

## Cossacks and Bandits

KATIA KAPOVICH is a bilingual poet writing in English and Russian. She is the author of five collections of Russian verse and of a book of English language poetry, *Gogol in Rome* (Salt, 2004), shortlisted for the Jerwood Alderburgh Prize 2005 in England. Her English poems have also appeared in the *London Review of Books*, *The New Republic*, *The Independent*, *Harvard Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The American Scholar*, *The Antioch Review*, *Jacket*, and numerous other periodicals. She received the 2001 Witter Bynner Fellowship from the US Library of Congress. In 2007 she will be Poet-in-Residence at Amherst College. Kapovich lives in Cambridge, MA, where she co-edits *Fulcrum: an annual of poetry and aesthetics*.



# Cossacks and Bandits

*Poems 2003–2006*

KATIA KAPOVICH



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“To Catch a Hedgehog,” “Brawl,” “Ferry” in *The Harvard Review*;

“The Seventh String,” “To Whom It May Concern” in *Jacket*;

“A Change of Wind,” “Dum Spiro Scribo” in *The New Republic*;

“Tutor” in *Public Space*.

“Ferry” is anthologized in *The Best American Poetry 2007*.



“Poems that chatter and sing at the same time. Melodic stories. Lyrical gossip. Writing which makes itself heard.”

—SIMON ARMITAGE

“Katia Kapovich’s new book of poems retains all her familiar virtues—her marvelous sense of story, her fearless but elegant use of form, her wit and delight in the world—but shows evidence of a new confidence in her adopted language. She moves with new lyric ease between Cambridge and Russia, between sensuous apprehensions of American life and memories of friends and family left behind. Some of the poems, especially those written in a tone of wry lament, and from a position of difficult exile, are absolutely heartbreaking.”

—JAMES WOOD

### Praise for Kapovich’s First English-Language Collection *Gogol in Rome*

“Katia Kapovich possesses one of the freshest, most arresting poetic voices I have heard in a long time. She can sway effortlessly from the most common detail into zones of sheer imaginative wonder. That she offers a rare view of a poet’s daily life in Soviet Russia only adds to the broader significance of her writing. *Gogol in Rome* is a powerful gathering of her best work in English.”

—BILLY COLLINS

“Katia Kapovich’s indelible vignettes introduce us to the eerily desolate landscapes of the post-Glasnost Soviet Union, often through the filter of that dream-like, transitional consciousness peculiar to the recent emigre to America. Her poetry is singularly vivid, poignant, and manages to capture in miniature what Babel and Chekov achieve in their finest tales.”

—AUGUST KLEINZAHLER



## Europe's Gate

A red boat sailed on muddy grass  
on the bald lawn between the checkpoint  
and the rusty dumpster, two mismatched oars  
crossed X-wise by the gate.  
It rained flags on this side and ropes on the other.  
One bird squealed in and out of the blue  
mist depositing droppings on your hat  
as you were about to step across the border.  
A trapped flag clapped  
about its metal pole, then flipped violently  
like a gunshot, because that's what flags  
do under rain. You looked back,  
neither turning into a salt pillar,  
nor hearing the Minotaur in the maze  
behind your back, where a customs officer  
struggled with a pump's unruly hose  
that writhed over whatever sewers gush with  
filling the air with blessings of manure.  
And while the officer twining with his hose  
lost, no hell broke loose.

## Tutor

My CV would be incomplete without mention of this Russian kid with Down's syndrome whom I taught English. Having come to the States just recently, I had placed an ad in the Russian bulletin, and there he was. He arrived with his mother, who also had a speech impediment and frog eyes. They were both very sweet, brought me a box of chocolates, which they themselves finished together in no time while slurping tea Russian style from their saucers. Back in Rostov the kid had attended till age 17 a school for mentally retarded adolescents. He had zero English, and his Russian was not without problems either. Never mind syntax, spelling, and punctuation, he wrote in a telegraphic style. Now he set about learning English: *The sky is blue. The grass is green. The paper is white.* Sometimes he would go into a kind of trance and stare at pigeons fornicating on a roof with long voluptuous cooing. Then his face would become almost handsome, his white puffy cheeks gained a bit of pink, and by the dreamlike glint in his colorless eyes without eyelashes I knew that he thought of love. He was eighteen after all and all chivalry, even with perpetual chocolate on his lips. I felt bad that our studies never advanced much beyond those simplistic statements. Blessed, on the other hand, with a perfect ear, he learned to pronounce them without a trace of Russian accent, much better than I ever could. The next thing I knew, he was dating an American girl. "Anton, my goodness, how did that happen?" He looked at me seriously. "I told her, 'Look! The sky is blue! The grass is green! The paper is white! What is your name?'"

## Hero

On a cold winter night in 78  
he drank two liters of Russian tea,  
went to Red Square before light  
and wrote on snow: "Brezhnev is an idiot!"

He was my god, my hero, my model world.  
I imagined him struggling with his fly  
when, busted by police, he had managed  
to end the sentence with an exclamation mark.

Imagine doing something like this nowadays.  
Imagine a hero dressed in a short sheepskin coat  
standing in the piercing wind, his pants pulled down.  
"Gross!" you'll say and will be wrong.

Sometimes truth necessitates madness, and beauty is hidden  
behind obscure details. To tell you the truth,  
I'm still jealous of him who shed his urine  
in the imperial garden of snow and laughed in the face

of the guards. Nothing beats in my eyes  
a jester, his smile full of broken teeth.  
When times in the yard are full of lies,  
why sing like a nightingale in the emperor's cage?

## They've killed the rat that lived alone

They've killed the rat that lived alone  
By the container where they piled old chairs,  
Bent rusty lamps and carpets, all moth eaten.  
So they have finally exterminated her.  
As I took off in the early hours  
I saw her body right there in the puddle,  
Or rather stretched along it like a boat  
With oars lifted.  
There she was, and the puddle that had served  
Her as a mirror glowed and did not reflect  
Her muzzle and whiskers, but the usual world  
Of these dull backyards.  
Now, my friend, you won't scare us,  
Suddenly dashing across the path before the walker,  
But, can I say, you still have the same bright eyes  
And your wet fur glistens like Russian silver.

## The Bells

Did it happen on the day that monks from St. Daniel's  
Monastery in Moscow came here to ring the bells  
that had once belonged to them? As to him,  
he had long been marked for death.  
I just wonder why no one stopped him  
when he set about painting her nude portrait,  
pouring turpentine and mixing oils  
in his studio under the roof?  
Hadn't he looked in the mirror and seen the sign on his brow?  
"Hey Joe, come over!" she said, melting in the heat.  
Didn't he hear the strange crack in her husky voice?  
She urged: "Put your hand here, does it hear my heart?"  
He wasn't sure whether he felt a heartbeat behind her bosom.  
Her husband sued him for sexual harassment. Sexual harassment  
my ass, he was merely following Her Majesty Death's orders,  
and so he killed himself with a rope and a piece of soap  
in front of her portrait on the easel on the twelfth floor,  
right under roof. Wasn't that exactly when the monks,  
having reached the top of the Lowell House belfry,  
swung the bells, which was their second nature,  
and the chimes broke out so beautiful that I cried.

## A Burn

When cleaning day descended upon junk,  
the City Hall and our German host were found  
in a remote compartment of the suitcase  
they shared with a ball of socks, a torn hood,  
you shivering in your swimming trunks  
on the freezing beech where the German  
encouraged us to join him for a swim.

I'll take my watch and bury it in pebbles  
where it may grind the sand of emptiness,  
waving its hands, bruising its elbows,  
yet polish me a magnifying glass.  
You asked the German to leave us alone,  
gulped from the bottle, married someone,  
but in my dreams lured me again  
with nakedness under the autumn sun.

One last thing before I forget  
the freckled skin, blue lips, goofy voice—  
I'll take the magnifying glass  
and show you what I meant.

## Ink Rain

Sooner the black cartridge of rain  
will shoot its Babel alphabets through the air  
than you'll get round to sending a letter  
from where you are now to where I am.

The night is humid hot, the fan mills  
the weather, the mind falls  
from its rock down miles  
of calendar days, but neither

you, who commanded the best in words,  
hyphens, commas and all such punctuation,  
nor I, who'd always fall asleep to the sounds  
of your typewriter, ever knew such rain,

who types up a storm on the roof with ten fingers,  
as dark as a man's soul the carbon paper  
where the letters flow backward, backward:  
bring a mirror and you'll decipher

what's typed out lucid on black across the page,  
what one wanted to scream from within one's own besieged  
lungs, gnawing at the barbed wire of language:  
speak to me, I'll sing you words in perfect pitch.

## The Girl That Saved a Village

The animals knew everything.  
On the morning before the tsunami  
the girl's cat carried her kittens out  
and lead them up the hill;  
the cows abandoned their pasture  
and roamed further inland;  
some goats quarreled at first  
for the position of the leader,  
but soon enough trotted away through the woods  
like a defeated army;  
pigs, big skeptics in the face of change,  
became disquieted and left the village  
in an organized crowd followed  
by the deaf village shepherd.

As she came home from school  
and her parents told her  
that the water had withdrawn far away from the shore,  
she also knew what it meant.  
Predictably, they didn't want to believe her:  
how could she know if  
she was only ten years old,  
and her geography book could be wrong anyway.  
So she ran to the beach  
where people were rummaging  
through the sandy wasteland  
picking crabs and fish.  
The bottom of the ocean lay naked and breathless  
like a woman after delivering a baby.  
There, she stripped off her school uniform  
and screamed until they couldn't ignore her anymore:

“Big wave is coming! Big wave is coming!”

## Commercial Shoot

Reality resumes at six, when the chthonic heart  
of the subway starts pumping blood  
into numb limbs. Raised from the dead,  
I count the passing trains like my own pulse.

Proserpine's name is Charlotte Bass. In spring  
she brings her buckets to the brick surface  
of the Square, her bleached yellow hair tickling her lips,  
once kissed by Pluto. She's comes here to share  
with strangers the daffodils of her old nightmare.

People are tough when they know no better,  
I overhear her saying while feeding a quarter  
into a meter through the morning mist.

Proserpine, or Charlotte Bass, works on a farm.  
"Sell Your Soul"—a tongue-twister for the Japanese tourist.  
The camera pans over the garbage can,

then over Charlotte's shoelaces by the curb.  
Life is a two minute commercial, except for the born-  
again, who know how to rewind.

## The Hardest Money I Made

For next to nothing, I held this part time job  
at the N Writers' Foundation affiliated with  
H University. I had to unlock the door at 6 a.m.,  
launch the coffee machine, refill the fridge  
with soda cans. No big deal, good enough for me.  
The secretary, with dirt on her forehead, said,  
"Check their bags when they're leaving the building;  
writers steal." Her handshake was sweaty,  
and it wasn't dirt, it's was Ash Wednesday ash.  
Most of the time the writers slouched around the mansion,  
an apple lay forgotten on the porch table  
with clear white bite marks in its red skin, the chess game  
of plastic cups on the checkered floor was in progress,  
and half a chocolate chip cookie in an ocean of grass  
sat stranded on a napkin island. That night  
the alarm system misunderstood me to be a burglar,  
though no police ever arrived to arrest me.

## A Change of Wind

On the eighth day he coined the word “alone”  
and saw that it was as good as everything else.  
A yellow school bus rattled down the lane,  
a wind blew in a drainpipe, strong, mellifluous.

I brought two empty crates to the parking lot,  
watched neighbors with briefcases and car keys.  
At noon a mailman passed by where I sat  
invisible, like a tree among trees.

Why, why, I asked. I wanted to know why,  
but only scared a squirrel that dropped his acorn  
when my voice broke silence unexpectedly—  
a white noise in a wireless telephone.

My club soda went flat in the bottle. With a spit  
of rain, a wind blew again from the lake.  
I raised my index finger and touched it,  
pleading, give me a break, give me a break.

## Satori

A linguistics professor in an old  
moth-eaten coat, he traveled to the north  
with his wife on her charity trips,  
talked Inuit to folks in the cold,  
caught a dog-sled ride through the wilderness,  
gave the musher a generous tip.

Now he comes out with his flat-nose shovel,  
tosses snow left and right,  
throws salt along the slippery driveway,  
with me nearby stuck like a lamppost,  
hands in pockets, groggy after a sleepless night,  
unwilling to fight for survival.

Let it snow three times, as in that old song.  
Someone rewind my mind and dust the screen.  
I am the one who confuses everything:  
right and left, “safari” and “satori,”  
the color yellow and his brother green.  
I want isolation to be absolute,  
like a dialogue between the blind and the mute.