

PHILIP METRES

This Is Autumn, My Dear

Talking With Yunna Morits

YESTERDAY, I PASSED a line of trees that edge the campus where I walk. A yellow maple and red maple stood side by side, their leaves a stunning carpet of yellow and red around their respective trunks. From a certain distance, the borderline where yellow meets red was stark and definite—as if some past arborist had planned this meeting place between them. When I walked closer, though, that borderline disappeared. The welter of yellows and red merged, overlapped, confused—some yellows having spun far from the trunk and branches under the red maple, some reds finding a home right beneath the yellow.

This is autumn, my dear. When I met the poet Yunna Morits in Moscow in 1992, she seemed impossibly old, but she was just a decade older than I am now. We'd been reading and translating her work, my Russian mentor Dima and I, and it was already fall, mid-October, the first snows already come and gone, the leaves achingly stained in the suddenly brisk air. Morits once described it this way:

The smell of sea-foam and burning leaves,
Gypsy gaze of crows loitering at the train.
This is autumn, my dear. These are waves
Of words about woolen things, banal fevers.

Whose teeth clatter in October clouds,
Who chatters the castanets near bell towers?
This is autumn, my dear. The beak of the crane.
Rattling in a ripe apple, the sound of seeds.

Only the boulevard lamppost blossoms
On cast-iron branches, shedding the night.
This is autumn, my dear. The fresh black ink
That crawls wider, slowly drowning the light.

Soon everything will get covered with frost,
The blue thickness of a classic hardcover.
This is autumn, my dear. These are thoughts
About how to feed by spoon the young and old,

And how to tremble over all these people,
Like, I don't know, a single willow leaf.
This is autumn, my dear. And those are tears
For everything that dies without this love.

At Mytishchi train station, as we waited for the *electric* into Moscow where we'd head to the Union of Writers to meet Morits, a gap-toothed older woman who gripped a bottle of sloshing beer staggered from the crowd and introduced herself as "Auntie Galya." She was thrilled, absolutely *thrilled*, to meet an American, and told me about how, as a child, her father once gave her a Walt Disney book about three little pigs. She handed me a torn sheet of paper with her phone number lightly scented with hops and insisted that I visit.

I have no idea how she knew I was American; I'd been doing my best impression of a Russian, wearing my Russian host's nondescript dark-blue jacket and dirty old jeans. But she, and everyone else in the country, always seemed to know I was a stranger, finding any pretext to approach me and hear my stranger's accent, to plumb my stranger's mind. To be an American at that time in Russia was to be a sort of exotic species, representative of another world, a world glimpsed through the mirroring glass of the Cold War.

Which is what Yunna Petrovna Morits was to me, with every poem I read and reread as I translated it into my stiffly unmetrical and American tongue.

We were reading her because she was one of the best living poets of Russia, whose first book, *The Cape of Desire* (1961), announced her presence in Russian poetry during the brief but heady period known as the Thaw, when some of the icy strictures of Stalinist Russia loosened under Nikita Khrushchev. Though she kept a lower profile than the Stadium Poets—Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Andrei Voznesensky, and Bella Akhmadulina—so-called because of the massive crowds that came to hear them read in sports stadiums, she'd been praised by the great Anna Akhmatova, a poet not given to blurbing other poets.

The Union of Writers had its own building in the middle of Moscow, near the Barricades metro stop, and had once been a club for literary insiders who traded a loaf of conscience for a slice of privilege during the Soviet period. Which is probably why Dima, a harried teacher of translation and secretly aspiring poet referred to this edifice as "Piss-Soyuz," punning on the Russian word for "writer" (писатель) which begins with the sound "piss."

We met in the dark basement café of Piss-Soyuz, which featured a typical array of stale bakery sweets displayed behind a glass counter. Yunna, accompanied by her husband, welcomed us to her table with a brisk and commanding wave toward herself. To my naïve, idealizing eyes, she looked vaguely like a combination of Tsvetaeva and Akhmatova, with Tsvetaeva's short-cropped gray-blondish bangs, and Akhmatova's authoritative demeanor. She had a pronounced mole above her upper lip, like a punctuation mark on the line between her mouth and her cheek, and a proud mouth.

I'd planned to tape the interview, and as a formality asked her if it was okay.

She grimaced, shook her head, and waved the recorder off the table with the brush of her hand, her ever-present cigarette still gripped tightly between two fingers. She wanted to speak freely, without the worry of being recorded, and she did, in a husky voice punctuated by tubercular coughs.

I began by telling her how I'd received a fellowship to study Russian poetry and its relationship to historical change for the year when she launched into a monologue about the necessity of mastering Russian first, before anything else taking language classes all day, and perhaps taking night classes on top of the day classes, and she could recommend some teachers, and also it would be inexpensive, and, and, and . . . suddenly I knew that this interview wasn't going to go as planned, just as perhaps everything that I'd plan to do in Russia would not go to plan, and that somehow that would be okay.

"I'm curious about rhyme in Russian poetry—"

"—people," she leapt in, "for example, a person in the army, who lives alone at his post, and has no way of learning anything except by memory—people *need* rhymes."

It was an utterly new thought to me, an American weaned on a century of free verse, to be living in a country where all the poems seemed to rhyme and ride strict metrical patterns. She explained that during the Brezhnev era, she translated French and Spanish free verse poems, but that it was already too late for her to adopt free verse. It would always feel unnatural.

"When I graduated from college, I worked on an icebreaking ship. And later a coal mine. And a gold mine. My writing, I realized, had been adorning life and not writing about it."

The Cape of Desire, the book that had brought her national attention, had emerged from her time working on a solitary icebreaker in the Arctic

Ocean. Morits had lived a life I could not imagine—from escaping the Nazis as a child in Kiev to growing up in a single room of a communal apartment, where she shared a bed with her mother until she left for university; from living on that icebreaker to witnessing life among the natives of the Arctic; those early years had changed her in ways that she'd spend the rest of her life figuring out.

I asked her about the challenge of writing during this time of historical transition. “Do you know those children who survived the earthquake in Turkey?” she asked. Just a few months before, hundreds had died and thousands more left injured and homeless from the devastating quake. “You can't look down and watch the earth begin to crack or your mind would begin to crack. You'd look down and watch your very mind split apart.”

She cast her eyes about the room, as if inspecting the other writers as they clinked their teacups against saucers and scribbled their latest visions on unlined notebooks, wondering if someone were eavesdropping on our conversation. It wouldn't have been the first time that had happened here. She admitted, speaking under her breath, that she was having trouble getting published these days, because she wasn't writing things *they* wanted for publication. I didn't catch who “they” were. She said she had plenty of material about the current events, but wanted to save it so it would last for more than eight years.

Why *eight* years, I'm wondering, twenty years later. At the time, I took everything down as a verity that was a mystery only to me, who hadn't lived long enough to know.

It hadn't been that long since she'd played the role of public hero. Just a year before, in late August 1991, when a small cadre of military men attempted a takeover of the government because of the changes that Gorbachev had induced with glasnost and perestroika, people manned homemade barricades to isolate the generals, holed up in what the Russians call their White House—the building that contained the Congress of People's Deputies. No one knew what might happen next. The radio station Echo-Moscow, which was broadcasting the proceedings live, called Morits and asked her to say a few words of encouragement to the demonstrators. She recited “Pony,” her well-known children's poem made famous thanks to a musical rendering by The Nitikins, a popular Russian folk group. Told from the point of a view of a pony who is sad to see a cavalcade of war horses leading a parade across a square, the pony wonders about his worth: “Aren't I worthy of squares? / Can't I carry a child / As well as any old horse?” The poem ends:

So come all you generals
 On Sunday to the zoo.
 I eat only a little,
 Less than a dog or two.

I endure more than any,
 Even the camel or steed.
 So bend your legs and knees
 And take a seat on me.

When she recited the penultimate stanza over the radio, the crowd's roar lifted up and echoed off the White House, where the rebellious generals were trying to stop time, to hold on to the Soviet Union a little longer. This little spark of democracy, the people who saw themselves as aspiring ponies, somehow outlasted the old generals and their steeds. In those terrifying and exhilarating days, Ilya Krichevsky, a dashing amateur poet, was killed by a stray bullet when a tank crashed the barricades, and Boris Yeltsin—the white-maned, ruddy-cheeked politician—would make the speeches cementing his role as the first leader of the new Russia.

Though no one could have predicted it, the August putsch was the last gasp of the Soviet empire; within a week, it began to break apart, as far-flung republics began to declare their independence. Moldova. Latvia. Lithuania, Estonia. Tajikistan. Armenia. By the end of 1991, the Soviet Union had disappeared. Though it had a name, the Russian Federation, what exists now was still coming into being, and no one seemed to know what would come next.

Less than a year later, when I somehow found myself in this same Russia, I couldn't figure out how to say the first thing about what I was seeing—the lunar-cratered streets, the hurly-burly of crowds in the Metro pushing their way into already packed cars, the closed faces of the people scanning the shelves of decimated state-run stores. The hunger and the shock (theirs foremost and then mine, as I witnessed them). As if I were the opposite of Akhmatova, who, in line to deliver a package to her son in prison, was asked by a woman if she could describe this. In the prologue to her long poem "Requiem," Akhmatova responds: *I can*. The woman is relieved: "something like a smile," the poet writes, "passed over what had once been her face." Fifty years later, and considerably less prepared, I told Morits that I was struggling to write anything at all in Russia.

"When I was a visiting writer at the University of Iowa, I couldn't write. I still don't know how to write for a middle class," she said. She recalled the unbelievable grocery stores of America. "There was an Eagle,

and then a Pioneer, and then a specialty natural food store, but it was the most expensive.” The supermarkets of Iowa spooked her. Just two years after her time abroad, supermarkets, cars, horror movies, detective fiction—the things of America suddenly began appearing in Russia.

“Detective fiction,” she said with scorn. “I prefer reading the dictionary like a detective,” she said. She wondered what popular culture would do to people. Horror movies were poisoning people’s minds, she said. She hated horror movies the way she’d hated socialist realism, the dominant aesthetic during the Stalinist era, when millions were killed by their own government.

“Poetry,” she said, “on the other hand, poetry is a way of life.” There was something magical about its powers, she said. “You write it, and it comes true.”

“But now we absorb the dirtiest parts of American culture—the popular culture, the economics of speculation—and we don’t know how it will turn out,” she said. She was right, of course, in ways that I only barely could understand at the time. It was in Russia that I learned about the dark side of capitalism and financial speculation, how oligarchs grew by cheating the fearful and ignorant millions. “Now, we have to be afraid of fascism rising in the country, because of the total chaos,” she said. She’d saved five thousand rubles for her son’s education, and now “it could buy ten pounds of sausage.” Around that time, she wrote this:

You come home—to a casino or Pizza Hut.
 Each block sports its own President and Vice.
 Snug in privatization’s cotton, a soldierette
 drives an armored car. A well-guarded politician
 drinks Dutch beer in a can, wrapped in bathrobe
 like a mayor. Today, the firm’s fax enlightens:
 Burma is trading four trainloads of toilet paper
 for a submarine. Anarchy at the State Bank:
 no money, the puppy has died, the Treasurer
 feels sick. *Damned Dimocrats, kiss your mama’s ass!*
 the queue’s a mob, not knowing how to line up
 for the grave in a civilized fashion.
 Clio, personally, I don’t find aid demeaning,
 but bear in mind I don’t get it. Enough thievery.
 All the beautiful ones and the brains are leaving;
 only the giftless and idiots remain. Like me.

Despite this sardonic look at the excesses of the Wild '90s, Moritz's political poems now occasionally swerve into patriotic territory, lashing out against what many Russians see as the Russophobia of the West. It's unusual that this powerful Jewish woman, who felt the sting of anti-Semitism during the Soviet era when her father was sent to prison for two years as an "enemy of the people," now turns and waves the Russian flag in her own verse.

At the time, back in 1992, she saw the West as a possible oasis. If things got too terrible, she said, she could go to America and live on fellowships for the rest of her life. America stands out in the world, she said, as a place that accepts foreigners like her. There was something beautiful about the way she described it, bathed in light, though it was a partial picture, a Potemkin village of the mind, one that left out more than she could know.

Which is, more or less, how I felt about Russia, a terrifyingly magical place that constantly evaded my understanding. It was not a photograph of maple trees that I could behold from afar; it was a place that entered me as much as I entered it. Whenever I had the sense that I knew it, that I could stand on my own feet, it would throw me to the ground—sometimes physically—with its ice-glassy sidewalks, jolting train cars, and sharp-elbowed grandmothers.

And the next day would pick me up again, like that old lady who led me lightly by the arm and asked strangers for directions to the Foreign Literature Library for me, knowing I was lost. She asked about my life, and told me about hers—the great sadness she had at the present state of things, how they'd all been stepped on for too long, by the Party, and now nothing was going to hold into place. She let go of my arm in front of the library, said goodbye, and walked back into her unknowable life.

Morits said that they had been sending people from the United States to "keep some things quiet, to keep some kind of balance." "Akhmatova," she said, "never bowed to anyone," didn't politic to win a Nobel Prize, but Brodsky had.

Did this have something to do with the fact that Morits couldn't get published now? I wondered to myself.

I asked, with eyes wide, "CIA?"

She leaned in and said, "CIA and KGB were like brothers, so close."

We all laughed.

Later, midsentence, Morits turned to Dima and said, "Okay, where is it? Give it to me."

"What?" he said.

“Your poems, of course. You write poems, don’t you?”

Dima didn’t bring his poems to the interview, he explained, not wanting to share them with other people yet.

“Never mind,” she said. “You can come to the entrance of my apartment and leave it in the mailbox. We always look into this mailbox, don’t worry.”

Later, Dima remarked, “It seemed as if she were starving for poems.”

I wondered how often she’d deign to give interviews, to give audience to younger poets, only to be saddled with reams of juvenilia. With no creative writing programs in Russia, perhaps this was how younger poets found their first mentors. By now, she must have assumed that was part of the transaction. She was Yunna Morits, after all. She built her life out of words and recited her poems to stadiums of fans. The least she could do was read a few poems stuffed furtively in her mailbox.

I wish now that I’d translated more of her poems, but something in them seemed to repel translation. Everything, it seemed, was lost once the poems’ music disappeared. We did, however, adopt the title of one of her books, *В Логове Голоса*, *The Den of the Voice*, to name the apartment where Dima and I discussed Russian poetry and American poetry, where we translated one impossible language into another, and listened to the basso arias of Feodor Chaliapin and the mystical folk-pop of Akvarium on an old phonograph.

You write it, and it comes true. Once, before her first book was published, she said she visited a Russian witch. She performed various spells, and said that if there were any mistakes in the manuscript, they would turn out corrected in the final copy.

Somehow, after she’d turned in the final proof, she’d realized that she’d failed to correct a couple of mistakes.

But when the book came out, the errors were gone. The spells worked.

Somewhere in the three hours we spent at the little table in *Piss-Soyuz*, Morits counseled us on how important it was to “breathe through a tree,” as she put it. Go to a grove near your house, she said, embrace a pine or a maple, and just breathe through it.

I thought of Whitman, how he’d wrestle with a tree in his backyard on Mickle Street to regain his strength after a debilitating stroke. And how I always felt more at home among trees than among people.

Before we parted, I promised Morits that I’d visit her at her home, and she offered that her husband could give me a ride to the Maly Theater, as I was late for a play. He barely said a word during the entire three hours,

and little more on the drive, this meek and kind man, the kind of man who seemed used to blending into the background. But he always was there, faithful to Yunna and waiting to be needed.

Settling into my plush seat in the Maly, I watched as Chekhov's legendary fin de siècle *The Cherry Orchard* unfolded before me. I would understand only half of what I heard, and half of what I was seeing, though I'd read it before and knew its rhythms the way one knows the seasons. That is, until the final scene. It's hard not to read the play as prophecy for the coming Russian Revolution, as the lazy and dream-buoyed landed gentry while away their last days. As the characters leave the old house, we hear the sound of axes chopping offstage, chopping down the emblematic cherry trees, hewing apart a dying generation's memories.

I never saw her again.