

Eduard Bagritsky

FEBRUARY

Here I am back again in this land.  
I pass by  
Again under the young planetrees,  
Again, children run amid the parkbenches,  
Again, the sea lies covered in the smoke of ships...  
Here I am, a volunteer, in epaulets,  
Edged in colored piping, -  
Here I am, a warrior, the hero of Stokhod,  
The strongman of the Mazovian mires, morosely  
Plodding along in my crooked boots,  
And my half-fallen cap...  
I am on furlough, so that my every muscle,  
My every cell could take in the movement of the  
wind tangled up in foliage,  
Pigeonlike warmth of breath  
Of tanned youths, the sun playing tag  
In the sand, the sea's salty caress...  
I'm used to anything: the world  
From which I broke free  
was burnt through by the shells,  
Pierced by bayonets, tightly wound in  
Barbed wire, obnoxiously  
Reeked of sweat and sour bread...  
I now must find a corner in this world,  
Where a clean towel hangs on its nail,  
Where it smells of mother, the soap - by the faucet,  
And the Sun, running through the window,  
Doesn't burn my face like embers...  
Here I am again on the boulevard.

Again

Pansies are in bloom on all the lawns,  
A man in a naval cap is reading  
A crimson-covered book;  
A girl, her skirt cut just above the knee  
Plays diablo; on some balcony  
A parrot screams in his silver cage.  
And I am now like an equal among all these,  
When I want - I sit, when I want - I stroll,  
When I want (if no officer in sight) -  
I smoke, observing how a graceful  
Leaf floats over the benches, how fly the  
Wrens past the townhall's clock...  
The most important would  
Occur at four.  
From behind the kiosk  
There will appear a cloaked girl, -

Swinging her striped rucksack,  
She'd be flung open, like breath,  
To the cool sea, sunbeams and birds,  
In her green dress made of weightless  
wool, she swims, into a dance -  
Into a vortex of leaves and heavens of  
Flowers and butterflies above the lawn.  
She's walking home from school...  
Along with her - From a forgotten world,  
In circles, fly school-bells,  
Girlfriends' whispers, a notebook angel  
And teachers' clatter in the corridors.  
The planetrees sing before her, and the sea,  
Hoarsely, walks her along...  
I never loved according to the rules...  
A small Judean boy -  
I, perhaps, the only one in town  
Was to shiver nightly from the steppe's winds.  
I, like a somnambulist, plodded along the railroad  
Toward quiet summer cottages, where in thistles,  
Gooseberries or wild rowan  
Murmur hedgehogs and vipers hiss,  
And in the thick, where it's the most impassable,  
Darts the red-headed birdie  
Whose song is hairpin thin,  
It is known as "Oxeye"...  
How I, born to a Jew, and  
Circumcised on the seventh day,  
Became a birdcatcher - I don't know!  
Harder than Mayne-Reid I loved Alfred Brem!  
My hands shook from passion,  
When blindly I opened the book...  
And from its pages birds flew at me  
Birds, like strange letters,  
Sabers and horns, spheres and diamonds.  
It seems the constellation of Sagittarius got  
Stuck over the blackness of my abode,  
Over a despicable Jewish babe,  
Goose-schmalz, over the rote  
Of tedious prayers, over the beards  
On family daguerrotypes...  
I didn't peep, like others,  
Through the bathhouse cracks.  
I didn't ever try  
To furtively pinch a classmate...  
Timidity and dizziness  
Plagued me.  
I made myself run sideways  
Across the garden, where  
Girls in uniforms sang choruses...  
Only having lost my vigilance, oblivious to  
myself, could I give in to  
Bluntly ogling a maiden's

Naked calves.  
Up on a chair,  
She wiped the panes with a rag..  
Suddenly the glass whistled like a bird -  
And before me flew forth  
Yellowhammers, dry leaves,  
Murky puddles full of forget-me-nots,  
Women's shoulders and birds' wings,  
Whistle of flight, murmur of skirts,  
Nightingales' clicks, the song of a  
Young neighbor from across the street, -  
And finally, more clearly, more cleanly,  
In the world of habits, customs,  
Under the streetlamp near my hovel -  
Nightingale's eye in a maiden's face..  
Just like now, looking under the bonnet,  
In the weak shadow I saw eyes.  
They were full of a nightingale's tremble,  
They, rocking, floated by  
To the rhythm of her heels, over them hung  
A lock of hair, golden against the skin..  
Along the alley, past the lawn,  
Walked the liceum dress,  
And a hundred paces behind, like an assasin,  
Stumbling over benches and bumping into  
People and trees, whispering curses,  
I walked in my tall boots, a greasy  
Olive tunic, hair closely  
Cropped as befits a military man,  
Still not without an old habit of haunching -  
The platoon's sharp, a little jewboy..  
She peered into vitrines,  
And there, amid transparent silks and jars  
Mysterious, unhuman,  
Was reflected her watery face..  
She paused by flowergirls,  
And her fingers chose a rose, that  
Was swimming in an enameled pot,  
Like a little terrycloth fish.  
The colonial shop  
Smelled of burnt coffee, cinnamon,  
And in that odor, mixed with the wet rose,  
Over heaps of leaves in baskets,  
She seemed a wonderbird  
Escaped from Brem's compendium..  
I now did my best to get out of active duty.  
How many banknotes flew  
Into the hands of the platoon scrivener!  
I plied my captains with the best of vodkas,  
Brought them tobacco and cured sides of pork..  
Like a nomad,  
Coughing in asthmatic throes,  
I wandered between the districts.

I huffed and puffed,  
Spat into bottles, drank my medication,  
I stood naked, skinny and anshaved,  
Under the stoscopes of medical committees..  
And when I succeeded, with  
Merit or without - who shall remember this? -  
To obtain another furlough pass,  
I shined my boots to gleam,  
Straightened my tunic - and sprightly  
Marched to the boulevard, where among the planetrees  
An oriole sang in terracotta voice,  
And the familiar dress greened  
Over the alley's sand,  
Curving, like smoke..  
Again I stalked her, melting,  
Cursing, stumbling into benches..  
She went into the cinema,  
Into the chattering darkness, into the tremble  
Of a green light in the square frame,  
Where a woman wrung her alabaster hands  
Over an extinguished fireplace  
And a man in a granite plastron  
Shot out of a mute revolver..  
I knew her friends by face,  
I knew their habits, smiles, gestures.  
Their slow pace, when one deliberately tries  
With his chest, thigh, hand  
To feel through the fragile cloth  
The alarmed softness of maiden's skin..  
I knew it all..  
Birds flew away..  
Grass withered..  
Stars perished..  
The maiden walked across the light,  
Picking flowers, her eyelashes lowered..  
Autumn..  
The air is soaked with rain,  
Autumn..  
Grieve, perish and lament!  
I'll approach her today.  
I will stand  
Before her.  
I will not let her veer off.  
No empty bustle.  
Take all courage!  
Get hold of yourself.  
No slacking off!  
The kiosk is boarded up..  
By the townhall clock  
The pigeons teem.  
Soon - four.  
She was an hour early, -  
Bonnet in her hand..

Reddish hair,  
Transparent with the heatless sun,  
Sways by her cheeks...  
Silence.  
And the voice of  
A titmouse, lost in this world...  
I must approach her.  
I must  
Approach her without fail.  
I must  
Approach her by all means necessary.  
Don't think,  
Shake up - into pursuit.  
Enough horsefeathers!..  
But my feet wouldn't move,  
As if they were made of stone.  
And the torso  
Feels chained to the parkbench.  
Getting up - impossible...  
A lout! A fool!  
The girl by now was in the middle of the square,  
And in the dark-gray circle of museums  
Her dress, borne by the wind,  
Seemed finer and greener still..  
I rose with such effort,  
As if I were permanently bolted  
To the bench.  
Now I tear myself off - without looking back  
I run after the girl into the square.  
All I have nightly read about,  
Sick, hungry, and halfclad, -  
About birds with strange un-Russian names,  
About people from an unknown planet,  
A world, in which inhabitants play tennis,  
Drink orangeade, kiss women, -  
All this moved before me,  
Dressed in a woolen dress,  
Aflame with red curls,  
Swinging a striped rucksack,  
Mincing heels...  
On her shoulder I'd put my hand:  
"Look at me!  
I am your grief!  
I sentence you to the unheard  
Torment of nightingales' passion!  
Stay!"  
Around the corner -  
In twenty paces her green dress.  
In a moment I'd overtake her.  
A bit more  
effort - we would walk abreast...  
I give her an officer's salute,  
What shall I say? My tongue

Mutters some nonsense:

- Allow me...

Don't run away... Say, may I

Walk with you? I was in trenches!..

She is silent.

She wouldn't blink

An eye.

She speeds

Her pace.

Beggarlike I run along,

Politely bent.

I wasn't meant

To be her equal!..

Like an imbecile

I mutter more daft words...

Then: sudden halt...

She silently

Turns her head - I see

Red hair, a blue-green

Eye and a purple vein

On her temple, atremble from tension...

"Leave, right away", - and points

Her hand at the intersection...

Here he is -

Installed as a protector of tranquility -

He stand at crossroads, like a regnum of

Belts, shined badges, medals,

Thrust into his boots, and above -

Covered by a regulation cap,

Around which pigeons circle in a halo,

Yellow and unbearable like a torture,

Pigeons out of the Holy Scripture

And clouds, twisted snaillike...

Potbellied, shiny, in greasy sweat -

A gendarme.

Since morning to the rim

Pumped up with vodka, stuffed with lard...

~\*~

Students' blue caps;

Soldiers' hats, porkpies, peaked caps;

Steam, escaping frozen throats;

Tobacco smoke, traveling in columns...

Turmoil of furcoats, peacoats,

Trenchcoats, reeking of sour bread,

And on the pulpit, by a large decanter -

Completely unexpected in this smoke -

An excited man in unlined

Sheepskin, worn over a torn blouse,

Screams in a voice broken from tension,

And with a free upswing

Opens his embrace...

Large doors  
Fling open.  
Out of a February night  
Men enter, grimacing from the light,  
They stomp, shake the frost  
From their coats - now they are with us,  
They speak, yell, raise their arms,  
Curse and cry.  
Snore, cough,  
Turmoil.  
In the choir the banisters are cracking  
Under the tide of shoulders.  
And, ascending,  
High-fives covered in dirt and clotted blood  
Rise, like soiled heavenly bodies...  
That night we went to take the Headquarters...  
I, a comrade-student, and the third -  
Redhaired privat-docent from the "SR".  
The blood of manliness fills the body,  
The wind of manliness inflates the shirt.  
My youth is over...  
Maturity begins...  
Bang the gunstock on the stone! Cap off!  
The face of the world has changed.  
Earlier this morning  
The planetrees hummed goodneturedly.  
The sea  
Resided in the bay.  
In quiet cottages  
Girls sang in circles.  
In the book  
Doctor Brem was resting, having leaned his staff  
Against the boulder.  
My parental house was aglow  
With candles' tongues and biblical cuisine...  
The face of the world is changing...  
Tonight  
The trees will be iced over,  
Their knots poke at my eyes, as if alive.

The sea  
Spilled over the emptied boulevard.  
The hoarse steamers shriek,  
Cottages are  
Boarded up.  
On empty stoops  
Rats dance.  
And Brem, having escaped the book,  
Raises his rifle at me with menace...  
The thieves have emptied my parental house.

The cat  
On the cold stove lifts her legs...

Today my youth is over... The repose is distant...  
Feet plod in water.  
Curse!  
Now, raise the collar, cover the shoulders!  
Well, then! I must go on!  
Grieve not, my friend!  
Rain!  
Bustling reparte  
Of crows in the acacias.  
Rain.  
From an abyss  
Motorcyclists roll  
Aglow in acetylene.  
And, again, black  
Tunnels - no beginning, no end.  
Wind,  
Blowing in unknown direction.  
Along the puddles -  
Marching patrols.  
And again -  
Rain.  
We are alone - in this soaked world.  
Bumping into planters in the alleyways,  
Stumbling over each other,  
Falling to the pavement, by midnight  
We reached the Headquarters...  
Here it is,  
The iron box, locked with a hundred  
Rusty chains and leaden hooks, -  
The box, filled to the rim with  
Fevers, typhoid chills, delirium  
tremens, muttering prayers and songs...  
Cherubs, in Turkish pants,  
Stood watch at the front gate,  
Like mustachioed teakettles,  
One fatter, redder than the other...  
Out of nowhere, from an abyss,  
Hissing with rain, broke out a round  
Horseneigh and an eerie,  
Keening, rooster's call...  
The doorman  
Cracked open a passage.  
Then again  
Thundered the locks, barring the exit.  
We walked along the corridors that resembled  
Dreams.  
Crooked lamps  
Swung over us.  
Crooked shadows  
Ran up in tangles and spirals  
Along the walls, above,  
Leading to the sagging ceiling.  
On long benches,

The gendarmes  
Snored, resting their chins on sabers' hilts...  
And this labyrinth came together  
At the oak gates, on which  
Hung the square plaque: "Inspector"!.  
Pink, with azure sideburns,  
That a slightest wind could  
Rouse into flight,  
Like a notebook angel,  
He fled above the scribal desk,  
The penholder made of shrapnel casing,  
He smiled, melted with abandon,  
From hospitality, kindness, and bliss  
Of meeting with us, Committee members...  
And we stood there,  
Shifting weight  
From foot to foot,  
Leaving dirty footprints  
On the exotic horses, parrots,  
Embroidered on the rug...  
We had no time for courtesies.  
Enough...  
The keys are handed over - off to the devil!  
All talk is done.  
Good bye...  
We took over the affairs.  
We sniffed  
out all the nooks.  
In one room  
In the corner, piled like potatoes  
Brownings and revolvers in a mound.  
We counted up our take.  
In the morning,  
Half-awake, dizzy from the worknight,  
Besmudged in warehouse dust,  
We fetched a prisoner's kettle,  
Beaten up and rusty, and drank  
With burned and smacking lips,  
Our first tea of Liberty...  
Blue rains washed the earth,  
And in the night there was already starting  
The clandestine and manly blooming  
Of chestnut trees.  
The land was drying...  
The coast was blowing  
Its heated salt...  
In the bandshell  
Lost amid the planetrees' -  
Marseillaise, held aloft by bows,  
Dispersed among the leaves and streetlamps.  
Our street, washed sparkling-clean  
With summer showers, flew down to the bay,  
The planetrees' formations stood like a fence,

Wondrous and green.  
Above all that, in the curlicues of foam  
The battleship "Sinop"  
Swayed ever-so-lightly,  
And in the steel-gray cloud  
Slithered the fireworm, its banner.  
Acacias molted.  
Invisible  
Fragrance of rotting flowers seeped into the sea,  
And the sailors danced away  
With the buxom wenches from the outskirts  
In their arms.  
Beyond the fishermen's fires, on the slopes  
Overgrown with mottled mint,  
Under broken sloops, by half-demolished  
Bathhouses, desperados -  
Deserters in loose insignia -  
Played poker, whist, or pinochle,  
And in the cave, calflike,  
Snored the moonshiner's still.  
I remained in the district...  
I went to work  
As a deputy commissioner...  
Early on  
I whiled my nights away in dank armories,  
Observing the passing world, the passerbys,  
Strange to me, like manifestations of foreign nature.  
From slanted lampposts, from the thick smoke,  
Emerged the freaks not ever seen before...  
I practiced omnipresence...  
In a cart  
Along the country lanes I chased  
Horsethieves.  
Late at night  
I would take a cutter  
Into the bay, black like a horn,  
Amid the crags and dunes.  
I broke into thieves' lairs  
That stunk of overfried fish.  
I would appear, like the Angel of Death,  
With a flashlight and a pistol, surrounded  
By four sailors from the battleship...  
(They were young. Still pink with happiness.  
Just underslept a bit, a mere hour.  
Caps - sideways, peacoats - open.  
Carbines on the arm. And eyes- against the wind.)  
My Judean pride sang,  
Like a string stretched to its limit...  
I would pay a lot, so my ancestor  
In a long robe and a foxfur hat,  
From under which gray  
Sidelocks spiral down and a flurry of dead skin  
Ascends over his square beard...

I would pay a lot  
So this ancestor could discern an heir  
In this towering hulk  
That rules over the headlights, the bayonets,  
The engine that scuttles the midnight hour...  
I shuddered.  
A ringing phone  
Screeches by the ear...  
"The commissar? 'Tis he. What do you want?"  
The voice, hidden in the tube,  
Told me that in the Richelieu street,  
In the teahouse of the general's widow Clemenz,  
Will gather Simon Rabinovich,  
Pete the Flounder and Monya the Dimondcutter,  
The scourge of railroads,  
Cinematographic heroes, -  
Bandits with suitcases, containing  
Diamond drills and saws,  
A soporific opium fag for an unsuspecting neighbor...  
They flew along the pullman roofs  
In storm-blown cloaks,  
Revolvers hidden in tuxedo sleeves,  
A 100 rouble wench in tow,  
Tonight at the teahouse - They'd be done with.  
Basta!  
At the barracks the battleship boys  
Drank tea, amid the game of checkers.  
Their striped shirts  
Wrinkled along their musculature...  
Their faces were pink with the pinkness of a child,  
Largehanded, with blue eyes,  
They moved the pawns  
With exaltation between the squares,  
Blinked, moved their lips,  
Thoughtfully, without a grin  
Hummed, stomped their heels...  
We boarded the cart,  
Holding onto each other's shoulders,  
And the angular nag  
Dragged us off into the warm darkness...  
It took a revolver's barrel  
Thrust into the cracked gate  
To rouse the concierge,  
Who, yawning and holding up his pants,  
Did finally let us in.  
In silence  
Up we went  
Along the crimson carpet  
That lined the staircase.  
Alone  
I approach the door.  
The lads, holding the carbines  
Tightly between their knees,

Were flat against the wall.  
All - like in a decent house...  
A lamp topped with a deep-blue shade  
Over the family table.  
Gardines,  
Chairs plushly upholstered.  
An upright piano,  
A bookcase, on it - Tolstoy, a plaster bust.  
Kindness and comfort  
In the warm air.  
Steam  
Over the samovar.  
The cozy of woven wool  
is on the kettle, perfect order.,  
We enter like a storm, like breath  
Of blackened streets, our boots unwiped,  
Not taking off the peacoats.  
A madam, bewigged and  
white with powder,  
Rings on nervous fingers,  
Rolled forth to greet us,  
Bowing, wringing her hands.  
Fat, with drooping cheeks...  
"Antonina Clemenz!"  
Are you her? - A warrant", -  
I said, flinging open the doors.  
A conversation was taking place  
Around the table.  
Three gentlemen  
In land-hussar uniforms,  
Damsels, laughing politely.  
Sweets and pastries - on the table.  
I stood in awe...  
Damn it! Must be a wrong address!  
This is no teahouse!  
Some friends, together for tea.  
Who am I to interfere?..  
I should be sitting in this comfort,  
Talking of Gumilev,  
Instead of beating about the night, like a detective,  
Breaking up quiet families  
In search of some unknown bandits...  
One of my sailors  
Approached the table,  
And blurted in gloomy bass:  
"I know these three.  
Hands up!  
Take 'em, boys!"  
Where is the fourth? Ladies, aside!  
All hell  
Broke loose.  
From the luxurious landhussars we took  
Revolvers in the holsters.

Of course, they were  
The ones that we were after...  
We locked them in the pantry.  
Locked up -  
And left a sailor on watch.  
We pushed open the doors.  
We entered  
The rooms filled with rabble...  
The air was stained with choking powder,  
Human seed and sweet  
Liqueurous stupor.  
Through the mass  
Of this blue fog  
The barely visible  
Streetlamps' puddled reflection  
Was limply breaking through...  
In beds, narrow bodies  
Moved like fish under the blankets...  
A man's head rises  
Out of the circular foam of pillows...  
We check the paperwork,  
We close the door, apologize,  
We go further.  
Again sweet  
Tidal wave of fragrance.  
Again  
Heads rise from pillows  
And dive again into the silken spray...  
The third room. We're met by  
A lad in blue longjohns.  
He stands, with firmly planted feet,  
His torso rocking slowly  
And swinging, like a glove,  
A Browning... He winks at us:  
"Oh! The whole fleet is here! This cannon  
Couldn't take you all. So I surrender..."  
Behind him, a blanket thrown aside,  
Barelegged, a nightgown  
Sliding from the shoulder, in her teeth a fag,  
Halfawake, silently sat  
She, the one, my torment,  
A nightingale's glance and flight  
Of shoes on slippery asphalt...  
"Go back! - I told the sailors... -  
The search is done! Take the lad away!  
I'll stay with her!"  
The awkward gunstocks  
Clinked, my boys  
Squeezed into the doors.  
I remained.  
In stuffy twilight, in hot dozing  
The girl was seated on the bed...  
"-Recognize me?" - she didn't say a word,

Her weightless hands over  
Her ashen face.  
"Now, do you recognize me?"  
Silence.  
Then in ire I blurt:  
"What price a session?"  
And softly,  
Barely having moved her lips, she said:  
"Take pity! Money isn't needed..."  
I threw the wad at her.  
And forth I went,  
Not taking off my boots, not taking of the holster,  
Not unbuttoning my tunic,  
Straight into the down eddy, on the blanket,  
Under which shook and panted  
All my predecessors, - into that dark,  
Illegible torrent of phantoms,  
Shrieks, unbound motions,  
Darkness and unstoppable light...  
I am taking you, for the reticence  
Of my age, for my timidity,  
The shame of my ancestral vagrants,  
The chirping of a random bird!  
I am taking you, as my retribution to the world  
That I could not shake off!  
Take me into your vacant innards,  
That couldn't grow grass,-  
Maybe, my nocturnal seed  
Will fertilize your desert.  
There will be showers, a southern wind,  
And calls of swans in love.

Transl: R.Turovsky - 9/29/06