

## Alexander Pushkin: 'The Bronze Horseman'

### Prologue

On the banks of a wilderness of water  
one man stood, brimming with thoughts  
as his eyes advanced to the horizon.  
The breadth of the river surged forward,  
as a single, ramshackle canoe sped by.  
Along the moss-ruled, swampy shores  
he saw the dark and scattered huts  
of the godforsaken Finns;  
and the forest, foreign to the sun,  
sounded around him.

And he thought:  
Here's where we'll threaten the Swedes from,  
where we'll set a city's first stones  
to spite our power-drunk neighbours.  
We'll make a slave of nature,  
hack a window through to Europe  
and by this sea put down firm feet.  
All flags will find their way  
across these waves; and we'll hold a feast  
out here in these wastes.

One hundred years have passed,  
and the youthful city's become the marvel  
of the midnight regions, has risen  
from the dark forests, from the sweat  
of the marsh, luxuriant and confident.  
Where nature's neglected stepson,  
the Finnish angler, would sit by himself  
on low riverbanks to cast a fraying net

into unplumbed depths, now  
the stern hulks of palaces and towers  
crowd shores busy with life,  
and ships from all ends of the earth  
jostle towards rich jetties;  
the Neva is draped in granite,  
bridges raised across its waters,  
islands wearing the warmth  
of green gardens; in the glow  
of the younger capital  
old Moscow seems ever fainter,  
a purple-clad widow  
standing before the new tsarina.

Oh act of Peter, I'm in love  
with your strict and structured form,  
the Neva's commanding flow,  
its granite banks, the design  
in the iron railings, the translucent  
dusk and moonless sheen  
of dream-soaked nights.  
As I write in my room I need  
no lamp. Bright giants are asleep  
on the empty streets,  
and the needle of the Admiralty shines,  
and banning the gloom from gold skies,  
dusk hurries on towards dawn,  
and night makes do with a half-hour.  
I'm in love with the frost and immobile air  
of your brutal winter, the sprint  
of skates along the broad river,  
girls' faces brighter than roses,  
with ballrooms, their lights and noises;

and — when it's time for the single  
to get down to serious drinking —  
the hiss of foaming glasses,  
the rum-punch's flame of blue.  
I'm in love with the glittering force  
of the drills on the Field of Mars,  
the singular beauty of foot-soldier and horse,  
the shreds of victorious banners  
in the strict, rippling ranks,  
with bronze as it flashes on caps  
shot through in battle.

War capital, I'm in love  
with the smoke and thunder  
at the fort when the Tsarina of the North  
bestows her son to the empire,  
or Russia triumphs over enemies  
once more, or when the Neva  
cracks open its pale blue ice,  
bundles it off to the Baltic,  
and, sensing spring days, exults.  
Stand in beauty, Peter's city,  
remain as unshakable as Russia.  
May the defeated elements  
make their peace with you. Let  
the Finnish waves forget  
their ancient enemy and prisoner,  
their futile malice fail to unsettle  
the everlasting dream of Peter.

There was a time of terror,  
its memory fresh ... This, friends,  
is the theme of the events  
I'll relate in my bleak story.

## Part one

November breathed an autumn coldness  
across Petrograd, as it lay under dark clouds.  
The noisy waves were busy rippling  
at the edges of graceful railings,  
the Neva shifted like a sick man  
in a restive bed. It was late  
already and dark, as an angry rain  
beat and beat against the windows;  
and the wind, as it blew, seemed to whine.  
Around this time, young Yevgeny  
was walking back from friends'.  
We'll award our hero this first name.  
Its sound is fine enough; what's more,  
my pen and it have met before.  
His surname is of no concern:  
though once, it may have had its turn  
at peeling through famous stories  
beneath the quill of Karanzin,  
the world and the talk of the town  
have quite forgotten it. Our hero's home  
is in Kolomna, you'll find his name  
on a payroll somewhere,  
he keeps away from nobles,  
and no longer grieves for friends passed on  
or for things now buried and gone.  
On getting home, Yevgeny  
shook off his coat, and undressed for bed,  
but lay awake for hours as every kind  
of speculation swirled through his mind.  
His thoughts? That he wasn't well off

and would have to earn his independence  
and recognition by hard slog; that God  
was more than welcome to dole  
him out more capital and brains.

That many contented souls  
whose intellectual aims  
weren't high — the lazy sods! —  
were on holiday all year round!  
Two years now he'd been at his job ...

That the weather had not calmed down,  
the river was still rising; that for tonight  
the Neva bridges had been raised,  
cutting him off from his future bride  
for two to three full days.

Breathing in deeply, Yevgeny floated  
off into a dream, as if a poet:

“Get married? Me? Why not?  
Of course it won't be easy.  
But hell, I'm young and fit,  
and ready to work round the clock;  
one way or another I'll fix us  
a quiet and simple place to live  
to put Parasha's mind at rest.

And when a year or two has passed,  
they'll boot me up to some higher post.  
Parasha will be in charge  
of the house, of feeding the kids ... Our lives  
will really get going, and holding hands  
we'll walk ahead, our grandchildren  
will see us to our graves.”

... Yevgeny's dream. But his spirits  
that night were down, and he wished

that the howl of the wind were less dismal,  
that the rain wouldn't rattle at the window  
with such fury ...

His drowsy eyes at last  
fell shut. Now the foul night-mist  
was thinning out. A pallid day had come ...  
a day of terror.

All night the Neva had torn  
towards the sea to face a storm,  
but failed to get the better  
of the wind's violent temper,  
so the weary river broke off battle.

By morning, all along its banks,  
people were clustering to admire the spray,  
the swells, the foam of the frenzied waves.

But the Neva, filled with new life  
by the force of the winds from the gulf,  
turned back in scorn, seething,  
its waters spilt over the islands, the weather  
upped in ferocity, the Neva  
roared as it breathed in deeply,

like a cauldron it gurgled and steamed,  
then like a beast whose rage was at its peak  
it suddenly flung itself across the city.

Everyone ran, everywhere emptied,  
water gushed into cellars,  
canals rushed up to railings;  
like a Triton, Petropolis surfaced,  
with water dragging at its waist.

A siege! An assault! Malicious waves  
crawl through windows like thieves.  
Sterns take running leaps

at glass. Hawkers' trays,  
their shroud-like covers soaked through,  
wreckage of huts, beams and rooves,  
the trading stock of the thrifty,  
beggars' paltry property,  
bridges the storm abducted,  
coffins washed from the cemetery  
now bob through the streets!

God's anger is there to see:  
the populace awaits its punishment. All's gone.  
Roof and food are lost.  
Where are we to find them?

At that dangerous time  
another tsar, who's since passed on,  
still ruled in splendour.  
With worry and sorrow in his eyes,  
he stepped out onto his balcony  
and spoke: "No tsar can master  
God's elements". Grief  
seemed to wash across his face  
as he mulled over the disaster  
and its malevolence.  
Squares resembled lakes,  
streets fed into them like broad rivers.  
The Palace was a desolate island.  
The Tsar spoke — and across the city  
generals set off along dangerous routes  
that took them through violent waters  
along every street, however distant,  
to save a population gripped  
by fear, drowning in their houses.

Back then, on Peter's Square,  
a new construction towered  
in one corner. There,  
above an elevated porch,  
as if alive, with raised paws,  
two lions kept watch.

On one of those beasts of marble  
Yevgeny was sitting, stiff and pale,  
his hat now lost,  
his arms clenched into a cross.  
A pitiful figure, filled with fear  
but not for himself. He didn't hear  
how the thirsty waves rose  
and lapped at his soles,  
how the rain lashed his face,  
how the wind, with a violent yelp,  
had suddenly ripped his cap  
from his head. His despairing gaze  
was fixed on a distant place.  
Resembling hills, the waves swelled  
bad-temperedly out of the rebellious  
depths; here a storm wailed,  
there the flotsam skimmed past ...  
Christ, no! So close  
to the waves, right on that cove,  
that unpainted fence, that willow,  
and the shanty hut where the widow  
and her daughter, his life's whole meaning —  
Parasha ... Or was he just dreaming?  
Was this what life was, in its essentials?  
A desolate dream, heaven's  
joke at the earth's expense?

As if in a trance,  
as if manacles hold him to the marble,  
our hero can't get down! Water  
surrounds him, nothing more!  
And high up and unshakable,  
with its back towards him,  
above the mutinous Neva, stands,  
with an outstretched hand,  
that graven image on its bronze horse.

#### Part two

But glutted with destruction,  
as if it now needed a break  
from disorderly conduct,  
the Neva began to flow back,  
feasting its eyes on its mutiny,  
casually flinging about its booty.  
It was like some thug with his vicious  
gang, who've torn into a village  
and rip, shatter and smash,  
looting and yelling, and urge  
each other on to violence with curses,  
surrounded by panic and wailing,  
their plunder weighing them down,  
and afraid of the chase,  
the exhausted robbers hasten  
homewards, dropping their takings  
en route.  
The water fell, and a street  
emerged. Yevgeny, our hero,  
sped to the river as it subsided;

fear, longing and hope  
were vices clamped round his mind.  
But the malevolent waves, filled  
with the pride of victory, boiled  
again, as if a fire smouldered  
beneath them, and foam  
crested the waves once more,  
and the Neva panted like a horse  
galloping up from combat.  
Yevgeny's eyes located a boat;  
he ran up to it as if to some trinket  
glittering on a road.  
He called the ferryman.  
Untroubled by a single thing,  
the ferryman was ready to row him  
across the heartstopping waves  
for a handful of kopecks.  
That seasoned oarsman  
battled and battled with the storm,  
and at any moment the canoe  
might have sunk between the ranks  
of the waves with its foolhardy crew,  
until at last it reached the far bank.  
Frantic, Yevgeny runs  
towards familiar places,  
along familiar streets. He gazes  
round, but nothing is as he knows it.  
A panorama to flinch at.  
Torn and hurled, piled-up things,  
twisted or collapsing homes  
shifted by the waves, and scattered  
corpses as if this were a battlefield.

Weak from fear, his memories gone,  
Yevgeny runs headlong  
to where the future's been keeping  
its news for him inside a sealed letter.  
And he's reached those huts already,  
there's the creek, not far now to the house ...  
But what's this ... ?

He stopped,  
turned round, walked back to one spot.  
Looked ... stepped forward ... and gazed  
once more. OK, their hut  
must be right here. The gates,  
I guess, got taken by the flood.  
But where are the walls,  
the doors? Like an evening sky,  
anxiety darkens his mind, and he walks  
around and around in circles,  
thinking everything through, out loud,  
until suddenly he strikes  
his forehead with his hand,  
and breaks into giggles.

Night-time darkness  
dropped onto the city that was still trembling.  
That night it was long before anyone slept,  
as people talked and tried to find sense  
in that day's events.

Out of the pale,  
exhausted rainclouds, the morning's rays  
dazzled across the calm capital,  
but they discovered no trace  
of yesterday's disaster, whose malice  
was concealed again in purple.

Life reverted to good order,  
the streets were passable, and people  
walked along them unconcerned.  
Civil servants left their roosts  
for the office. Unperturbed,  
go-ahead small businessmen  
were opening up the basements  
that the Neva had burgled,  
compensating their losses  
from neighbouring properties.  
Boats were cleared from yards.

And Count Khvostov,  
poet and favourite of the heavens sang  
of the grief on the Neva's banks  
in those verses we all still love.

But Yevgeny, Yevgeny ...  
His trampled mind could not withstand  
these shockwaves. The mutinous  
noise of the Neva and of the winds  
travelled through his ears, and fear would fill  
his thoughts as he wandered, mute.  
Some kind of vision, it seemed,  
was stretching him on a rack.

A week, a month passed by and still  
he never once went home. The lease  
expired on his vacant bolthole,  
the landlord let it to a poor poet,  
and Yevgeny failed to come back  
for such things as he had. Before long  
the world had lost all meaning to him. He'd wander  
the streets all day, then sleep on wharves,  
live from bread proffered through a window.

His threadbare clothes were ripped and rotting.  
Fierce children chased him with stones.  
He felt the lash of coachmen's spit  
whenever he blocked the road,  
ignoring approaching horses, deafened  
by the sound of unease in his mind.  
He dragged out his miserable life,  
neither animal nor human, neither  
one thing nor the other — alive  
on earth, or dead among ghosts ...

Once he was asleep on the quays  
by the Neva, as summer days  
declined into autumn. The wind wheezed  
with rain, and a sombre wave  
grumbled as it splashed onto the wharf,  
beating the sleek steps  
like a man at the doors of a court  
shut against his complaint.  
Our victim of events awoke.  
Everything around him was murky.  
Rain dipped, the dismal wind  
wailed. Far into the night-mist  
the watchmen were hailing round ...  
Yevgeny gave a jump:  
the flood in its whole horror  
was alive again in his memory. Hurry  
called him to his feet, and off he tramped  
along the streets, then suddenly stopped.  
Gingerly, he trailed  
his eyes around him, a wild  
fear in his face. Where was he?  
He sensed beside him the pillars

of an enormous building.  
With paws raised, up on the roof,  
life-like lions stood watch,  
and up in front of him in the gloom  
on top of the railed-off rock,  
that graven image with its outstretched hand  
sat astride its horse of bronze.

Yevgeny flinched. His thoughts  
took on disturbing forms.  
He saw once more the place  
where the flood had played,  
where the predatory waves  
had massed in their angry rebellion,  
and the square, and the lions,  
and the man whose head of bronze  
loomed from the fog, immovable,  
whose lethal willpower founded  
this city at the sea's brink.  
How terrible he looked in the mist!  
The brooding visible on his brow!  
Concealed within him, what power!  
And within that horse, what fire!  
Where is your galloping taking you, proud horse,  
where will your hooves fall?  
Great shaper of lives,  
declare: you came to the abrupt  
edge, pulled back the iron bridle,  
and Russia reared up.  
Yevgeny, out of his senses,  
kept circling the statue's base,  
kept casting savage glances  
at the face of the master

of half the globe. He felt his chest  
constrict. He rested his forehead  
against the cool bars,  
his eyes twitching in the mist,  
a flame ran across his heart,  
his blood began to seethe.  
He stood there angrily, in full view  
of the proud statue, teeth clenched,  
fingers tightened, as if seized  
by a dark strength.

“All right, builder of things incredible!”  
he whispered, fury making him tremble,  
“I’ll get you!” And he set off  
at a run, headlong.

And it seemed as if in a split-second  
the face of that terrible emperor  
flared into fury, and quietly turned  
towards him . . . And Yevgeny runs  
across the empty square,  
and behind him he can hear,  
like a drum-roll of thunder,  
heavy, resounding hooves  
along a quaking road. Behind him,  
in the dawnlight of the pale moon,  
one hand thrust into the sky,  
the Bronze Horseman rides  
on his noisily cantering warhorse.  
In Yevgeny’s desperate, night-long trauma,  
wherever his legs transport him,  
the Bronze Horseman pursues him  
with the clatter of his galloping hooves.

From then on, whenever he crossed  
that square, agitation was painted  
in his face. He’d hurriedly press  
one hand to his heart, to restrain  
somehow his distress,  
doffed his threadbare cap,  
didn’t raise his nervous eyes,  
skirted round to the opposite side.

Not far off shore  
there’s a small island where, out late  
with his nets, a fisherman sometimes moors  
to boil up his meagre meal,  
or some official takes  
his Sunday boat ride  
out to this desolate island,  
where not a single blade  
of grass has grown, the place  
to where that surge, as it played,  
brought the wreckage of a hut.  
It came to rest there, like a black shrub.  
Last autumn they carried it away  
on a barge. It was empty and ruined.  
And where there’d once been a door,  
they found my insane friend,  
and gave his cold corpse  
right there its beggar’s funeral.

(1833; trans. Alistair Noon)



### **Alastair Noon, "Dragged Along by a Statue: Translating Pushkin's 'The Bronze Horseman'"**

Walk along the hard, straight embankments of the Neva — or take a Google Earth trip down to the centre of St. Petersburg — and you'll come to a large lump of granite, atop which a determined and martial-looking figure is pulling up a fierce, eye-bulging horse, and pointing out across the wide river in the direction of the West. Falconet's statue of Peter the Great has become the Little Mermaid of St. Petersburg, only the Little Mermaid isn't a symbol of geopolitical manoeuvring, emerging naval power and enforced socioeconomic change in a huge but predominantly agrarian territory. Peter's founding of St. Petersburg in the early 18th century derived from a need to keep the regional rivals, the Swedes, at arm's length, and construct a prestige project for his imperial ambitions.

The source material of Pushkin's tale of how a young clerk loses his prospective fiancé in a brief but deadly flood includes newspaper reports of a flood that had taken place in St. Petersburg in 1824. Somewhere in the background is also Virgil's *Aeneid*. Though the narrative is retrospective, its quasi-supernatural aspect — does the Horseman "really" come to life and pursue Yevgeny, or does it all take place in the latter's traumatized mind? — seems not dissimilar in technique to that of a science fiction story set just a few years from now where most things are the same, but one thing is different.

The poem is also a virtuoso performance of form and tone, moving from ode to narrative, to chatty interior monologue, to jibes at contemporary poets, and enactments in verse of psychological distress and trauma. It's a love poem for a city — this is the bit the censors didn't mind — and a not-too-subtly concealed elegy for those who died in its construction — an aspect the censors certainly

did mind: the poem did not appear in anything like its full form until after Pushkin's death by duelling in 1837, and even then with certain omissions. Critics have disagreed about the nature of Pushkin's attitude to Peter the Great: did he imply that Peter was to be admired? Hated? Distrusted? Accepted? At the very least, the poem problematizes the relationship of the state and the individual. It might, in Poundian terms, be accorded the status of an Image with a capital 'I'.

If the translation is a success it won't need an apology, but I'll offer one here for any dissatisfied customers. Pushkin is an all-rounder, so I tried to make my compromises everywhere a little bit, rather than prioritize one particular aspect and make a huge compromise elsewhere. The rhythm of 'The Bronze Horseman' can be analyzed in metrical terms as iambic tetrameter, but Russian is a strongly stressed language, and the distribution of natural as opposed to metrical stresses in a tetrameter is frequently such as to give, to my ear anyway, the feel of a three-beat line. It was the three natural stresses, rather than the four metrical stresses that I was more concerned to preserve, at least as a rough base, though the reader will quickly see and hear that even here I've been very flexible. The imagery of the poem is sharp and concise, and I was loathe to add or delete words and images for the sake of line length. This, perhaps, is where I have indeed been guilty of favoritism towards one particular element.

Eliot's 'ghost of a metre' (behind good free verse) has a parallel in rhyme I think, and my translation aims to give the feel of a rhyming poem without making the compromises in diction and meaning that tend to accompany attempts to do Pushkin in full-chime rhyme in English (Edwin Morgan's 'Autumn' is one highly successful exception to this tendency.)