

Selected Poems

Yevgeny Yevtushenko , Peter Levi , Robin R. Milner-Gulland

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Selected poems of Yevtushenko

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Anika says

"Cracking green walnuts, each of us
searching with our eyes for the sea.
And I whitened my lips with pressing them,
drew my ribs tight and wept invisibly.
The coast came forward and the sea with it."

Muhammad Arqum says

Yevgeny Yevtushenko has become one of my favorite poets! And Zima Junction has placed itself in my all time beloved poems. There is something so profound yet simple about his poetry that even after getting lost in translation, the percolating melancholy, and the rising nostalgia leaves you sighing and smiling. When Yevtushenko writes about snow, you rub your hands. When he tells you he misses something, you miss it with him. When he writes about rain, you get drenched. Gorgeous imagery, beautiful thoughts, simple topics. I wish I could speak Russian...

Highly recommended!

Dewey says

Yevgeny Yevtushenko was perhaps the greatest poet from the Soviet Union post-Silver Age along with Joseph Brodsky (or after, depending on who you ask). His recent passing and a chance reading of a really moving poem online led me to keep an eye out for any volumes I could find. This reprinting of a Penguin edition of his first English poems in the 60's was the first I found and is thus the first volume I acquired.

Like the early Mayakovsky book that City Lights published some time ago, this volume isn't very big, with about 32 poems. But it's more substantial than the Mayakovsky book, in part because the centerpiece poem, Zima Junction, is quite long. While Yevtushenko's poetry apparently rhymes in the original, the translators chose not to render that into English and the form it takes in English feels a little like free verse Beat poetry (a sign of the time the translators were living in perhaps). However, Yevtushenko's voice and the world he evokes couldn't be further from the world of the Beats, save for the more ecological ones. The closest cousin to Yevtushenko seems to be Akhmatova: there is a similar feeling of cold earthiness shared between the two. Overall they were much different than the poem I read online, the name of which I regrettably forgot. But it's a fine and interesting introduction to the poet.

Lysergius says

Despite the difficulties and inadequacies of the translation, something of the flavour of Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poetry has been captured and made available for the English reader. Well worth the effort.

Lucy says

Talk

You're a brave man they tell me.
I'm not.
Courage has never been my quality.
Only I thought it disproportionate
so to degrade myself as others did.
No foundations trembled. My voice
no more than laughed at pompous falsity;
I did no more than write, never denounced,
I left out nothing I had thought about,
defended who deserved it, put a brand
on the untalented, the ersatz writers
(doing what had anyhow to be done).
And now they press to tell me that I'm brave.
How sharply our children will be ashamed
taking at last their vengeance for these horrors
remembering how in so strange a time
common integrity could look like courage.

Tangleofwires says

[28/10/09-23/11/09:]

Eadweard says

Beautiful poems.

"THOSE weddings in wartime 1 The deceiving comfort !
The dishonesty of words about living.
Sonorous snowy roads.
In the wind's wicked teeth I hurry down them
to a hasty wedding at the next village.
With worn-out tread and hair down in my eyes
I go inside, I famous for my dancing,
into the noisy house.
In there tensed up with nerves and with emotion
among a crowd of friends and family,
called up, distraught, the bridegroom
sitting beside his Vera, his bride.
Will in a few days put his greatcoat on

and set out coated for the war.
Will see new country, carry a rifle.
May also drop if he is hit.
His glass is fizzing but he can't drink it.
The first night may be the last night.
And sadly eyeing me and bitter-minded
he leans in his despair across the table
and says, 'Come on then, dance.'
Drinks are forgotten. Everyone looks round.
Out I twirl to begin. Clap of my feet.
Shake.
Scrape the floor with my toe-cap.
Whistle. Whistle. Slap hands,
Faster, leaping ceiling-high.
Moving the posters pinned up on the walls:"

"MY love will come
will fling open her arms and fold me in them,
will understand my fears, observe my changes.
In from the pouring dark, from the pitch night
without stopping to bang the taxi door
she'll run upstairs through the decaying porch
burning with love and love's happiness,
she'll run dripping upstairs, she won't knock,
will take my head in her hands,
and when she drops her overcoat on a chair,
it will slide to the floor in a blue heap."

"A SHOT-UP forest full of black holes.
Mind-crushing explosions.
He wants some berries, he wants some berries:
the young lieutenant, lying in his blood.
I was a smallish boy,
who crawled in the long grass till it was dark
and brought him back a cap of strawberries,
and when they came there was no use for them.
The rain of July lightly falling.
He was lying in remoteness and silence
among the ruined tanks and the dead.
The rain glistened on his eyelashes.
There were sadness and worry in his eyes.
I waited saying nothing and soaking,
like waiting for an answer to something
he couldn't answer. Passionate with silence
unable to see when he asked me,

I took his party card from his pocket.
And small and tired and without understanding
wandering in the flushed and smoking dark,
met up with refugees moving east
and somehow through the terribly flashing night
we travelled without a map, the priest
with his long grey hair and his rucksack,
and me and a sailor with a wounded arm.
Child crying. Horse whinnying.
And answered to with love and with courage
and white, white, the bell-towers rang out
speaking to Russia with a tocsin voice.
Wheatfields blackened round their villages.
In the woman's coat I wore at that time,
I felt for the party card close to my heart."

Peter says

First read early 1970s...

Mick Canning says

A collection of poems centred around a long poem, 'Zima Junction' which lyrically describes a visit that the poet makes as an adult to his family home in the small Siberian town of the same name. All of the poems are beautiful, but Zima Junction is the standout one, and for which alone the purchase of the book is more than justified. Descriptions of eccentric family, strawberry picking, meals and drinking, cart rides in rainstorms...by the end of the poem you feel that you know and understand the countryside and the society there. A poem that I continually go back to re-read.

Jerry Oliver says

This is an amazing book of poetry. These poems are from a time and place and yet they are timeless and reach far and wide because they map a familiar terrain of the soul. These lines were composed in the repressive communist Russia I grew up hearing about yet they are the visions and observations of a young man whose spirit couldn't be contained by borders or authority.

Sasha Strader says

As with almost any book of poetry (at least the ones I've read), there are some stunningly good poems, and there are some that just drag. Overall, I felt this book had more of the latter than the former, but it just wasn't my preferred style.

Steven Godin says

An important collection of poems, if a little on the slim side, from one of the greats to emerge from the Soviet Union (whom I didn't realise had died only last year). Two poems in particular are highly political, the long memoir, 'Zima Station' which connects his daily life and trip back home to sub-zero Siberia, and 'Babiy Yar' which deals with Russian anti-Semitism and the 1941 massacres in Kiev, which resulted in a nobel prize nomination.

Yevtushenko was much respected by others at the time both for his poetry and his political stance toward the Soviet Machine. He challenged the state, not in a political way but culturally through words. And as a recognized writer, he was banned from leaving his homeland for some time. But over his life was actually still well traveled and this only helped to strengthen his popularity in the West.

Not everything here struck me as great, a couple of poems didn't seem to fit in with the rest, but overall, considering I hadn't read Yevtushenko before and didn't know what sort of direction he wrote in, the vast majority impressed me. Some brief highlights - 'Waking' opens with,

Waking then was like a lonely dream
in this cottage in this settlement,
thinking: time to go and pick mushrooms,
and ruffling your hair to wake you,
and kissing your eyes open,
all this each day a new discovery...

An extract from 'Lies'

Who never knew
the price of happiness
will not be happy.
Forgive no error
you recognize,
it will repeat itself,
a hundredfold
and afterward
our pupils
will not forgive in us
what we forgave.

And 'The Companion'

Masculine pride was muttering in my mind:
I scraped together strength and I held out
for fear of what she'd say. I even whistled.
Grass was sticking out from my tattered boots.
So on and on we walked
without thinking of rest

passing craters, passing fire,
under the rocking sky of '41
tottering crazy on its smoking columns.

Finally some powerful lines from the mighty ' Babi Yar'

Wild grasses rustle over Babi Yar,
The trees look sternly, as if passing judgement.
Here, silently, all screams, and, hat in hand,
I feel my hair changing shade to gray.

And I myself, like one long soundless scream
Above the thousands of thousands interred,
I'm every old man executed here,
As I am every child murdered here.

No fiber of my body will forget this.
May 'Internationale' thunder and ring
When, for all time, is buried and forgotten
The last of antisemites on this earth.

There is no Jewish blood that's blood of mine,
But, hated with a passion that's corrosive
Am I by antisemites like a Jew.
And that is why I call myself a Russian!

Christina says

Another book difficult to rate: 5 stars for the poet, 3 stars for the translators. (Extra credit given for translators' notes, which were somewhat helpful.) Once again, it was tremendously frustrating not to be able to read the work in its original Russian. More than once I suspected an idiom may have been translated literally. Nevertheless, it was wonderful to visit with Yevtushenko again 35 yrs after first discovering his work. This slim volume begins with his magnum opus, "Zima Junction," and includes some of his most famous poems of the 1950s among them "Babiy Yar." Even his topical, political poems, which spoke to integrity and outspokenness in the face of Soviet oppression and fear, still resonated for me.

Steven Peterson says

Yevgeny Yevtushenko is one of my favorite Russian poets. Years ago, while I was in graduate school at the State University of New York at Buffalo, I bought this copy. I still enjoy repairing to this collection every so often.

There is a nice, albeit brief, introduction to his work, written by Robin Milner-Gulland and Peter Levi. It does provide useful context for the poetry to follow. But it is the poetry that is the heart of this slim work. A few lines to illustrate his art. . . .

"Zima Junction"

"As we get older we get honester,
that's something."

"Lies"

"Telling lies to the young is wrong.
Proving to them that lies are true is wrong."

"Visit"

"with one sudden thought, how little I
Have done in life, how much I can do."

"Waking"

"And how I flattered myself
From time to time with proving to myself
Nothing in you could be unknown to me.
You don't belong to the mind's calculations,
And you disproved each of my demonstrations,
Since to be unexpected is your truth."

All in all, a nice, although brief, introduction to the poetry of Yevtushenko.

Nune Harutyunyan says

Either I don't read poems too much, or it was a very bad translation. I was guessing the meanings and metaphors that were used and I was lost throughout the whole thing. However, I'm not the professional to judge. If you like poetry in general, give it a shot but don't expect much from the book, it's not gonna move you and your feelings. (or it may, depends on your personal opinions about specific values)

My personal favorite poem is "The Wedding"
