

Reading Sample

POEMS by Volha Hapeyeva

translation into English by Forrest Gander

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hard to be a road
especially at the painted zebra
crossing
there
the hOriZOntal
and
the VERTicAl
rush together people and cars
animals sometimes
dogs and pigeons
and bicycles – new ones and the ones inherited from those born in the 1930's

as a child
I often confused the horizontal with the vertical
and each time I uttered those words,
I imagined a horizon

the horizon, such a long narrow line
in the distance
behind which just now just now the sea
is about to appear
as I, the road,
disappear

•

like a foot in a shoe
 not yet broken-in
my heart clenches and if
it's not about size
then what?
wine, coffee, beer, maybe tea
such a sononymy, daughternomy and childnessness
and infants out of wedlock
 —they're not mine
I can't move
(so apt that “m” and “l”
 are neighbors on the keyboard—
much closer than we are)
and the gallows
 suggested by parked cranes:
I hang my desolation on them
day after day
while you deal with yours in a gulp.
In some unpeopled park
during my lunch break, I'll torture my grief
but not even my lost earring will reveal
that the criminal is
 me

•

if I lived in 1908
I'd be Emmeline Pankhurst
I'd go to demonstrations
and I might come to catch something
shaped like a tumor--
sort of yellow and bronze--
in my chest,
and some man, unfolding a newspaper the next day
would think:
she just walked into the wrong place
at the wrong time.

with a naïve hope I'd be reborn as Sonya
copying out the novels of my genius husband for days on end
rearranging his words for harmony
and the words would love me, pity me, and think
she was in the wrong place
at the wrong time

having been born here and now
I put on a skirt or pants
or sometimes an elation
but most often I put on my conviction
that what matters isn't the time or place
but that man with the newspaper, that reporter and his editor,
pity and words and tumors and novels
and geniuses
and maybe even a tight-fitting wine cork

once you asked:
if I had the chance to choose,
where would I be born and as whom

I like to choose an answer to please and
surprise you, but there's nothing to think about
For me there is no choice
I can tell you the truth

to be a Chinese peasant in the twelfth century
herding cattle, on the look-out for hazards
wishing only for a bowl of hot noodles

unlike you with your new york turn of the century jazz

choice

is never time nor place

but something more trivial

a kind of multiple of my existence

say—the existence of yours

•

when you are a tree
and the wind has abandoned you,

you can stand still for centuries

and why care about birds with their piercing summer songs

when you are
a tree
the wind abandons

•

believing in miracles on Christmas is no longer
tolerable
not because I'm of age
but because behind every miracle there's someone's big job
it's kind of embarrassing and shameful to want someone to do something in
your stead only because you want a miracle
so this year I decided—no more
miracle
and there wasn't one
and somebody finally may have met the right person
or calmed down or been granted the day off
coming back from the job of loving someone you don't anymore,
piles of postcards don't help
no matter how hard you stick them like mustard plasters to the body
which can't understand why nobody embraces it anymore
and can't make sense of this absence.

I am lost
and the body trembles
it can't parse the word
that took you from me

in a recurrent hope I'm pressing the “home” key
but I don't get home

•

a little pony carries little children
for the money
their parents pay to its owner
but it's still not enough
to eat sweet carrots for dinner every day
which is why tonight the little pony gets dry grass

I'm nothing like a pony
and nothing like little children
maybe I'm more like a carrot
or the grass
you've been chewing for who knows how many years

there was a time
before I could spell when my mom
read to me that book in which
a little pony carries little children
for free

•

they handed out compulsory happiness yesterday
on some unknown Strasse.

someone ran up to me saying
you have such irregular eyes, please,
take a bit for yourself.

I brought it home and hid it
in the cupboard without reading
the instructions.

and then it turned out
I had to live with it.

•

I'm opening my lips to the wind at a run,
for dessert I'm ordering a caramel day
so what if I wanted to marry a shadow
for me your shadow was enough
but the thing was that your language
had no future forms
so I used to and fell
into some plusquamperfection