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