

**Your Hair Will Smell of River Water:  
Four Poems by Xenia Emelyanova  
Translated from the Russian by Katherine E. Young**



It is with great excitement that we bring you today four new poems by the acclaimed contemporary Russian poet Xenia Emelyanova in exquisite translations done by Katherine E. Young. They are musical, mysterious, and sensual—and we’re delighted to have discovered a new favorite poet. We hope you agree.

We’d love to hear from you! Please let us know how you like our posts, or attend, share, and spread the word about our readings. Open your heart to new experiences and the beauty of the world, and celebrate its cultures and new voices with us using #NTM2017. Happy National Translation Month!

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

**Translator’s Note:** Xenia Emelyanova, who burst on the Russian scene in 2014 with publications in *Iunost’* and a nomination for the PEN International/New Voices award (she was named to the long list of six semifinalists), is an emerging poet of considerable skill. A graduate of Moscow’s Gorky Literary Institute, Emelyanova works both within and against the enduring Russian poetic tradition of strict rhyme and meter. She is particularly interested in preserving what she calls “the natural intonation of speech,” regardless of the dictates of poetic form. She has described her writing process as beginning with a single line or key phrase with its own internal rhythm, around which the rest of the poem is built. As Emelyanova’s interests dovetail quite nicely with the predominant free verse aesthetic of much of contemporary American poetry, translating her lines becomes first and foremost a matter of incorporating music into the translation



at the level of the phrase and line. Although I wish I could say I have a “method” for this work, much of it occurs at a subconscious level during the crossover between Russian and English—and I often find that the more I *consciously* tinker with a line to emphasize its music, the less satisfied I am with the outcome!

Emelyanova speaks and reads English fluently and has translated poetry from English into Russian. It is a great luxury to work with a poet who has such keen understanding of the translation process and English itself, but there are a few risks! For example, Emelyanova made significant changes to “Your hair will smell of river water” during the translation process, sometimes working directly in English in response to

my translation questions. Consequently, no authoritative Russian-language version of this poem exists. —*Katherine E. Young, translator*

**Four untitled poems by Xenia Emelyanova**  
*translated from the Russian by Katherine E. Young*

Наследники усадебных прудов,  
супруги селезень и утка  
неспешно пробираются меж листьев  
разросшихся кувшинок. Их утята  
спешат и путаются. Чтобы не отстать,  
срезают путь по листьям, как по суше,  
и вес их листьев не колеблет.  
Говорят,  
кувшинка, отцветая, сокращает  
на время к солнцу выпущенный стебель,  
и он утягивает зреть под воду  
зачатый плод.  
Наследники усадебного парка,  
мы ходим по «неведомым дорожкам»  
и наблюдаем жизни чудеса.  
И после, дома,  
готовясь лечь, выходим на балкон  
в последний раз перед коротким сном  
движение жизни и услышать, и вдохнуть  
из крон деревьев.  
Нам вспоминаются и парк, и пруд,  
семейство уток в лабиринте листьев,  
цветущие кувшинки, чудеса...

...И, засыпая,  
мы разговариваем шепотом, неслышно,  
чтобы самих себя не разбудить.

Heirs to the estate ponds,  
the spouses duck and drake  
slowly make their way through the thick-grown  
leaves of water lilies. Their ducklings  
rush, grow confused. So as not to fall behind,  
they cut a path through the leaves, as if on dry land,  
and their weight doesn't even sway the leaves.

They say  
the water lily, after blossoming, contracts  
the stalk released towards the sun for a time  
and drags the immature fruit under water  
to ripen.

Heirs to the estate park,  
we walk on "unknown roads"  
and watch the miracles of life.  
And afterwards, at home,  
getting ready for bed, we go out on the balcony  
one last time before a short sleep  
to hear and breathe in the movement of life  
from the crowns of trees.

We recall the park and pond,  
the family of ducks in the labyrinth of leaves,  
the flowering water lilies, miracles....

...And, falling asleep,  
we speak in whispers, noiselessly,  
so as not to wake ourselves.

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Человек, которого не было,  
Грызет грушу, улыбается, смотрит в окно.  
Человек, которого не было, мой сын,  
Играет со мной в прятки:  
Закрывает глаза ладонями,  
Говорит: смотри, мама, меня нет.  
Отрывает ладони, и мы вместе смеемся:  
Вот он ты!  
Человек, которого не было год назад,  
Дает мне предметы и забирает все из моих рук.  
Связанные судьбой и кровью,  
Мы свидетели друг о друге:

Человек, которого не было,  
Однажды подумает обо мне –  
человеке, которого нет.

The person who wasn't  
nibbles a pear, smiles, looks through the window.  
The person who wasn't, my son,  
plays hide-and-seek with me:  
covers his eyes with his hands,  
says, "Look, Mama, I'm not here."  
He opens his hands and we laugh together:  
"Here you are!"  
The person who a year ago wasn't  
gives me objects, takes everything from my hands.  
Connected by fate and blood,  
we bear witness to one another:  
someday the person who wasn't  
will think of me as  
the person who isn't.

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Зреет годами  
Случается в одночасье  
Нет между нами  
Больше ни ссор, ни истерик  
Я ничего не требую  
Ты не властен  
Ни над горем моим, ни над счастьем  
Мы, вероятно, увидим Америку  
Но время и место  
Не совпадут  
Ноги мои побредут  
По тресковому мысу  
Утопая в песке по косточку  
Ты, наверное,  
Разведешь разговоры в Денвере  
или в форточку  
будешь в Москве покуривать, как сейчас  
но ничто не излечит нас

The years pass  
it happens in no time  
there are no more quarrels, no hysterics  
between us

I don't ask for anything  
you have no power  
over my sadness, or my joy  
we probably will see America  
but the time and place  
won't coincide  
my feet will tramp  
along Cape Cod  
up to my ankles in sand  
you probably  
will hold discussions in Denver  
or have a smoke  
like now, through the window in Moscow  
but nothing will cure us

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*After the Russian original, translated by the author and Katherine E. Young*

Your hair will smell of river water  
The water in your eyes will grow clearer  
If you want to see me while I'm still young  
the time is now

In a few short years my son will explore  
the neighborhood around our *dacha*  
rambling through currant and gooseberry bushes  
He'll call it his Homeland  
each small plot of ashes and dust

I'll fill out a pattern of printed mothers  
whose image is made of hands, voice and skirt  
Time will twist and curl around me  
In the center of the spiral our home will smell  
of my freshly-washed floor

And every year the same Russian boys by the same Russian rivers  
the same bikes thrown on their sides  
old couples and children bathing, water shivering in sunset  
In the evening one neighbor says to another

"Abragin died last winter, the one who kept bees"  
In the yard next door an old woman, his widow  
talks to the peonies: "My sweethearts, you're fading already"  
They listen to her, dropping petals  
putting their heads in her hands  
leaning deeper and deeper



#### **About the author:**

Russian poet Xenia Emelyanova published her first poems in the summer of 2014 in the journal *Iunost'*, for which she won the journal's Anna Akhmatova Prize. Also in 2014, her poems were longlisted for the PEN/International New Voices Award. In 2015 she won the Russian Rhymes award. Her first full-length collection, *Lepet*, was published in 2016. Emelyanova's work has

appeared in English translation in *Waxwing* and *From the Fishhouse*. Emelyanova, a graduate of Moscow's Gorky Literary Institute, lives in Moscow. [More info here.](#)

#### **About the translator:**

Katherine E. Young is the author of *Day of the Border Guards*, 2014 Miller Williams Arkansas Poetry Prize finalist, and two chapbooks; she currently serves as the inaugural Poet Laureate for Arlington, VA. Young is also the translator of *Two Poems* by Inna



Kabysh; her translations of Russian poets Xenia Emelyanova and Inna Kabysh won third prize in the Joseph Brodsky-Stephen Spender competitions in 2014 and 2011, respectively. Young's translations have appeared in *Notre Dame Review*, *The White Review*, *Words without Borders*, and *The Penguin Book of Russian Poetry*; a full-length collection of Inna Kabysh's poems was a finalist for the 2016 Cliff Becker Book Prize in Translation. Young was awarded a 2017 Fellowship in Translation by the National Endowment for the Arts. [More info here.](#)