

Roman Elegies

by

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

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**First
Published**

1795

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JOSEPH BRODSKY
Roman Elegies (1982)¹

To Benedetta Craveri

I

Mahogany, captive to a private Roman flat.
Ceiling set with dusty crystal islands.
Venetian blinds at sunset, like a fish
that merges scales and islands.
Barefoot on red marble, a body steps
toward the future – gets dressed.
If you shouted, “Freeze!” I’d freeze right here,
as did this city from bliss in its youth.
The world is made of nudity and wrinkles;
in both shows more love than faces show.
How sweet, like an operatic tenor, for he slips
forever behind the curtain. Stargazing
blue pupils bathe their sclera with shining tears.
The moon overhead, a vacant plaza without
fountain, but from that selfsame stone.

II

A month of static pendulums (in August only
flies in the necks of dry decanters are quick).
Symbols on the clock-face intermingle
like antiair floodlights in search of seraphim.
A month of drawn drapes and shrouded chairs,
of a sweaty double in a vanity mirror,
of bees who forget the location of the hive
and fly to the sea encrusted with honey.
So stream, spout, over flaccid, snow-white
muscles; pour over gray tufted scorch marks.
Nothing is dearer than a view onto ruins
for a homeless torso and idle hands.
And they of the broken “j” in Jewish
also know themselves; with only saliva
you re-form the fragments, while
Time’s barbarous eye scours the Forum.

¹ Iosif Brodskiĭ, *Rimskie elegii* (New York: Russica Publishers, 1982).

III

Tiled hills, white-hot with noonday summer.
Clouds like archangels of winged shade.
A happy cobblestone sins with the sky-blue
skivvies of his long-legged gal. Troubadour
of junk, surplus thoughts and broken lines,
I hide in the bowels of the Eternal City
from a luminary who blinds caesars
with laser eyes that would suffice
for a second cosmos. Amber plaza; midday
stupor. A Vespa owner tortures the ignition.
Hand on heart, I tally from afar
the blows of a protracted life.
Like a book fanned open to every page,
a laurel rustles on the scorching balustrade.
The Coliseum: skull of Argus, in whose sockets
sail clouds like memories of his former flock.

IV

Two young brunettes in the library of the husband
of the more beautiful. As two young ovals crash
over tomes at twilight, the Muse describes
to Fate whatever she's dictated. A whisper
of old paper, crimson *crêpe-de-Chine*,
air steeped in lavender and cyclamen.
New coif; an elbow, at its height, for a moment,
inured to changes in the wind.
Oh, brown eyes assimilate without strain
furniture of their hue, shutters, pomegranate
fruit. They're sharper-sighted, gentler than blue.
But blue eyes require nothing! Blue is always ready
to distinguish the owner from his randomly
discarded articles (i.e. time from life),
the better to appraise him, as in a coin toss
the eagle strives to make out heads or tails.

V

Piano notes at lunch break.
The stillness of snoozing back-
alleyways, overgrown with flat tones
like fish scales. Flapping its gills,
umber stucco breathes the musty
August air, and cold pearls of Horace
wash into hot throaty hollows.
I erected no monolith reaching
to the clouds so as to scatter them.
From the black ink of alphabets
I learned of my (of every) hereafter.
So some drowse cradling a Leica,
to make themselves out in film
refracted through a dream lens
and wake up in another longer life.

VI

Embrace the fresh air of native pine boughs:
no more in fingers than on glass, on tulle.
Like birds who won't return from clouds
the bluer, neither are we gods in miniature.
Yet, we're happy in our insignificance.
Distance, height, etc., disdain the hemistich
of skin. The body is space inverted,
spin your wheels as you may. Ergo,
we're unhappy by the same cause.
So snuggle the dagger closer, doff overshoes
(a wall chills a forearm through its shirtsleeve),
and look, how the sun settles over gardens
and villas; how water, preceptress of eloquence,
seeps from rusty mouths, repeating naught
but that a nymph pipes ocarinas; that it
transfigures faces into ruins, being raw.

VII

In these narrow streets, where
even inward thoughts encumber;
in this sinuous cerebral tangle
no longer compelled by the world;
where sometimes frantic, sometimes
feeble, you shuffle boots in the plaza
fountain to fountain, church to church
- like a needle skips on vinyl, forgetting
to stop in the middle -, you might as well
resign yourself to the slim fraction of life
still remaining, to a past life inclined
toward wholeness, a comparable integer.
The sound of shoesoles on the ground
is the aria of their union,
time's serenade to the hereafter.
Such is Caruso to dogs
bolting from the gramophone.

VIII

Toil, candle tongue, over blank pages;
bend to tremble by our carbon exhalations;
follow – not too close! – the caravan
of fonts that stand in line for meaning.
You brighten the walls, the wardrobe, the satyr
in the alcove, more than manuscript
can compass! And your soot transcends
the author's thoughts in these words.
Even so, you make yourself a name in their row;
in eternal plume, in memory of your subtle
commas, at the end of the Roman millennium,
I trace the words "cresset," "candle," "lantern,"
but not full-stop – and the room appears
as it did at the start. (Composing, the plume
has composed little.) Oh, how much light
joined with dark ink they give by night!

IX

Eggshells of cupolas; carrilon spines.
Colonnade limbs spread in comfortable
calm. A hawk overhead, the square root
of heavens limitless like prayer. Light
reaps more than it has sown: the body
ably conceals itself, but not its shadow.
In these expanses all windows look north,
where the more imbibed, the more unknown.
North! A piano frozen in a giant iceberg,
quartz smallpox in a granite vase,
no able glance to halt the countryside,
ten fleeing toes of the dear Ashkenazi.
Don't run a cordon thither any longer, for
quills amass lettered cohorts only south.
Like domestic cornices at sunset, gilded
eyebrows rise, and darken darling eyes.

X

Private life. Tattered thoughts and fears.
A cotton throw more formless
than all Europe. By means of a mint
skirt and a sky-blue shirt, something yet
reflects in the wardrobe mirror. We sip
tea, face, to part our lips. Air levies the room
like quitrent. Taking wing, a jay bird quits
a stand of pines at a haphazard glance cast
through the window. In Rome: a person,
a page; the serif of a scribed letter is the tail
of a darting rat. Thus do things diminish
in their perspective to ideal proportion.
Disappearing from view on the Tanais ice,
shivering head to toe, crowned with withered
laurel, they shuffle toward time, who lies
beyond the borders of every dominion.

XI

Lesbia, Julia, Cynthia, Libya, Michelina.
The bust, that causal site; thighs, fleece ringlets.
Clay scorched with sky, soft in fingers, made flesh
proffering eternity like the anonymity of torsos.
You, the source of immortality: those who've known
you naked turned statue, Catullus, Trajan,
August et al. Ephemeral goddesses! It's pleasanter
to believe them transient than constant.
Exalt the smooth abdomen, the tender-skinned loins!
White on white like Casimir's dream,
one summer evening, among wreckage jutting
like ribs of the world, I, most mortal pilgrim,
drink wine from collar-bones with impatient lips;
the heavens, pale-cheeked with a golden mole.
And cupolas gaze upward, like teats of the she-wolf
who nurses Romulus and Remus, and dozes off.

XII

Lean in; I'll whisper something in your ear:
I am grateful for everything;
for chicken gristle, for the scrape
of shears already cutting me empty –
for this emptiness is yours. No matter
that it's pitch-black, devoid of hands,
of ovals. The more invisible a thing,
the more certain that at one time
it was present on earth, and moreover,
is now everywhere. Were you not the first
to whom this happened? What hangs
on a nail cannot be divided without remainder.
I was in Rome and filled with light,
as only fragments dream!
The golden nickel on my retina
will suffice for the whole long dark.