Translated by Walter Arndt (1993)

**The Bronze Horseman:  
A Tale of Petersburg**

**Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin**

*The occurrence described in this narrative is based on truth. The details of the flood are drawn from journals of the time. The curious may consult the account composed by V. N. Berkh.*

**PROLOGUE**

Upon a shore of desolate waves   
Stood *he*, with lofty musings grave,   
And gazed afar. Before him spreading   
Rolled the broad river, empty save   
For one lone skiff stream-downward heading

Strewn on the marshy, moss-grown bank,   
Rare huts, the Finn’s poor shelter, shrank,   
Black smudges from the fog protruding;   
Beyond, dark forest ramparts drank   
The shrouded sun’s rays and stood brooding   
And murmuring all about.

He thought;   
“Here, Swede, beware — soon by our labor   
Here a new city shall be wrought,   
Defiance to the haughty neighbor.   
Here we at Nature’s own behest   
Shall break a window to the West,   
Stand planted on the ocean level;   
Here flags of foreign nations all   
By waters new to them will call,   
And unencumbered we shall revel.”

A century passed, and there shone forth   
From swamps and gloomy forest prison,   
Crown gem and marvel of the North,   
The proud young city newly risen.   
Where Finnish fisherman before,   
Harsh Nature’s wretched waif, was plying,   
Forlorn upon that shallow shore,   
His trade, with brittle net-gear trying   
Uncharted tides — now bustling banks   
Stand serried in well-ordered ranks   
Of palaces and towers; converging   
From the four corners of the earth,   
Sails press to seek the opulent berth,   
To anchorage in squadrons merging;   
Nevá is cased in granite clean,   
Atop its waters bridges hover,   
Between its channels, gardens cover   
The river isles with darkling green.   
Outshone, old Moscow had to render   
The younger sister pride of place,   
As by a new queen’s fresh-blown splendor   
In purple fades Her Dowager Grace.

I love thee, Peter’s own creation,  
I love thy stern and comely face,  
Nevá’s majestic perfluctation,   
Her bankments’ granite carapace,   
The patterns laced by iron railing,   
And of thy meditative night   
The lucent dusk, the moonless paling;   
When in my room I read and write   
Lampless, and street on street stand dreaming,   
Vast luminous gulfs, and, slimly gleaming,   
The Admiralty’s needle bright;   
And rather than let darkness smother   
The lustrous heavens’ golden light,   
One twilight glow speeds on the other   
To grant but half an hour to night.

I love thy winter’s fierce embraces   
That leave the air all chilled and hushed,   
The sleighs by broad Nevá, girls’ faces   
More brightly than the roses flushed,   
The ballroom’s sparkle, noise, and chatter,   
And at the bachelor rendezvous   
The foaming beakers’ hiss and spatter,   
The flaming punch’s flickering blue.   
I love the verve of drilling duty   
Upon the playing fields of Mars,1   
Where troops of riflemen and horse   
Turn massed precision into beauty,   
Where laureled flags in tatters stream   
Above formations finely junctured,   
And brazen helmets sway and gleam,   
In storied battles scarred and punctured.   
I love, war-queen, thy fortress pieces   
In smoke and thunder booming forth   
When the imperial spouse increases   
The sovereign lineage of the North,   
Or when their muzzles roar in token   
Of one more Russian victory,   
Or scenting spring, Nevá with glee,   
Her ice-blue armor newly broken,   
In sparkling floes runs out to sea.

Thrive, Peter’s city, flaunt thy beauty,   
Stand like unshaken Russia fast,   
Till floods and storms from chafing duty   
May turn to peace with thee at last;   
The very tides of Finland’s deep   
Their long-pent rancor then may bury,   
And cease with feckless spite to harry   
Czar Peter’s everlasting sleep.

There was a time — our memories keep   
Its horrors ever fresh and near us . . .  
Of this a tale now suffer me   
To tell before you, gentle hearers.   
A grievous story it will be.

**PART ONE**

Through Peter’s darkened city rolled  
November’s breath of autumn cold.  
Nevá, her clamorous waters splashing  
Against the crest of either dike,  
Tossed in her shapely ramparts, like  
A patient on his sickbed thrashing.  
Already dark if was and late;  
A rainstorm pressed its angry spate  
At windowpanes, with moaning driven  
By dismal winds. just then was seen  
Back from a friend’s house young Yevgeny—  
(A pleasant name that we have given  
The hero of our tale; what’s more,  
My pen was friends with it before.)  
His surname may go unrecorded;  
Though once, who knows but it was lauded  
In native lore, its luster keen  
Blazed by the pen of Karamzin,2  
By now the world and rumor held  
No trace of it. Our hero dwelled  
In poor Kolomna,3 humbly serving   
Some office, found the great unnerving,   
And cared for neither buried kin   
Nor legend-woven origin.

And so tonight Yevgeny had wandered   
Back home, slipped off his cloak, undressed,   
Composed himself, but found no rest,   
As ill at ease he lay and pondered.   
What were his thoughts? That he was poor,   
And by his labor must secure   
A portion of esteem and treasure;   
That God might well have eased his pains   
With wits and cash; that men of leisure,   
Endowed with luck if not with brains,   
Could idly leave him at a distance,   
And lead so carefree an existence!   
He thought that in the post he held   
He had attained but two years’ rating;   
That still the storm was not abating,   
And that the banked-up river swelled   
Still more-and since by now they surely   
Had struck the bridges down securely,   
He and Parasha must, he knew,   
Be parted for a day or two.   
And poetlike, Yevgeny, exhaling   
A sigh, fell musing on his lot:

“Get married? I? And, yet, why not?   
Of course, it won’t be easy sailing,   
But what of that? I’m young and strong,   
Content to labor hard and long,   
I’ll build us soon, if not tomorrow,   
A simple nest for sweet repose   
And keep Parasha free of sorrow,   
And in a year or two, who knows,   
I may obtain a snug position,   
And it shall be Parasha’s mission   
To tend and rear our children ... yes,   
So we will live, and so forever   
Will be as one, till death us sever,   
And grandsons lay us both to rest ...   
Thus ran his reverie. Yet sadly   
He wished that night the wind would still   
Its mournful wail, the rain less madly   
Be rattling at the windowsill.   
At last his eyelids, heavy-laden   
Droop into slumber ... soon away   
The night’s tempestuous gloom is fading   
And washes into pallid day ...   
Disastrous day! Nevá all night   
Has seaward strained, in hopeless muster   
Of strength against the gale’s wild bluster,   
But now at last must yield the fight.

From morning, throngs of people line   
The banks and marvel at the fountains   
Of spray, the foam-tipped rolling mountains   
Thrust up by the envenomed brine;   
For now Nevá, her flow arrested   
By the relentless sea-wind’s force,   
Reared up in fury, backward-crested,   
And drowned the islands in her course.   
The storm more fiercely yet upsoaring,   
Nevá, engorged, with swell and roaring   
As from a caldron’s swirl released,   
Abruptly like a frenzied beast   
Leaped on the city. At her onrush   
All scattered, every place was swept   
An instant void, swift waters crept   
Into the deeply hollowed basements,   
Canals rose gushing to the casements,   
There streamed Petropolis, foam-laced,   
Like Triton foundered to the waist.

Beset! Besieged! The vile surf charges  
Through window frames like thieves, loose barges  
Dash in the panes, stern forward wrenched.  
Street-hawkers’ trays, their covers drenched,  
Smashed cabins, roofing, rafters reeling,  
The stock-in-trade of thrifty dealing,   
The wretched gain of misery pale,   
Whole bridges loosened by the gale,   
Coffins unearthed, in horrid welter   
Float down the streets.   
 In stricken gloom   
All see God’s wrath and bide their doom.   
Alas! All founders, food and shelter!   
Where now to turn?

That fateful year   
Our famed late sovereign still was sitting   
On Russia’s throne — he sadly here   
Upon his balcony did appear   
And owned: “For czars there is no pitting   
Their power against the Lord’s.” His mien   
All grief, he sat and contemplated   
The fell disaster’s desolate scene.   
Into the squares to lakes dilated,   
Debouched, like riverbeds inflated,   
What had been streets. The palace stood   
Like a lone cliff the waters riding.   
The Czar spoke out: and where they could,   
By roadways near and distant gliding,   
Upon their stormy path propelled,   
The Emperor’s generals went speeding   
To save the people, who, unheeding   
With fear, were drowning where they dwelled.

That night, where on Czar Peter’s square  
A corner-house4 new risen there  
Had lately on its high porch shown—  
One paw raised, as in live defiance—  
A marble pair of guardian lions:  
Astride upon the beast of stone  
There sat, his arms crossed tight, alone,  
Unmoving, deathly pale of feature,  
Yevgeny. He was afraid, poor creature,  
Not for himself. He did not hear  
The evil breakers crest and rear,  
His soles with greedy lashes seeking,  
Nor feel the rain splash in his face,   
Nor yet the gale with boisterous shrieking   
Tear off his hat. Impaled in space,   
His eyes held fast a distant border   
And there in frozen anguish gazed.   
There, mountainous, in wild disorder   
From depths of chaos skyward raised,   
Huge waves were towering and gloating,   
There howled the storm and played with floating   
Wreckage ... God, God! just there should be,   
Set hard upon the inland sea,   
Close, ah, too close to that mad billow,   
A fence unpainted, and a willow,   
And a frail hut: there dwelt those two,   
Her mother and she, his bride bespoken,   
Long dreamed-of ... or was all he knew   
A dream, naught but an empty token   
All life, a wraith and no more worth,   
But Heaven’s mockery at Earth?

And he, as by a spell enfolded,   
By irons to the marble bolted,   
Could not descend; all within sight   
Was an unending watery blight.   
And o’er Nevá all spray-ensheeted,   
Its back to where Yevgeny still clung,   
There towered immobile, undefeated,   
Upon its bronzen charger seated,   
The Idol with its arm outflung.

**PART TWO**

With rack and ruin satiated,  
Nevá, her wanton frenzy spent,  
At last drew back her element—  
By her own tumult still elated—  
And nonchalantly abdicated  
Her plunder. Thus a highwayman  
Comes bursting with his vicious clan  
Into some village, wrecking, slashing,  
Destroying, robbing — shrieks and gnashing  
Of teeth, alarms, oaths, outrage, roar—  
Then, heavily with booty weighted,   
Fearing pursuers, enervated,   
The band of robbers homeward pour   
And strew the wayside with their plunder.

The waters fell, and as thereunder   
Dry footing showed, Yevgeny, heartsore,   
Benumbed with sorrow, fear, and wonder,   
Made headlong for the riverside,   
Close on the barely ebbing tide.   
For still Nevá, high triumph breathing,   
Sent angry billows upward seething   
As from live coals beneath her course,   
And still the whitecaps heaved and slanted,   
And heavily the river panted   
As will a battle-winded horse.   
Yevgeny looks round: a boat on station!   
He greets it like a revelation,   
Calls to the wherryman — and he,   
With daring unconcern, is willing   
To take him for a quarter-shilling   
Across that formidable sea.

And long he struggled hard to counter   
The turmoil with his practiced strength;   
Time after time their craft, aflounder   
Between banked waves, seemed sure to founder   
With its rash crew — until at length   
They reached the shore.

Yevgeny, fear-stricken,

Runs down the long-familiar lane,  
By long-dear places, looks — in vain:  
Unknowable, a sight to sicken  
The heart, all stares in disarray,  
This flung aside, that swept away,  
Here half-uprooted cabins listed,  
There others lay all crushed and twisted,  
Still others stood misplaced — all round,  
Strewn as upon a battleground,  
Were scattered corpses. Barely living,  
Yevgeny flies onward arrow-straight,   
Worn out with terror and misgiving,   
Onward to where he knows his fate   
Awaits him with a secret message,   
As it might be a seated dispatch.   
Here is the suburb now, the passage   
Down to the bay, and here the thatch ...   
But what is this?

He stopped, confounded.   
Retraced his steps and once more rounded   
That corner ... stared . . . half raised a hand:   
Here is the place where it should stand,   
Here is the willow. There, remember,   
The gate stood — razed, no doubt. And where,   
Where is the house? Distraught and somber,   
He paces back and forward there,   
Talks to himself aloud, soon after   
Bursts out abruptly into laughter   
And slaps his forehead.

Night sank down   
Upon the horror-shaken town;   
But few found sleep, in every dwelling   
They sat up telling and retelling   
About the day just past.

Dawn’s ray

From pallid banks of weary gray  
Gleamed down upon the silent city  
And found of yesterday’s alarm  
No trace. The purple cloak5 of pity  
Already covered recent harm  
And all returned to former calm.  
Down streets rewon for old endeavor  
Men walk as callously as ever,  
The morning’s civil service troops,  
Emerged from their nocturnal coops,  
Are off to work. Cool tradesmen labor  
To open cellar, vault, and store,   
Robbed by Nevá the night before,   
The sooner to surcharge their neighbor   
For their grave loss. They carted off   
Boats from the courtyards.

(Count Khvostov,   
A poet whom Parnassus nurses,   
Lamented in immortal verses   
The blight Nevá had left behind.)

My pitiful Yevgeny, though — evil

His lot; alas, his clouded mind   
Could not withstand the brute upheaval   
Just wrought on it. The clash and strain   
Of flood and storm forever thundered   
Upon his ear; his thoughts a train   
Of horrors, wordlessly he wandered;   
Some secret vision seemed to chill   
His mind. A week — a month — and still   
Astray from home he roved and pondered.   
As for the homestead he forsook,   
The landlord let his vacant nook   
To some poor poet. Yevgeny never   
Returned to claim it back, nor took   
His left possessions. Growing ever   
More alien to the world, he strayed   
All day on foot till nightfall led him   
Down to the wharves to sleep. He made   
His meals of morsels people fed him   
Through windows. His poor clothing frayed   
And moldered off him. Wicked urchins   
Threw pebbles at his back. The searching   
Coachwhips not seldom struck him when,   
As often now, he would be lurching   
Uncertain of his course; but then   
He did not feel it for the pain   
Of some loud anguish in his brain.   
Thus he wore on his luckless span,   
A moot thing, neither beast nor man,   
Who knew if this world’s child, or whether   
A caller from the next.

He slept  
One night by the Nevá. The weather  
Was autumn-bent. An ill wind swept  
The river. Sullen swells had crept  
Up banks and steps with splash and rumble,  
As a petitioner might grumble  
Unheard outside the judge’s gate.  
Yevgeny woke up. The light was failing,  
The rain dripped, and the wind was wailing  
And traded through the darkness late  
Sad echoes with the watchman’s hailing ...

Yevgeny sprang up, appeared to waken   
To those remembered terrors; shaken,   
He hurried off at random, then   
Came to a sudden stop; again   
Uncertainly his glances shifted   
All round, wild panic marked his face.   
Above him the great mansion lifted   
Its columns. On the terrace-space,   
One paw raised as in live defiance,   
Stood sentinel those guardian lions,   
And high above those rails, as if   
Of altitude and darkness blended,   
There rode in bronze, one arm extended,   
The Idol on its granite cliff.

Yevgeny’s heart shrank. His mind unclouding   
In dread, he knew the place again   
Where the great flood had sported then,   
Where those rapacious waves were crowding   
And round about him raged and spun  
That square, the lions, and him — the one   
Who, bronzen countenance upslanted   
Into the dusk aloft, sat still,   
The one by whose portentous will   
The city by the sea was planted ...   
How awesome in the gloom he rides!   
What thought upon his brow resides!   
His charger with what fiery mettle,   
His form with what dark strength endowed!   
Where will you gallop, charger proud,   
Where next your plunging hoofbeats settle?   
Oh, Destiny’s great potentate!   
Was it not thus, a towering idol   
Hard by the chasm, with iron bridle   
You reared up Russia to her fate?

The piteous madman fell to prowling  
About the statue’s granite berth,   
And furtively with savage scowling   
He eyed the lord of half the earth.   
His breath congealed in him, he pressed   
His brow against the chilly railing,   
A blur of darkness overveiling   
His eyes; a flame shot through his breast   
And made his blood seethe. Grimly lowering,   
He faced the haughty image towering   
On high, and fingers clawed, teeth clenched,   
As if by some black spirit wrenched,   
He hissed, spite shaking him: “Up there,   
Great wonder-worker you, beware! . . .”  
And then abruptly wheeled to race  
Away full tilt. The dread czar’s face,   
With instantaneous fury burning,   
It seemed to him, was slowly turning ...   
Across these empty spaces bound,   
Behind his back he heard resound,   
Like thunderclouds in rumbling anger,   
The deep reverberating clangor   
Of pounding hoofs that shook the ground.   
And in the moonlight’s pallid glamour   
Rides high upon his charging brute,   
One hand stretched out, ‘mid echoing clamor   
The Bronze Horseman in pursuit.

And all through that long night, no matter

What road the frantic wretch might take,   
There still would pound with ponderous clatter   
The Bronze Horseman in his wake.

And ever since, when in his erring   
He chanced upon that square again,   
They saw a sick confusion blurring   
His features. One hand swiftly then   
Flew to his breast, as if containing   
The anguished heart’s affrighted straining;   
His worn-out cap he then would raise,   
Cast to the ground a troubled gaze   
And slink aside.

A little island  
Lies off the coast. There now and then  
A stray belated fisherman  
Will beach his net at dusk and, silent,  
Cook his poor supper by the shore,  
Or, on his Sunday recreation  
A boating clerk might rest his oar  
By that bleak isle. There no green thing  
Will grow; and there the inundation  
Had washed up in its frolicking  
A frail old cottage. It lay stranded  
Above the tide like weathered brush,  
Until last spring a barge was landed  
To haul it off. It was all crushed  
And bare. Against the threshold carried,  
Here lay asprawl my luckless knave,  
And here in charity they buried  
The chill corpse in a pauper’s grave.

**NOTES**

[1] The parade grounds of St. Petersburg are called Mars Field.  
[2] Allusion to Karamzin’s monumental *History of the Russian State*.  
[3] Then an outlying suburb of St. Petersburg.  
[4] The new edifice of the Ministry of War.  
[5] This is assumed to refer either to imperial charity or to the calm dawn, or ambiguously to both.

[from George Gibian, ed., *The Portable Nineteenth-Century Russian Reader* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 8-21; this poem translated by Walter Arndt; notes from this edition. The version in *Alexander Pushkin: Collected Narrative and Lyrical Poetry, Translated in the Prosidic Forms of the Original by Walter Arndt*, Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis 1984 is apparently identical save for the use of “Eugene” in place of “Yevgeny” throughout.]

http://www.piperry.net/travel/eastbloc/russia/petersburg/center/isaac/index\_bronzehorseman.htm