stay awake all night
Standing guard,
They don't even let me out alone
In the garden to stroll.
When they let me, it's only
With a really awful old man,
With my wealthy unbeloved,
With my wicked foe!

Second Half of 1848, Kosaral

Taras Shevchenko. "I bahata ia"

* * *

In captivity I count the days and nights,
Then lose count.
O, Lord. How hard
These days drag on.
And the years flow between them.
They quietly flow by,
They take away the good and bad
With themselves!
They take away, without returning
Anything ever!
And don't plead, for your prayer
Will be lost on God.

And the fourth year passes
Quietly, slowly,
And I begin to embroider
My fourth book in captivity—I embroider
My sorrow in a foreign land
With blood and tears.
For you never can tell
Your grief to anyone in words,
Ever, ever,
Nowhere in the world! There are no words
In far-off captivity!
There are no words, no tears,
No nothing.
You don't even have great God
Around you!
There is nothing to look at,
No one to speak to.
You don't feel like living in the world,
But you have to live.
I must, I must, but why?
Not to lose my soul?
It's not worth this sorrow...
This is why I am fated
To live in the world, to drag
These chains in captivity.
Maybe some day I'll still look
At my Ukraine...
Maybe some day I'll share
My word-tears with

Green oak groves,
Dark meadows!
For I have no kin
In all of Ukraine.
But still, the people aren't the same
As in this foreign land!
I'd stroll along the Dnipro River
Through cheerful villages
And I'd sing my thoughts in songs,
Quiet ones, sad ones.
Let me live to that day, to glance,
Dear God,
At these green fields,
At these grave mounds.
If you don't grant me this, then carry
My tears
To my land; for I, Lord,
I am dying for her!
Perhaps it will be easier
To lay myself down in this foreign land
If from time to time
They'll remember me in Ukraine!
Carry my tears there, my Lord!
Or at least send hope
To my soul... for there is nothing
That I can do with my wretched head,
For my heart grows cold
When I think that perhaps
I'll be buried
In a foreign land—and these thoughts
Will be buried with me.
And no one in Ukraine
Will remember me!

And perhaps quietly after the years
My thoughts embroidered by tears
Will reach Ukraine
Sometime... and fall,
Like dew, over the land,
They will quietly fall
Over a sincere young heart!
And this heart will bow its head
And will weep with me,
And, perhaps, Lord,

Will remember me in prayer!

Let be what will be.
Whether to flow on or wander,
At least I'll be forced to crucify myself!
But I'll quietly embroider
These white pages anyway.

1850

Taras Shevchenko. "Lichu v nevoli dni i nochi" (First version)

* * *

Even till now I have this dream: among the willows
And above the water near a mountain
There is a tiny white bungalow. A grayed grandfather
Sits near the bungalow and watches
His tiny grandson, so nice
And curly-haired.

Even till now I have this dream: a happy
Smiling mother steps out of the house
And kisses grandfather and the child,
She joyfully kisses him three times,
Takes him into her arms and nurses him,
And carries him to bed. And grandfather
Sits there and smiles, and quietly
Whispers: "Where is that misery?
That sadness? Those foes?"

And in a whisper the old man,
Crossing himself, recites the Our Father.
Through the willow tree the sun shines
And quietly dies out. The day is done,
And all has gone to sleep. The grayed old man
Has gone himself to the house to rest.

1850, Orenburg

Taras Shevchenko. "I dosi snyt'sia: pid horoiu"

Destiny

You were not devious with me,
You became a friend, a brother and
A sister for a poor wretch. You took me,
A little boy, by the hand
And led me off to school
To a tipsy deacon's lessons.
Study hard, my darling, and someday
We'll be somebody, you said.
And I listened and studied,
And learned the lessons. But you lied.
We're not the somebodies you promised?... But never mind!
We were not devious with you,
We walked straight; there's not
A grain of falsity in our breasts,
So let's go on then, my destiny!
My wretched, undeceiving friend!
Go on further. Further there'll be fame,
And fame is my testament.

February 9, 1858
Nizhny Novgorod

Taras Shevchenko. "Dolia (Ty ne lukavyla zo mnoiu)"

Translated by Michael M. Naydan

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