

MY FIRST LOVE

First time I fell in love
I was six.
That was September 1,
and white flocks of girls
went to school,
and I could not take my eyes off her.

She was about twenty-five,
a young doctor, just somebody
my grandmother met in a town park
when we were on vacation.

They sat on a bench and talked,
I guess, about her plans to marry,
about a new job. It wasn't so bad,
that southern town in the mountains:
mineral waters, mud baths, trails,
a sort of resort, a lot of flowers.

She was blond, a soft smile
and green attentive eyes, but unable
to recognize me.
I was just another little boy to her,
playing in the park.
I whispered in my grandmother's ear: I love her!
She laughed and told the young woman:
He says he loves you, silly boy.
The woman leaned
and kissed me lightly.

That was not far
from the site of Lermontov's duel,
where he was lying still alive all night
in the deep ravine. There was
a terrible storm that night,

the books claim. Lermontov

fell in love for the first time,
when he was four. Now
there is a Russian Army base in town:
trains, bringing more troops,
refueling stations, personnel carriers, hangars,
oil, gas, heaps of the surplus dead equipment
on the roadside, teenagers in fatigues
sitting on tanks, smoking Marlboros,

growing roar of the MIG fighters,
taking off for the next sortie
and heading East over the snow-covered plains,
framed by the mountains.

I haven't seen her since,
and I've never known
what happened in her life.
I would not want to know.

*The backdrop of this poem related to Russian imperial war against North
Caucasian nations. Mikhail Lermontov served there and was killed in the
officers' duel. Later in the same area—horrible Chechen war against the same
peoples.*

KALININ—CITY OF TVER*

Dead of winter. Crack in the building wall.
My boyhood bed open to the winds off Volga.
The nanny asleep clutches the Greek Legends book,
the only reading light is frozen moonlight from the frosted
window.

She read to me of Scylla and Charybdis of life of the grown-ups,
before I pretend asleep. Parents are just back from their friends',
father talking a bit loud, mother hushing him:
don't drink so much next time, moon getting dimmer,

I'm getting colder, wind picking up from the Great Steppe
beyond the ancient city of Tver, where once Wehrmacht infantry
turned into the frozen statues as if they met the last wave
of Mongol horsemen, seized in their flight further East.

My father for a few years was a surgeon in the provincial capital Kalinin. My mother and I stayed in Moscow in order not to lose a residence permit and moved in with my father for one year, 1954; this was just several years after German occupation. There were still a lot of scars from the war on the walls of the buildings and in life in general.

**Honorable mention, Pushcart Prize*

