

# This Music-stricken Home: The Documentary Poetry of Lydia Chukovskaya

Translated from the Russian by Basil Lvoff



We are delighted to present today these new translations of **poems by Lydia Chukovskaya translated by Basil Lvoff**—who also included his notes on the process and some very interesting details about the poet’s life. “Lydia Chukovskaya is best known for her novella *Sofia Petrovna*—an account of Stalin’s Great Purge, unique for having been written in the midst of it (when few dared write the truth) and for having survived it, unlike a great many testimonies that were confiscated and destroyed.” Written in a spare, documentary-style language, these poems burn the page with their intensity, conjuring unforgettable associations. Basil Lvoff’s masterful translation capture the musicality of the rhymes, giving the reader a powerful impression of the Russian voice. We hope you’ll enjoy this selection as much as we did.

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—Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman

## The Documentary Poetry of Lydia Chukovskaya

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Lydia Chukovskaya, 1953

Lydia Chukovskaya (1907 – 1996) is one of the protagonists of Russian twentieth-century literature. Daughter of legendary writer and critic Korney Chukovsky (see poem “House” below), a writer herself, a dissident, and, last but not least, a great chronicler of her time (among other things, as a confidante of Anna Akhmatova), Chukovskaya grew to be seen as the conscience of the Russian intelligentsia.

Lydia Chukovskaya is best known for her novella *Sofia Petrovna*—an account of Stalin’s Great Purge, unique for having been written in the midst of it (when few dared write the truth) and for having survived it, unlike a great many testimonies that were confiscated and destroyed. The novella is about a proud and law-abiding Soviet citizen Sofia Petrovna, whose son, a model communist, is suddenly arrested. After failing to rescue him, Sofia Petrovna begins to lose her mind, finally giving in to the doublethink of the totalitarian state: she chooses to destroy her son’s letter, pleading his innocence, no longer to be tormented by doubts about the justice of the infallible state.

Technically, *Sofia Petrovna* is a work of fiction, but it is documentary in essence, faithfulness to the facts being not only Chukovskaya’s attribute as a person but also the dominant aesthetic feature of her writing. For there are works that are merely inspired by real events, creating a semblance of authenticity, and there are works that depend on our absolute faith that the person telling the story is an actual witness. Such literature hinges on the readers’ sincere faith as much as some other stories do on our suspension of disbelief. (That, as a matter of fact, is a major difference between religious texts and fairy tales.) Chukovskaya’s words read as a motto of documentary literature: “I confess: I can’t from this day forth / Breathe with someone else’s—made-up—lot;” “I would like to read the real plot” (see poem “Over the Books”).

Nevertheless, documentary literature remains an art form, so that, rather than say things directly, it hints at them, having the reader guess them, and orchestrates the readers’ emotions by making use of artistic devices, editing and “cutting” life as if a filmmaker. At the same time, unlike autobiographical poems—and lyric poetry is mainly that—documentary poems seem to redeem their honesty from the sin of art, which is mendacity, by being... artless.

Artlessness may sound like a criticism, and it is indeed easy to pick at Chukovskaya’s poems, whose images are not startlingly original and rhythm, not uniquely her own. Yet at some point these images build up and overcome you, multiplied by Chukovskaya’s presence (not as a lyric heroine but as a private person), and the voice of this private person makes the rhythm her own, so that we grow used to it, ceasing to notice it, until it suddenly breaks off to pierce the reader’s heart. (See poem “We, almost smashed by the war.”) That is when artlessness turns out to be a potent device. Such artlessness makes Chukovskaya’s poems feel almost like a private diary, but the key word is “almost.” It is this fine line between art and unadulterated truth that is the reason why Chukovskaya’s private experiences yearn to be read aloud, memorized, and shared with others, not only for history’s sake but, more importantly, for that of a deeper, personal, truth within each reader.

The publication of this translation would not have been possible without the permission of Lydia Chukovskaya’s heir. *NTM* and the translator are genuinely grateful for the opportunity to share these poems with Anglophone readers. As for the translations themselves, Chukovskaya’s documentary poems posed a challenge of their own. Chukovskaya’s poetry is formal poetry, with rhymes and meters. In trying to convey the latter, I took some liberties with the original (especially in the poem “In a street-car sealed up by February frost”). Should I have resorted to free verse? But then the poetic manner of Chukovskaya, particularly Russian and having so much in common with Akhmatova’s, would have been slighted as well. What should have I chosen: faithfulness to every word in the original or the poetic tradition of these poems? One is no less a document than the other, and, however imperfect the translations below are, taken together, they contain a bit of both.

**Over the Books**

I confess: I can't from this day forth  
 Breathe with someone else's—made-up—lot.  
 With you and I in it, for all it's worth—  
 And the rest of us—for all it's worth—  
 Before returning to the dust of earth,  
 Our returning to the dust of earth,  
 I would like to read the real plot.

1947

**Над книгами**

Каюсь, я уже чужой судьбою —  
 Вымышленной — не могу дышать.  
 О тебе и обо мне с тобою,  
 И о тех, кто был тогда с тобою,  
 Прежде, чем я сделаюсь землею,  
 Вместе с вами сделаюсь землею.  
 Мне б хотелось книгу прочитать.

1947

We, almost smashed by the war,  
 Love, and the year thirty-seven,  
 We, self-condemned evermore,  
 Poorly thought out in the heaven,  
 We, not mortally wounded—  
 When is our turn?  
 When ends our song?  
 Before the motherland's killed us—how long?  
 If only it could be sooner.

[1946]

Мы, недобитые войною,  
 Любовью и тридцать седьмым,  
 Мы, непрощённые собою,  
 Придуманные плохо Им.  
 Мы — раненые не насмерть.  
 Когда настанет наш черёд?  
 Когда судьба нас допoeт?  
 Когда нас родина добьёт?  
 Только бы поскорее.

&lt;1946&gt;

In a street-car sealed up by February frost,  
 I was traversing bickers, squabbles, Moscow  
 (Bent backs; *avoskas*; insults, elbows tossed),  
 Day-dreaming still—I'll push the door: the waves, scows  
 Far as the eye can see! sails luffing in the breeze—  
 They are with me, again, these waters, turquoise as  
 The masts are high, and somber the pine trees,  
 Swung by the wind—brother of murdered voices!

[February 1945],  
Moscow

В трамвае, запечатанном морозом,  
 Я ехала сквозь ругань, сквозь Москву  
 (Авоськи, спины, злость, толчки, угрозы)  
 И всё-таки мечтаю наяву —  
 Что если бы — вот только дверь открою! —  
 А там полно и мачт и парусов,  
 И сосны тёмные и море вновь со мною.  
 И ветер — брат убитых голосов!

<Февраль 1945>,  
Москва**House***To father*

1

The house pretended to be peopled—  
 Feigned house, deceitful home.  
 Abandoned by its rightful keeper,  
 Long gone, without return.  
 I simply lack the valor  
 To play the music late at night.  
 It is the peak of terror.  
 I can't live with it by my side.  
 The music then will look askance  
 At memories of the gone,  
 And it will tumble down at once,  
 This music-stricken home.

May-December 1975

2

In that house, myself I want to hang  
 On the nail from my beloved photo;  
 Here, every stair will make one totter,  
 Pretty scarier than your fearsome gang.

**Дом***Отцу*

1

Дом притворился обитаемым —  
 Притворный дом, обманный дом.  
 Давно покинутый хозяином,  
 Когда-то обитавшим в нем.  
 Мне просто не хватает мужества  
 Под вечер музыку включить.  
 Она сосредоточье ужаса,  
 С ней рядом невозможно жить.  
 Она поставит под сомнение  
 Все, даже память о былом.  
 И рухнет он в одно мгновение —  
 Объятый музыкаю дом.

Май-декабрь 1975

2

В этом доме я могу повеситься  
 На гвозде любимой фотографии.  
 Каждая ступенька этой лестницы  
 Пострашнее вашей грозной мафии.

<p>1976</p> <p>3</p> <p>That nighttime fumbling for the glasses Amid the pillows' scratchy covers, The ghosts of shuffling as he passes, Those heavy steps above me—father's. His favorite pastimes and his gloom, His sleepless nights and daybreak dreams, Together buried in what seems Like a sepulcher of a room. My father's desk, my father's tombstone— Now it is set against my chest— I cannot sigh, I cannot groan, By its unwieldy burden pressed; I cannot stand under the load Of all his pains, griefs, writing spree, And those bright days: we, in our boat, Barefoot, are sailing in the sea.</p> <p>1980</p> <p>4</p> <p>On the throne, up to now, in your house a watchman, sit I. House and I—here's to us, here's to hope: together we'll die. And in case I am dead while your house has lived on, unaffected, From the nearest cloud, I shall look after it and protect it.</p> <p>1983</p>	<p>1976</p> <p>3</p> <p>Ночные поиски очков Посреди подушек жестких. Ночные призраки шагов Над головой — шагов отцовских. Его бессонницы и сны, Его забавы и смятенья В причудливом переплетенье В той комнате погребены. А стол его уперся в грудь Мою — могильною плитою, И мне ни охнуть, ни вздохнуть, Ни встать под тяжестью такою, — Под бременем его труда, И вдохновения, и горя, И тех легчайших дней, когда Мы, босиком, на лодке, в море.</p> <p>1980</p> <p>4</p> <p>Я еще на престоле, я сторожем в доме твоём. Дом и я — есть надежда, что вместе мы, вместе умрем. Ну, а если умру я, а дом твой останется жить, Я с ближайшего облака буду его сторожить.</p> <p>1983</p>
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<p>Daily ceremonies, shows— Garish funeral processions. We are happy for him so! Did he suffer! Those depressions! Innit good that he is saved!</p> <p>Glasses clinging, guitar singing. Path for work and fame is paved, And prosperity, God willing, And the guarded guarantee: To be.</p> <p>1975</p>	<p>Ежедневные обряды Разудалых похорон. За него мы рады, рады! Сколько настрадался он! Хорошо, что он спасён!</p> <p>Рюмок звон, гитары звон. Впереди работа, слава И достаток, может быть. И оправданное право: Быть.</p> <p>1975</p>
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Basil Lvoff (Василий Львов) combines scholarship with creative writing, his dissertations in literary theory defended at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York and at Moscow State University, and his essays and poems published by *The New Review*, *Novy mir*, *Zvezda*, *Gastarbajter (Slavic Diaspora Magazine)*, *Syndic Literary Journal*, and elsewhere. He has taught Russian culture, history, and language courses at Columbia University, Barnard College, and Hunter College, as well as composition courses at Baruch College. In 2017, together with his filmmaker wife Olga Lvoff, he launched *Moving Lyrics*—an international festival and workshop of poetry-based short films, organized between Columbia University, Hunter College, and Moscow State University. To learn more about *Moving Lyrics*, visit [movinglyrics.wordpress.com](http://movinglyrics.wordpress.com) To learn more about Basil Lvoff, visit [blvoff.com](http://blvoff.com)