

WRITTEN IN THE DARK

Five Poets in the Siege of Leningrad

**Gennady Gor, Dmitry Maksimov, Sergey Rudakov,
Vladimir Sterligov, Pavel Zaltsman**

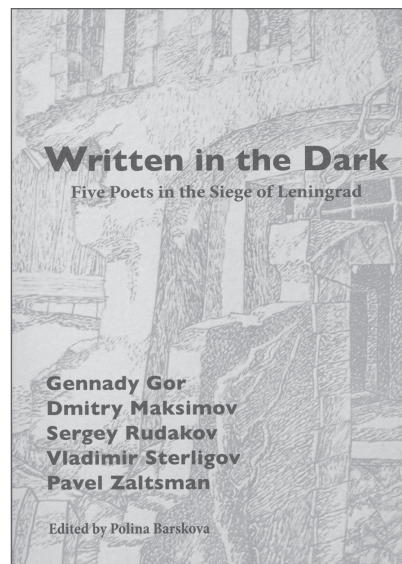
Edited by Polina Barskova

Translated by Anand Dibble, Ben Felker-Quinn, Ainsley Morse,

Eugene Ostashevsky, Rebekah Smith, Charles Swank,

Jason Wagner, and Matvei Yankelevich

Ugly Duckling Presse (\$18)



I ate Rebecca the girl full of laughter
A raven looked down at my hideous dinner.
A raven looked down at me like at boredom
At how slowly this human was eating that human.
A raven looked down but it was for nothing,
I didn't throw it that arm of Rebecca.

This untitled poem by Gennady Gor (1907-1981), about the siege of Leningrad during World War II, tells the reader more about that horrific event than any casualty numbers. For those who prefer historical facts: Leningrad (now known as St. Petersburg) was besieged by Nazi Germany from September 1941 until January 1944. Some accounts say 100,000 residents died of starvation each month, and occurrences of cannibalism have been documented, though it was rare. More than one million civilians died in the siege.

What makes *Written in the Dark* so noteworthy is that the five poets in this anthology wrote these poems while in Leningrad during the siege. The styles of the five poets vary, but there's an intensity to these poems, both from the grotesque conditions of the siege as well as the poets breaking free of the controls of censors. Both of these traits can be found in Gor's "I ate Rebecca the girl full of laughter." As editor Polina Barskova notes in her introduction, there's no heroism or stoicism in these poems, which were hidden by the poets from Soviet authorities.

A kind of macabre humor at times surfaces in these poems, as well as a willingness to experiment. One reason for this is that all five of the poets here were influenced by an avant-garde literary and artistic group called OBERIU (Union of Real Art) active during the 1920s and 1930s. One of the better known poets in this group was Daniil Kharms; to make clear the influence of Kharms and OBERIU, it's helpful to look at a short piece of his, which is included in the introduction:

There was a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears. He didn't have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily.

He couldn't talk because he had no mouth. He didn't have a nose either.

He didn't even have arms or legs. He had no stomach, he had no back, no spine, and he didn't have any insides at all. There was nothing! So, we don't even know who we're talking about.

We'd better not talk about him any more.

To avoid the wrath of the Soviet censors, Kharms claimed he wrote for children. This didn't protect him, however. He died in a political prison in 1942 during the siege, foreshadowing Stalin's virulent attacks on the writing of the avant-garde.

Less experimental than Gor, Dmitry Maksimov (1904-1987) personifies war in his poem titled "War": "She sewed up with white crosses / The bottomless eyes of / My buildings cast into darkness." Perhaps even more frightening than his portrait of war is the note he composed that serves as an epigraph to the poem: "My soul, / to defend itself, pretended / to be wooden. There was no light." In a city where furniture and books were burned for heat, a wooden soul would not survive.

More formal than Gor and Maksimov, Sergey Rudakov (1909-1944) seems out of place—at first. This unsettling poem, while using an historical allusion, bears witness to the everyday sight of bundled bodies in the streets of Leningrad:

On the streets there's quite a chill.
Wherever you look, they're dragging sleds
Of sorrowful remains,
Sewn into the white of linen.
The row of frozen mummies slides along.
In this world, everything repeats:
The rituals of Egypt's sands
Arise again in North Palmyra.

As if to provide verification of the “frozen mummies,” there’s a photograph of one on the back cover of the anthology, with a bundled resident striding past the body as if it were a common occurrence.

A close friend of Daniil Kharms’s, Vladimir Sterligov (1904-1973) composed an elegy, titled by the editor “[On the Death of D. I. Kharms].” The poem’s playful mood—“Daniil Ivanovich! You took a pipe / A yellow reed with squares of holes / A birchbark hornlet, a little fife”—contrasts mightily with the other poems by Sterligov (and by the other poets here). His poem “Death” is much more typical. It concludes: “Looked at the cabbage on the plate—death, / Seeing your friends off, two of them—death, / Happened to glance to the side—death.”

The last poet in this collection, Pavel Zaltsman (1912-1985), again shows the dark playfulness seen in Gor’s work. The rhyme used in “Growl,” here in its entirety, heightens the absurdity:

I’m a fool, I’m shit, I’m a wretch,
I’ll kill any man for sausage.
But open up, please, let us in,

We’ve scratched like beasts for days on end.
I suffer, you hangmen, can’t you see
From urinary incontinency!

Less playful, the poem “No, I don’t know from Job” makes this bold declaration: “I didn’t rise like Lazarus, / And God’s no father to me.” Once again, we can see why these poems would need to be hidden.

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The eight translators of these poems (Anand Dibble, Ben Felker-Quinn, Ainsley Morse, Eugene Ostashevsky, Rebekah Smith, Charles Swank, Jason Wagner, and Matvei Yankelevich) deserve praise for capturing poems where “language and meaning had come out of joint.” The translations clearly convey the horrendous circumstances that the poets witnessed. The introduction by Polina Barskova and

the afterword by Ilya Kukulin provide context and helpful commentary on the poems.

Those interested in Russian literature, particularly the Russian pre-war avant-garde, will be fascinated with *Written in the Dark*. Ugly Duckling Presse has done a great service by bringing us these historical poems—which unfortunately remain all too timely.

— John Bradley

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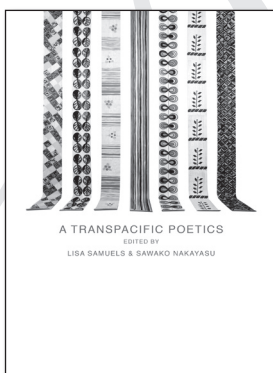
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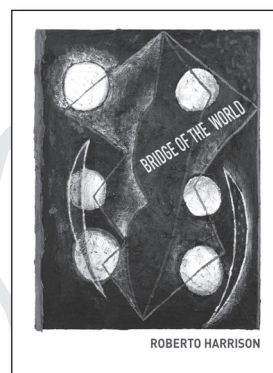
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