

An abstract painting featuring large, expressive brushstrokes. The upper portion is dominated by various shades of blue, ranging from light sky blue to deep, dark navy. The lower portion features horizontal bands of bright yellow and vibrant red, with dark, almost black, shapes at the very bottom. The overall style is gestural and textured, suggesting movement and emotion.

MARINA TYURINA OBERLANDER

THAT STRANGE FEELING OF FREEDOM

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY ANYA TUCKER
ILLUSTRATED BY KONSTANTIN F. WEBER-CHUBAYS



THAT STRANGE FEELING OF FREEDOM



BY MARINA TYURINA OBERLANDER

*Translated and Edited by Anya Tucker
Illustrated by Konstantin F. Weber-Chubays*

BOSTON • 2023

MARINA TYURINA OBERLANDER

That Strange Feeling of Freedom. *Stories and novellas*

Translated and edited by Anya Tucker

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Note to My Readers

I consider myself a happy person. Maybe because my attitude to life was always positive. I was lucky to be born in the middle of the 20th century, after the World War II, into a family of intellectuals, who bore the sense of freedom in their souls. My father was Russian, my mother — Ukrainian. I spent my early childhood with my grandparents in our family home in the heart of Ukraine, in a little town Piryatin, glorified by the prominent Ukrainian writer Evgen Grebinka in his novel *Chaykovsky*, a love story of a young cossack Alexy and his fiancée, my namesake Marina.

My first teacher of English and music was my own aunt, my tutor was my grandfather, who had four MDs and miraculously survived ten years in Stalin's GULAG. Due to my parents' efforts and my own skills, I got the best possible education and started my professional life having three foreign languages in my portfolio. It gave me a certain advantage, but I was a poet.

I began writing poetry at six, and translating at fifteen. To overcome the bureaucracy barriers and get into "poetry circle" was practically impossible, especially if your thinking was different from the main stream. So, I concentrated on translations and to a certain point succeeded. But, as I said, I was lucky. With Gorbachev's perestroika and later collapse of the Soviet Union, I was able to travel and finally ended up in the US, where I met my future husband and settled in Washington, DC.

This wasn't just moving to a different country and different culture. It was adopting a feeling of freedom. I realized that I can express my thoughts and feelings freely, dropping off the net of restrictions and rules that entangled me in my own country. My first original book was published in 2008, followed

by five others, among them my poetry book in English, *I Simply have to Fall in Love* (2020). However, it turned out that poetry was not enough. I started to write stories.

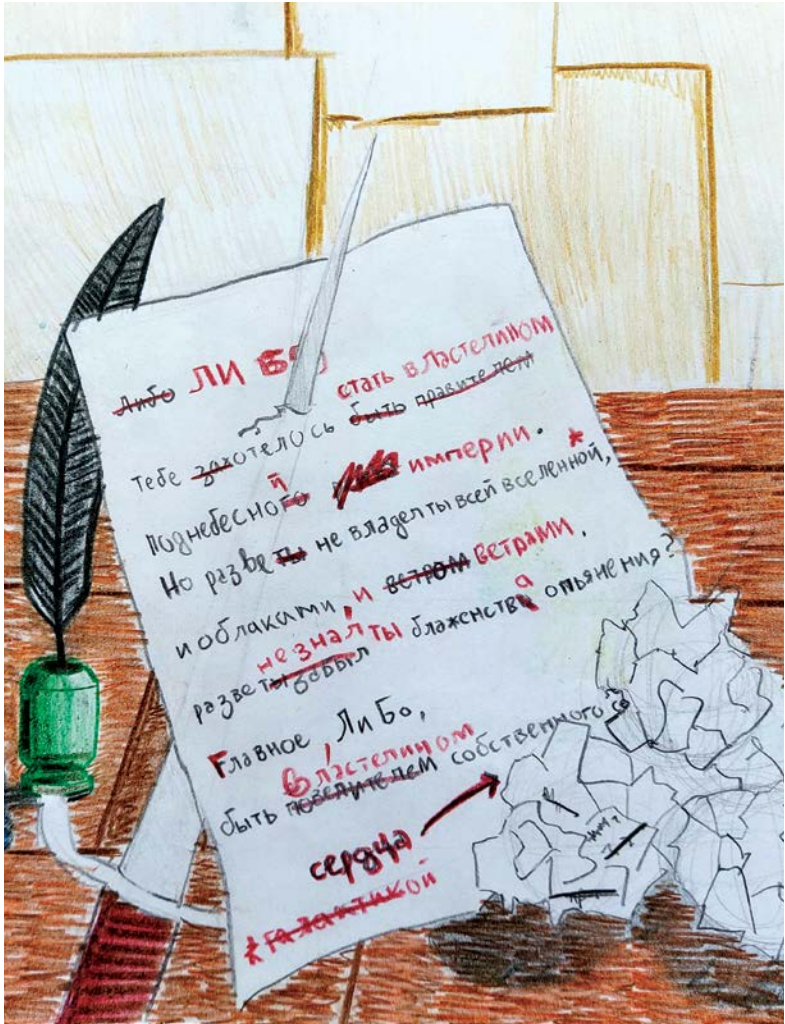
This was my second attempt. The first one happened in the 1970s, but failed. I wrote a few stories and then, later, burned them together with my diaries and my poems, written before. If you ask me, why, I can only say, that it was too dangerous to keep them. One story survived, and I included it into this collection.

All my stories are based on events that I witnessed, with, of course, a certain amount of imagination and even a touch of magic. Maybe because my favorite books from childhood were fairy-tales and I still believe in miracles...

In conclusion, I would like to thank Anya Tucker for the brilliant translation of my prose, and, also, to acknowledge my grandson, Konstantin Ferdinand Weber-Chubays, for illustrating the book.

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A Conversation With The Devil

Place: *Moscow*

Time: *1987*

The translation wasn't going anywhere. Margarita stared blankly at the scribbled over sheet of paper that could hardly be called white anymore.

What the hell, she thought. So far everything had been moving along smoothly. This translation was a welcome and unexpected gift that had basically dropped in her lap.

By this time in her life she had pretty much given up the hope to ever be lucky enough to translate genuine, real poetry. So far, she had been offered what the famous and venerable had rejected, but what was still needed for poetry collections. The translations she herself offered had been rejected as untimely, apolitical, and, therefore, useless for the Soviet reader. The only thing that was popular and in demand was light family-friendly comedy by a cheerful Western European author whose stories were eagerly, and in large numbers, published not only by satirical weeklies, but by respectable thick magazines too. On top of certain emotional satisfaction, these brought her decent financial gain, so every season Margarita could afford to buy a new piece to add to her wardrobe.

Still, she was a poet. Poems came to her unexpectedly and without any effort, and all she had to do was write them down. When she didn't have a pencil and a piece of paper handy, she would recite the words over and over to remember them and safely carry the poem to her desk where a notebook always lay open. The next day she would often marvel at what she had

written the day before, but eventually she gave up trying to understand this phenomenon. One should not test harmony with algebra, and emotion with mind.

Something similar happened with translations. Margarita was fluent in four foreign languages and, naturally, preferred to read literature in the original, and poetry even more so. Sometimes, while enjoying a poem she felt it start morphing inside her into Russian words and then it would spill out in its new shape. Then she would just write it down. The process was so natural that she could not imagine it happening in any other way.

Once, a friend of hers, a poet and a translator, who was most comfortable with short aphoristic *vers libre*, asked her:

“How do you translate this stuff?”

“I have no idea,” she confessed. “It’s a sort of magic. I feel as if I transform into the author. And afterwards, I can’t understand how it happened.”

“I have not heard anything like that in a while. For Christ’s sake, do not lose your gift. Not everyone is so fortunate”.

When was the last time they talked? About ten years before, and he was now gone.

Has she really lost her gift?

The stumbling block was a poem about Li Po.¹ The very appearance of the name of this Chinese poet and philosopher in a poetry collection of a modern Scandinavian author seemed ridiculous and artificial. Furthermore, the words did not fit the general mood of the collection. And Margarita had already transformed. So much so, that half of the author’s *vers libre* she had turned into rhymed harmonies that flew and spun like snow vortices. So, they flowed onto the paper. But Li Po refused to flow anywhere.

¹ Li Po (also Li Bai, Li Bo and Li Pai, likely born in 701 CE): A Chinese poet of the Tang dynasty.

He stayed canned in his tin like Icelandic herring, and she could not find the can opener that fit.

Margarita cursed quietly and shoved the messed-up sheet of paper in a folder.

“To hell with it”, she thought. “I need a change of scenery. Papa used to send his lab assistants home or to the movies when their experiments stumbled. I should use the positive experience of my ancestors. Work is over, for today”.

She stretched so hard that her shoulders popped and abruptly got up from her chair.

On the floor, there was a pool of sunlight trickling through the window. Margarita decided it was a good time to take a walk. Luckily, she had sent her daughter to the country with her parents the day before, but hadn't gone herself. The translation was due on Monday, and it would have been impossible to finish it in the country and with the whole family running about.

Margarita ate a quick bite, donned her favorite pair of jeans and her handmade olive-green sweater, stuffed a small volume by Li Po that she had borrowed from her parents the day before in her purse, walked out of her building to Yakimanka² and headed towards the Big Stone bridge³, listening to the hub-bub of the street and the rustling of sparse late fall leaves. It was one of those gentle and soft days of Indian summer that happen in late September—early October and swaddle you in their contentment like in cobwebs. The sky was covered by a thin haze of smog, but kept its transparency, despite its noticeably faded blue.

Li Po, Li Po... Margarita didn't notice that he had returned and taken over her thoughts. What was so special about this poet

² Yakimanka: the main street in Yakimanka District, one of central districts in Moscow.

³ A bridge across Moscow river leading to the Kremlin and downtown Moscow.

that had attracted others for almost twelve centuries? A Fate's favorite, an emperor's confidant, he suddenly left the court and his career and turned to eternal wandering. Of course, he drank. And do you, honey, know of a single poet who never drank a drop of alcohol? There you go. But what was that which he wanted from life, and how did he displease a modern-day Scandinavian?

When she reached the movie theater *Udarnik*, Margarita bought her favorite chocolate ice-cream from a vendor, took a bite and closed her eyes with pleasure.

She walked down to the embankment, crossed the space under the bridge, skipping, ran up the stairs and headed towards the Alexander Garden;⁴ it was flooded in all shades of blossoming yellow.

The garden was nearly empty, for a Saturday. The late asters shared their last light in the flower beds; the walkways were covered in brown and gold. The air smelled of musty leaves, and this smell was somewhat marred by the smell of gasoline intruding from the road. Margarita slowed her pace and noted a bench where she could sit and think things over.

The bench she picked stood deeper in, away from the path. Margarita made herself comfortable and looked around, making sure nobody could approach her undetected. Then she got her Li Po volume out and submerged herself in it.

"Pardon me. Would you mind if I sat next to you?"

Margarita startled, angry at herself for being so engrossed in the poetry that she had not noticed a stranger come so close.

"Don't be afraid. I will not hurt you. May I?"

"Go ahead", grumbled Margarita and shut her book. She was about to get up and leave, but something about this unusual man seemed to her both familiar and attractive.

⁴ One of the first urban public parks in Moscow, Russia. The park comprises three separate gardens, which stretch along all the length of the western Kremlin wall for 865 metres (2,838 ft).

The stranger sat down unhurriedly, set his topped cane between his knees, and took a heavy silver cigarette case out of his pocket.

“May I offer you a cigarette?” he asked and clicked the latch open.

“I don’t smoke,” replied Margarita sharply.

“Ah, the new generation. I remember, fifty years ago or so ladies considered smoking highly fashionable”.

“How do you know that?” Margarita squinted. “Back then you would have been small enough to play under a table”.

“You are only half right. I played, but not under a table. However, I did eat at a table, and in good company, too.”

“And where was that?”

“Right here in the capital.”

“And the table was located in the evil apartment?”

“So, you do recognize me!”

“You bet!” Margarita laughed. “I did not spend three years writing a paper on Mikhail Afanasyevich⁵ for nothing!”

“No, you did not”, smiled Woland.⁶ It was, indeed, him.

“So, what brings you back to Moscow?” Margarita inquired. “I was, in truth, convinced that after your famous previous visit you would never be so tempted again”.

“Indeed, that was quite a job of work. It is sad, however, that all my efforts changed nothing”.

“Come on. You did make some people happy”.

“Alas, not in this life. I wish it could have been otherwise. Anyway, this time around I am here because of you.”

“Flattery won’t get you anywhere with me. I do not believe you.”

⁵ Mikhail Afanasyevich Bulgakov (1891–1940) was a Russian writer, medical doctor, and playwright active in the first half of the 20th century. He is best known for his novel “Master and Margarita”, published posthumously, which has been called one of the masterpieces of the 20th century.

⁶ *Woland* (Satan) is one of the major characters of the novel “Master and Margarita”.

“Flattering you was never my intention. As recently as this morning you sent to me this paper with a quite confusing text. I could not figure it out, so I decided to ask you what it meant.”

To Margarita’s astonishment, Woland took out of his pocket her scribbles and doodles of the stubborn translation of the poem about Li Po. Speak of the devil and he doth appear indeed, flashed through her head.

“I hope you did not damage the lock when you broke into my flat”, Margarita said severely.

“My dear Margarita Nikolayevna! Who do you think I am?”

“Precisely who you are. And if you yourself cannot figure out what is written on this paper, I cannot clarify it for you”.

“Still, why are you so upset?”

“Because some hunter from the North climbed on top of an eagle mountain and decided to give life advice to a long-gone Chinese man. I wish I had his problems,” Margarita blurted out and then added with a sigh: “I can’t penetrate the essence of this poem. I can’t find its cornerstone. So the translation isn’t working”.

“Why did you send it to me?”

“Because nobody else can figure it out.”

“Even He?” Woland pointed at the sky.

“I only go to Him when my loved ones need help.”

“Have you never asked for yourself? Never mind, I already know. You have learned well from the recommendations I once gave to your namesake.”

“Too well. That is why I dwell in obscurity. At this time all the VIP seats on the Parnassus are taken, and its foothills are diligently guarded by literary lackeys.”

“Do you desire fame?”

“Who doesn’t? Fame can come in different flavors, though. I do not desire the paid for kind”.

“You can’t afford that kind anyway,” Woland laughed. “I could, of course, offer you...”

“Are you going to tempt me?” Margarita lifted her eyebrows.

“I am not,” said Woland apologetically. “Those who are gifted by God cannot be tempted. Still, since we are talking, let’s talk about your translation. Let’s leave the Chinese man alone for now. What’s up with the rest of it?”

“The rest is fine. Although, I don’t think that a rhymed poem will work”.

“Why is that?”

“Because the original is carved in *vers libre*, and the editor is very precise.”

“And what is stopping you from carving, as you put it, in *vers libre*?”

“My own nature. When I read a poem in a foreign language and it captivates me and penetrates into my flesh and blood, I see and feel it as a whole and not line by line. Pasternak⁷ said that you must rise above the original as high as possible to fully see and feel it and then the translation will come on its own. Apparently, I must step on the throat of my own song, true to Mayakovsky⁸, since literary tradesmen cannot conceive of real art.”

“Come on, it’s not that bad. You do write in *vers libre* yourself.”

“I do, when the rhyme does not match the content or when the content does not fit into the rhyme”.

“Please, elaborate. I do not quite understand.”

“I don’t think I can. Many literary scholars speak of some “craft secret” and penetrating into some depths, but I know it’s all nonsense. There is no craft secret in poetry. Genuine poetry is not a craft, it is a gift, and even a gifted poet can’t know its secret. He either accepts the gift or rejects it. Poetry written by a craftsman is doomed to oblivion.”

⁷ Boris Leonidovich Pasternak (1890–1960) was a Russian poet, novelist, composer, and literary translator, author of “Doctor Zhivago” (1957).

⁸ Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky (1893–1930) was a Russian poet, playwright, artist, and actor.

“And how can you tell real poetry from “craft poetry”? Sometimes the latter is very well done”.

“You, of all people, should not have to ask. It may be well done, but it never touches your soul.”

“So, you think I am soulless?” Woland smiled wryly.

“I never looked to check,” Margarita pointed at his chest.

“Well, perhaps you shouldn’t, anyway,” Woland agreed. “By the way, why did you give your early creations to the fire?”

“Hard to tell,” she mused. “Perhaps, it was desperation and desire to leave this life in general.”

“So, what stopped you?”

“Pity for my parents. They poured so much love into me. I couldn’t betray their love. And, perhaps, also curiosity.”

“Curiosity?”

“Yes, about the future. I thought that if I left, I would never know what happened next.”

“Would you like your manuscripts back? They do not burn, you know.”

“They do too. But no, I do not want them back. Those that didn’t burn, remained here,” Margarita touched her head. “And those that did not stay, well, they were not meant to.”

“Well, as you wish. In conclusion of our conversation let me give you this piece of advice: do not squander your gift. Your time will come,” he paused for a moment, gazing at the setting sun, “in about twenty years. I have a small request. Please, do not write anything in response to the topic of the day!”

“Don’t worry about that,” interrupted Margarita. “I’ll never.”

“I thank you in advance. May I keep this paper as a memento of our encounter? I doubt we will ever see each other again. Unless you decide to send me another scribbled message, that is. Now let me say my good-byes.”

He rose, and for some reason Margarita wished he wouldn’t leave.

“May I ask one last question?”

“You may. Just make it an answerable one. No ‘Who’s to blame?’ or ‘What to do?’.”

“That’s what you think of me?” Margarita was hurt. “I am not a politician, to ask such questions. That is their bread and butter. They are only being fed while they search for the answers. Can you imagine what would happen if someone with common sense showed up and answered both questions? They would starve.”

“So, poets are not bothered by these questions?”

“Why would we? Poets, unlike politicians, know what they are doing. And they do not look to shift the blame, because they first look inside themselves. I think this can be applied to all creative people. The most important thing is to rule over your own heart. If a poet, an artist, or a scholar starts searching for someone to blame, he, or she, is worthless. And blaming yourself is a dangerous path. One can get depressed.”

“This is an extremely sensible notion. Have you not been depressed, though?”

“I am only depressed on Tuesdays,” Margarita declared. “That is why on Tuesdays I do laundry and clean my flat.”

Woland laughed and Margarita joined him.

“Now, let’s go back to our sheep,” said Woland finally. “What was your question?”

“Will I be remembered?” Margarita suddenly burst out. This was not at all what she had wanted to ask.

“I do not normally reveal the future. But I have already broken my rules once and now I must do it again, since I promised to answer your question.”

“Well?”

“You will be sung. Interpret this as you wish.”

Margarita didn’t realize Woland’s sudden switch to familiarity right away. When she caught it, he had already disappeared into the dusk.

“Gosh, this translation has driven me bonkers,” she shook her head as if trying to shake off a vision. The sun had set, and Margarita shivered from the fast-approaching evening chill. She rose from the bench and walked quickly along the path to get warm. A new crescent moon hung over the bridge and its reflection swam and splashed in the heavy waters of the Moscow river.

Margarita felt suddenly angry with herself for never asking the burning question and never discussing Li Po with Woland. That was the reason he had come to begin with, and then he unexpectedly wrapped up the conversation and left. Why? Was it something she said?

Then it dawned on her. How could she have missed it? The Scandinavian never intended to teach the old Chinese man how to live his life. He admired the man! He admired Li Po’s rejection of power over others and his choice of the freedom to be himself, to be the master of his own heart.

She walked faster and, after entering the lobby, did not wait for the elevator but flew up the stairs to the fifth floor.

The poem rapidly flowed onto the paper and settled there, content. Margarita opened the folder to put it in with the rest and froze.

The scribbled draft wasn’t there.

September–October, 2011

About The Author

Marina Tyurina Oberlander is a poet, writer and well-known translator of Scandinavian and English prose and poetry into Russian, member of the Writers' Union of the XXI Century and Laureate of the International Leonardo da Vinci Prize (2018).

Among her translations are poetry books of the Nobel Prize nominee Inger Christensen and a prominent contemporary Danish poet Søren Ulrik Thomsen, as well as the book *Denmark and Russia — 500 Years*, a history of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

She is author of four books, three of which were published in Moscow: *Na ostrom rubezhe prostranstva* (On the Sharp Edge of Space, 2008), which comprises her own poems and translations into Russian, of Danish, Norwegian and American poetry, *Muzika Slov* (Music of Words, 2013), a collection of more than 200 poems and six short stories and *Vysokaya Nota* (High Note, 2020), a collection of about 150 poems, five stories and three essays, and one, published in Washington, D.C., *I Simply Have to Fall in Love*, (2020), a collection of about 70 poems, originally written in English and, also, translated from Russian. Besides, she has numerous publications in prestigious literary journals and anthologies in Russia, USA, Germany and Iran.

A CD with 12 songs on Marina's poetry, *Kogda vryvaetsya lyubov'* (When Love Barges In) was released in 2014.

Marina Tyurina Oberlander was born in St. Petersburg (Leningrad), Russia, into the family of a world renowned soil scientist,



Ivan V. Tyurin. She holds a Master's Degree in Philology from Moscow State University. After completing post-graduate studies at the same university, she taught Danish at the Diplomatic Academy and, for more than a decade, worked as an editor at two of the largest publishing houses in Russia — Progress and Raduga.

Since 2000, Marina Tyurina Oberlander has lived in Washington, DC. She is co-editor of VREMENA, *International Journal of Fiction, Literary Debate, and Social and Political Commentary*, a Russian-language quarterly, published in Boston.

The book is illustrated by Marina's grandson, Konstantin Ferdinand Weber-Chubays, a young prodigy, who illustrated both translated books of Inger Christensen's and Søren Ulrik Thomsen's poetry and her last two books of poetry and prose.



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This book compiles stories and novellas, written in America (with the exception of one) in the last decade. Its symbolic title *That Strange Feeling of Freedom* is not incidental. The Author, a known Russian-American poet and translator, Marina Tyurina Oberlander, having moved to the USA from Russia on the break of two millennia, writes absolutely freely, at ease, feeling no creative limitations and taboos. Her stories and novellas are not traditional *poet's prose* with its indispensable lyrical, romantic and confessional stream. This is a different literature — action-packed, sometimes phantasmagoric, featured by exact and rigorous vocabulary. This is literature of thoughts and feelings, but mostly — thoughts.

The readers could have become familiar with these stories and novellas in Russian, that have been published in different editions. Now they come out in English.

"All the stories are bright and cheerful. You can rarely get such a boost of life optimism from contemporary prose."

—Vadim Chernykh, historian, archaeographer, researcher of Anna Akhmatova literary works.



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