THE SCAR WE KNOW

Lida Yusupova

NEW YORK, CICADA PRESS
2020
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EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

I first met Lida Yusupova in January 2016 at a coffee shop on Guadalupe Street in Austin, Texas (sunny, smiling, light on her feet). But I’d heard about her a few years earlier, after a friend gave me Ritual C-4 when Lida came to Moscow for its debut in 2013. At the time, my sense of Russian poetry was strongly local—meaning based on Moscow and St. Petersburg—and it was an experience of genuine defamiliarization to read these poems, written in Russian but seeming somehow not Russian, full of strange words and situations and not sounding like any of the other contemporary poets I knew. The intonations sometimes made me think I was reading a very free back-translation (in the following essay, Oksana Vasyakina makes the same comparison). In 2013 it wasn’t unusual to encounter foreign words (mostly English) in Russian poetry, but Lida wasn’t simply sprinkling her verse with these words: her poems sounded different. Not just using Russian to describe foreign phenomena, these poems were those phenomena, they made them.

Some aspects of Yusupova’s work can thus seem fairly transparent in English translation. She writes unrhymed, mostly narrative poems, and even goes out of her way to insist on the arbitrariness of
form: when I asked her to clarify where certain long lines should end (since they were printed differently in different Russian editions), she said “the lines should just go on and on” and complained about the “fancy” intentional-seeming indentations introduced by some of her Russian editors. Furthermore, many of the contexts she writes in—so surprising to me when I encountered them in Russian—seem less exotic in English than in Russian: characters with names like Margaret Agnes Clay or Joel Waight, locations like San Pedrito (a neighborhood in San Pedro, Belize), or the whole scene in the poem “obeah!” featuring 83-year-old Orcelina Gabourel “eating oreos and drinking ideal […] on the corner of Douglas Jones and Claghorn.” None of these person- and place-names come across as all that unfamiliar in comparison to the striking effect they produce in Cyrillic, which has to perform some contortions of its vowels and consonants alike to make words like “Waight” or “Jones”—not to mention the way that Yusupova throws out those San Pedritos, oreos, and “ideal” (a Belizean frozen sugar-water treat) with the same cavalier hand that opens a book (*Ritual C-4*) with a poem with an Inuktitut title: “saxifrage Δγ.ΘΓ.Ϊς.Ϋ.” (We have followed her lead in appending no explanatory footnote.)

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Lida Yusupova was born in the Soviet Union, in Petrozavodsk—a small city that in Soviet times was both ordinarily provincial and unusually open to the West, and even to outer space. But, alas, she slept through the famous 1977 alien visitation. After she was forced to abandon her studies at Leningrad State University (having been accused of being both depraved and anti-Soviet), Yusupova worked
at the post office. When she hung a portrait of Isaac Babel over her cot in the dormitory, the other post girls thought it was her father.

Her first book, *Irascaliml*, came out in 1995. In 1996, Yusupova left Russia, first for Jerusalem and then for Toronto, where she spends part of her time now as well. In 2004, Yusupova moved to Belize, to the island of Ambergris Caye (San Pedro) which, in its beauty and human openness, came close to being a perfect world. But this was also where she was nearly murdered by a burglar who climbed into her apartment at 3am on December 13, 2006.

* 

Living between San Pedro and Toronto (and usually visiting Russia once a year) lets Yusupova claim a footing in at least three cultural and linguistic contexts. But Russian dominates, not only in her choice of a writing language. Various periods of Russian literary history have seen similar moments when radical innovation takes the form of extremely direct, even crude, language, in contradistinction to a more cultivated discourse founded on formal subtlety and things left unsaid. Although she makes creative use of repetition and spacing, Yusupova often shocks more through thematic than formal means; for instance, it may be difficult for readers of American poetry to grasp the significance of Yusupova being among the first Russian poets ever to write about her own experience of sexual violence. Her explicit descriptions of lesbian sex, which use physiological description and taboo language unprintable in most Russian presses even today, were likewise among the first of their kind (though now surpassed in spades by younger poets). But even as the themes of her poems are unprecedented,
Yusupova’s use of vivid narrative to drive home the suffering of various social groups (women, children, LGBTQ+) also recalls the castigating force of mid-nineteenth-century Russian “civic” poetry, which saw literature’s main task as railing against poverty, slavery, ignorance and other societal ills.

Even as they bridge disparate cultures and languages, nearly all of Yusupova’s poems share a preoccupation with violence. In *Ritual C-4*, there is the “natural” violence of Tennessee Spice’s many stillbirths; both Margaret Agnes Clay’s bloody demise and the uncomfortable, subtle violence done to her successor in marriage in “saxifrage”; the cheerful brutality of Belizean gang politics; and the heavy dread that hangs over the Russian characters like burdened Vika and doomed Dima. In *Dead Dad* this violence becomes even more personal—as Yusupova addresses her father, his decline and death, and her own youthful experiences of sexual violence (“One Minute,” “Mateyuk”)—and at the same time more public and official, with her cycle of “Verdicts,” which are built on documentary material (mostly investigative and trial transcripts) found on Russian law websites. Public and official does not entail greater distance, however: the dry and technical legal jargon builds a relentlessly brutal, excruciatingly graphic account of violent crimes, mainly perpetrated against women, children and queer people. In their use of the “found language” of legal documents, these poems were virtually unprecedented in Russian poetry (one could claim they have inspired a new genre). Yet they are simultaneously in dialogue with the twentieth-century Soviet dissident

*Only a few of the “Verdicts” have been translated for this volume. The Russian-language volume *Verdicts* [*Prigovory*] (NLO, 2020) has many more—though still not all—of them.*
literary tradition (Anna Akhmatova, Lydia Chukovskaya, Varlam Shalamov, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and many others), with its many attempts to document injustice through literature.

Through her publications and collaborative projects, Yusupova has been a kind of literary activist for Russian-language feminist and LGBTQ+ communities, which in Russia today are tightly bound up in artistic and literary circles. The “Verdicts,” which mostly focus on physical and institutional violence against women and queer people, are certainly a part of this work, as Yusupova’s introduction explains. In part because of this work, Yusupova has become a kind of matriarch for the burgeoning feminist and LGBTQ+ movement in Russia—queer feminist poets like Oksana Vasyakina, who wrote an essay for this book, cite her as an important predecessor. Yusupova is quite a bit older than many of the leading figures in this movement, however, and the generational difference can be significant. As these poems show, Yusupova’s activism is personal, idiosyncratic, and literary; her attitude toward ideological dogmatism, like that of many people who came of age in the Soviet Union, is healthily dosed with irony and a sense of the absurd. In this respect her work diverges from many of today’s activists, the Soviet dissidents, and the nineteenth-century civic lyricists—and perhaps from many American political poets as well.

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Yusupova has written that she was raised to feel responsible for the world, while always being aware that she was among its major imperfections. We borrowed the title of this volume from the title of one of its poems, “the scar we’ve known about from the very
beginning,” but intentionally shifted the verb tense. *The Scar We Know—at the same time there are so many we don’t know and may never see, on others’ bodies as on our own. Yusupova once wrote that she spent her whole childhood seeking “a path toward comprehending the world’s perfection.” These poems clearly continue the search, while making clear that this is a journey that leaves scars.
камнеломки

через несколько дней
констебль С. Г. Клей
возвращается в 

смотрит в кольца порфирных гнёзд
ступает по красному мху не зная что это кровь
и чувствует приближение Маргариты Агнессы Клей

но вместо Маргариты Агнессы Клей навстречу ему выходит
констебль Г. Сталвофи
останавливается у большого гранитного камня
и опустив голову ждёт
констебль С. Г. Клей его не видит
констебль С. Г. Клей смотрит на кровавый мох
констебль С. Г. Клей смотрит на камнеломки
вся плоская земля весь мох все камни покрыты маленькими
лиловыми цветами
весь покрыт маленькими лиловыми цветами
маленькие лиловые цветы разламывают на камни
a few days later
Constable S. G. Clay
returns to saxifrage

looks at the rings of porphyry-colored nests
steps on the red moss not knowing that it is blood
and he senses Margaret Agnes Clay drawing near

but instead of Margaret Agnes Clay Constable G. Stallworthy is walking toward him
he pauses next to a large granite stone
and waits with his head bowed

Constable S. G. Clay does not see him

Constable S. G. Clay looks at the bloody moss

Constable S. G. Clay looks at the saxifrage

all the flat earth all the moss all the stones all covered in small purple flowers

all of saxifrage is covered in small purple flowers

small purple flowers breaking apart into stones