Love Poems

Alexander Pushkin

Edited and translated by Roger Clarke

With translations by

James Falen, Jill Higgs, R.H. Morrison, John Coutts, Mary Hobson, David and Lyudmila Matthews, Walter Arndt, Walter Morison, B. Kelley
## Contents

Introduction xi

### I The Imperial Lycée (1813–17) 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reason and Love</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Tear</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For the Lovely Girl Who Took Snuff</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To a Young Widow</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Elvína</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Moon</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Morpheus</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Friends</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Singer</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cupid and Hymen</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Window</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Her</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notice on the Infirmary Wall</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Delivery to the Bábolovsky Palace</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### II St Petersburg (1817–20) 23

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friendship and Love</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yours and Mine</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ye Gods!</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Yelizavéta Ogaryóva,</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Homeland</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Princess Golitsyna</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madrigal for M—</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To A. B—</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Catherine Bakúnina</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Shcherbínin</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Olga Masson</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
That’s when She’ll Come… 36
Recovery 37
Dorída – and Another 38
Trustful Love – for Dorída 39
Platonic Love 40
In Sosnitskaya’s Album 42
Aimed at Kólosova 43
For Katénin 44
Song of the Twelve Girls 45

III The South (1820–24) 47

Epilogue to Ruslan and Lyudmila 49
A Sick Girl 51
A Nereïd 52
Crimean Venus 53
Epilogue to The Fountain of Bakhchisaray 54
Tatar Song 57
For the Fountain in the Palace of Bakhchisárây 58
The Rose and the Nightingale 59
For a Flirt 60
Zemfíra’s Song 62
Shadows of the Past 63
The Tenth Commandment 64
For a Greek Girl 65
Something or Nothing? 66
Night 67
Jealous Love 68
Gullible Love 70
It’s Finished 71
Comparisons 72
A Storm 73

IV Exile at Mikháylovskoye (1824–26) 75

Proserpine 77
The Rain-Quenched Day 79
The Desire for Fame 80
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Save Me, My Talisman</em>…</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Burned Letter</em></td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Melancholy Moon</em></td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Spanish Love Song</em></td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Liza</em></td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Anna’s Name Day</em></td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Confession</em></td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>To Praskóvyá Ósipova</em></td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>To Rodzyánko</em></td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>To Anna Kern</em></td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sappho</em></td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>On the Death of Amalia Riznić</em></td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>V</strong> <em>Return to Metropolitan Life (1826–30)</em></td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Cleopatra</em></td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Man I Was Before…</em></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>For Nanny</em></td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Riverbank by Night</em></td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Winter Road</em></td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Correction</em></td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Unresponsive Rose</em></td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>For Yekaterína N. Ushakóva</em></td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Angel</em></td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Talisman</em></td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Trinity</em></td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>St Petersburg</em></td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Songs of Georgia</em></td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dedication of Poltava</em></td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Portrait</em></td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Disfavour</em></td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Flower</em></td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Message from Georgia</em></td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>For a Kalmyk Girl</em></td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>2nd November</em></td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Winter’s Morning</em></td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Escape</em></td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I Loved You 123
My Autograph 124
Madonna 125
Burden of the Past 126
Rhyme 127
The Page, or At the Age of Fifteen 128
Farewell 130
Invocation 131
The Promise 132
Serenade to Inesilla 133
Scottish Girl’s Song 134

VI  Marriage and Final Years (1831–37) 137
A Different Kind of Love 139
Second Meeting 140
Memory of Moscow 141
Name-Day Greeting 142
A Beautiful Woman 143
Detachment 144
The Baron’s Return 145
Beauty’s Power 148
Charming Lad 149
Fragment from Anacreon 150
Worldweariness 151

Editor’s Note 153
Notes and Commentary 157
Extra Material 177
Alexander Pushkin’s Life 179
Select Bibliography 189

Index of Titles 191
Index of Russian First Lines 194
Introduction

Pushkin’s poetry is remarkable in many ways. It is remarkable for its quantity: quite apart from his narrative and dramatic verse, he has well over seven hundred shorter poems (including unpublished drafts and unfinished fragments) to his name. It is remarkable for the period it spans, stretching from his early schooldays to his premature death at the age of thirty-seven. It is remarkable for its range: it extends from deeply felt expressions of love and friendship, joy and pain, through acute and sensitive reflections on life, polished and entertaining society verse, to jokes, invectives and epigrams; it includes verse epistles, ballads, stories, descriptive pieces and songs; it covers, as well as personal and social matters, political, historical, philosophical and religious subjects; and it embraces not only purely original work but adaptations, imitations and parodies, not only of Russian literature and folklore but also of poetry from the Greco-Roman world, from modern Europe, and even from the Orient.

Pushkin himself was a remarkable man. Not only could he write poetry of technical excellence, he was also intelligent, independent, sensitive and penetratingly observant. Though he could be proud, self-pitying, angry and harshly critical, he also knew the importance of sincerity, loyalty and forgiveness. He had other weaknesses: he was an inveterate gambler and womanizer and could sometimes be excitable and petty; but he was also capable of generosity, of human understanding, and of establishing deep and lasting relationships. Another
redeeming feature was his irrepressible sense of humour: to a much greater extent than most writers, he prized what was “light and cheerful”. These qualities shine through in his writing; in particular, in his concision, clarity, directness, honesty and pervasive irony. One rarely goes away from reading Pushkin depressed – rather, stimulated, enlightened and exhilarated.

This goes to explain the singularity of Pushkin. There were other talented poets and writers among his immediate predecessors and contemporaries who displayed some of his characteristics, but his was a uniquely full and attractive combination. That is why he holds such an eminent place in Russian – indeed in European – literature.

The scope of this volume, however, is limited to Pushkin’s love poetry – though it is astonishing how even the love poems span most of the forms mentioned in the first paragraph. Of Pushkin’s total output of short poems his love poetry accounts for only perhaps a quarter. Even within this group we have had to be selective, and so have omitted insubstantial fragments and poems that, while meaningful to Pushkin’s contemporaries, are now difficult to appreciate without an extensive explanation of references and background. In total we have chosen 113 love poems, ranging across the spectrum of love’s orientations and expressions, from the imaginatively fictional to the starkly real, from playful society *bons mots* to heartfelt expressions of deepest feeling.

The poems are arranged broadly in chronological order of composition, so far as is practicable and can be ascertained. Of course, the main point of a book such as this is to allow the poems to be enjoyed for themselves. But as many of the poems are autobiographical, we wanted the volume to tell a story: the story of Pushkin’s personal and social life and his emotional development, as seen through his love affairs, real and imagined, from ebullient boyhood, through impetuous youth and more measured maturity, into the regrets and frustrations of middle age. To provide a framework for this
storytelling, the poems are grouped into six parts representing the major periods of his life.

In reading the poems as autobiography, one must bear in mind the limitations of this approach. Although Pushkin’s autographs, notebooks and correspondence allow scholars to date many of his poems quite accurately, in other cases dating is conjectural. Also, for understandable reasons, it was rare for Pushkin to name the addressees of his love poems; indeed he often did his best to disguise them behind pseudonyms or anonymity. Identification of the unnamed women he mentions is a complex and precarious field of study that has to draw not only on reading a poem’s often enigmatic contents, but on scrutinizing Pushkin’s rough drafts, deciphering other references in his notebooks and correspondence, and eavesdropping on the not always reliable comments and reminiscences of contemporaries.

Some of Pushkin’s love poetry, particularly in the early years, did not relate to real people at all, but was the construct of his literary interests and imagination. Even when a real woman was the original inspiration for a poem, the facts may have evolved into something more abstract by the time Pushkin came to writing it down. It is worth quoting Pushkin’s own account (albeit as the semi-autobiographical narrator of the fictional Eugene Onegin) of how he went about writing romantic verses:

…every poet enjoys dreaming of love. Time was when objects of affection used to appear to me in dreams: I kept their image concealed within my heart, and afterwards my verse brought them to life…

These days my friends quite often ask me: “Whom are these amorous verses of yours about? All of the girls are jealous – say who’s the dedicatee of this one? Whose glance stirred your imagination and won you, for your wistful lyrics, an affectionate caress? Who have your lines immortalized?”

XIII
My word of honour, friends: it’s none of them. I’ve not found any relief at all for love’s dementing anguish. Lucky’s the man who’s managed to combine with a love affair the fever of composition! He’s followed Petrarch’s footsteps: he’ll not only have doubled poetry’s sacred ecstasy, but he’ll have soothed his inner pain as well – and gained himself a reputation!

But I’ve been always dull and mute in love. Not till love’s passed does inspiration come and clear the darkness from my mind; then, free at last, I once more seek to unite my feelings and thoughts with the magic of words. I write; my heart has ceased to ache; my pen no longer absent-mindedly clutters the margin of unfinished lines with drawings of women’s heads or dainty feet. The extinguished embers will flare up no more. I am still sad; but there are no more tears; and soon in the wake of the storm, yes very soon, deep calm will settle on my soul. And then I’ll begin to write…

(Eugene Onegin 1, 57–59, translated by Roger Clarke)

So the extraction of pure autobiographical fact from a thick overlay of subjective memory and creative inspiration is not an easy process, and will always remain largely a matter of deduction, intuition and conjecture.

The chronological arrangement of the poems also allows us to follow Pushkin’s literary development over the same period. But a word of warning here too: in the sixth section of this collection, representing Pushkin’s final years after marriage, there is a sharp decline in the quantity and emotional intensity of the love poetry. It would be a great mistake to interpret this decline as evidencing a decline in the quantity or quality of Pushkin’s writing more generally. It is hardly surprising that a poet’s output of love poetry should dwindle after marriage, particularly when, as in Pushkin’s case, the marriage begins successfully and the poet is determined to resist extramartial affairs. In fact the early 1830s were years when Pushkin
focused more on prose writing; but he continued even then to produce fine lyric poetry on historical, literary, philosophical and religious themes.

To help fit the poems, whether autobiographical or not, into the framework of Pushkin’s life, a short biography of Pushkin is provided at the back of this volume.

Between the poems and the biography there is a brief commentary on each poem, supplying what information is available about the dates of composition and publication, if published during Pushkin’s lifetime. Many of the poems were only recovered after his death from his notebooks, or in a few cases from the records or recollections of friends. There could be several reasons for Pushkin not publishing them himself: he may have considered them – some of the album verses, for example – too slight and ephemeral; some may have been too personal, to himself or to others, to be published without embarrassment; he may have anticipated an adverse reaction from the censor or from the public; or he may not have had time to complete them to his satisfaction. The commentary also sets out to identify addressees (where possible), to explain obscure references, and to give the poems any relevant context or background that may interest the reader.

– Roger Clarke, 2013
Acknowledgements

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I am grateful to Simon Blundell, Librarian of the Reform Club, who has helped me identify and recover the texts of some of the obscure French verses referred to by Pushkin.

I also pay tribute to the memory of the late Iain Sproat, owner of Milner and Company, whose initiative in assembling and publishing for the first time English versions of all Pushkin’s lyrics laid the foundation for the present volume.

I am also deeply grateful to Alessandro Gallenzi for entrusting me with the task of editing this volume, work that has given me enormous interest and enjoyment.

Finally, I am immeasurably grateful to my wife Elizabeth, who has supported me throughout in this work by providing me generously with time, encouragement and practical assistance.
Love Poems
1813–17

The Imperial Lycée
Reason and Love

Young Daphnis, chasing Chloë, cried:
“My beauty, wait! Don’t run away!
Just say: I love you – please don’t hide;
I swear by Venus, I won’t stay!”
“Keep silent!” Reason coldly said.
“Now say: ‘I like you’!” Eros pled.

“I like you!” sang the maiden sweet,
and love set both their hearts ablaze,
and Daphnis fell before her feet,
and Chloë dropped her flaming gaze.
“Oh flee! Oh flee!” cold Reason cried,
while crafty Eros “Stay!” replied.

She stayed. And, trembling with his love,
the happy shepherd made his plea:
“Oh look,” he said, “that downy dove
has kissed his mate beneath the tree!”
“Oh flee!” cried Reason once again;
“They’ll teach you how!” said Eros then.

And then a smile so tender spilled
across the blushing maiden’s lips,
and as her eyes with languor filled,
within her lover’s arms she slipped.
“Be happy!” Eros softly said.
And Reason’s words? Oh, Reason fled.

translated by James Falen
The Tear

Last night behind a jug of stout
    I sat with a hussar;
and, grimly mute, I stared along
    the road, away off far.

My comrade asked: “Why, tell me, does
    the highway hold your gaze?
You’ve yet to see your mates march off
    along it, God be praised!”

Dejectedly I hung my head
    and whispered in reply:
“Friend, she’s deserted me!…”, and then
    fell silent with a sigh.

A tear rolled glistening from my eye
    and dropped into the stout.
“What, cry about a girl, young lad!
    Oh shame!” my friend cried out.

“Leave off, hussar!… My heart – it aches!
    No pain’s touched you, that’s clear.
A single tear’s enough, alas!
    to spoil a jug of beer!”

*translated by Roger Clarke*
For the Lovely Girl Who Took Snuff

Can it be so? It once was roses, Cupid’s flowers, you loved, or a corsage of stately tulips, or fragrant freesias, jasmines, lilies – you used to love them all and wear them every day against the marble whiteness of your breast.

How can it be, my dear Kliména, that you have changed your taste so inexplicably?…

Now what you like to smell is not a flower, morning-fresh, but a green toxic weed that human industry’s transformed into a powdery dust.

That greying German academic, hunched in his professorial chair, his learnèd mind immersed in Latin books – he, as he coughs and coughs, may use his shrivelled hand to poke the crushed tobacco up his nose.

That young moustachioed dragoon, while sitting by his window of a morning, still drowsy from a hangover, may puff grey smoke from out his meerschaum pipe.

That erstwhile beauty in her sixties, her charms away on leave, her love life terminated, whose glamour’s now maintained by artifice alone, upon whose body nowhere’s left un wrinkled – she, as she slanders, prays and yawns, may sniff tobacco dust, sure antidote to sorrow.
But you, my lovely one!… Yet if tobacco so takes your fancy now – oh, blaze of inspiration! – yes, I could be transmuted into dust, incarcerated in a snuffbox, I could be caught up on your gentle fingers; then it would be my sweetest pleasure to have you sprinkle me upon your breast beneath your silken hanky – and perhaps even – No, empty dream! That cannot be. Why can’t harsh Fate relent enough to let me be a pinch of snuff?

translated by Roger Clarke
To a Young Widow

Lida, true and loyal friend,
through my shallow sleep beside you,
tired and happy from our love,
I can hear you sighing – why?
Why, too, when I’m burning fiercely
in intensity of passion,
do I notice now and then
that you’re shedding secret tears?
And you listen, absent-minded,
to my ardent declarations;
cold the gaze with which you watch me,
cold your hand when pressing mine.
Dearest friend beyond all value,
will there be an end to tears,
will there be an end to calling
your late husband from the grave?
Trust me: for those held in death-sleep
there’s no reawakening ever;
sweet voice brings them no more sweetness,
cry of grief grieves them no more.
Not for them the rose-decked coffin,
new day dawning, noisy wake,
heartfelt tears of gathered friends,
shattered lovers’ choked farewell.
Yes, your not-to-be-forgotten
friend too early breathed his last
and in blissful exaltation
fell asleep upon your breast:
crown now won, in joy he slumbers.
Yield to love: we’re innocent.
No one with a jealous grudge will
come to us from nether darkness;
thunderbolts won’t fall at midnight;
nor will any wrathful phantom
up on two young lovers creep,
startling them too soon from sleep.

translated by Roger Clarke
To Elvína

Elvína, come, give me your hand, dear heart;
cut short this heavy dream that wearies me.
Speak... Will I see... Or must we stay apart,
   condemned by destiny?

Shall there be no more meetings face to face?
Must all my days be veiled in constant night?
Shall we no more be caught in love’s embrace
   by a new morning’s light?

Elvína, as the night’s dark hours fly by,
may I not hold you tight, my blood on fire,
gaze at you, dear, with languid, longing eye
   and tremble with desire –

and then, in joy beyond all speech or measure,
listen to your sweet lisp, your gentle cry,
and drowse through pleasing night to waking pleasure,
   just we two, you and I?

*translated by Roger Clarke*
The Moon

Out of the clouds why do you venture,  
oh solitary moon, and on  
the pillow where I lie alone  
squander your melancholy splendour?  
You with your gloomy visitation  
awaken dreams of love, the pain  
of hopeless passion, and the vain  
longings of lovers’ aspiration  
that reason hardly can allay.  
Sad recollections, fly away!  
Sleep, love that failed us both outright!  
There’ll never come again that night,  
when, moon, with your mysterious ray  
of placid radiance, you shone  
through heavy curtains on my bed,  
and gentle, gentle lustre shed  
upon my sweetheart’s lovely form.  
Why, precious moments, did you press  
with such a haste to fly away,  
and shadows pale to nothingness,  
extinguished by unwelcome day?  
How was it, moon, your lustre fell  
away in bright dawn’s radiance?  
Why did the morning light advance?  
Why did I bid my love farewell?

translated by Jill Higgs and Roger Clarke
To Morpheus

O Morpheus, god of dreams, till day
grant me relief from love’s distress.
Come, blow my lamp out now, I pray,
and my nocturnal visions bless!
Block from my cheerless recollection
the dreadful pain of those goodbyes;
grant me to see her loving eyes,
and hear her murmurs of affection.
Then, once the dark has taken flight,
your power over vision ended,
oh how I wish my poor wits might
forget love till fresh night’s descended!

translated by Roger Clarke
For Friends

On you, my friends, the gods above
still lavish golden nights and days:
on you is fixed, with thought of love,
every young girl’s attentive gaze.
Play on then, comrades, for the while;
drink up, and fill again your glasses;
and, as the transient evening passes,
through tears on your brief joys I’ll smile.

translated by R.H. Morrison and Roger Clarke