ON THE EDGE

Poems and
Essays from Russia

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Translated by
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WEIDENFELD AND NICOLSON
LONDON
Tavern violins and harps sob your hearts out,
over the black daisy with an Afro haircut,
who has gone to sleep in a bar, leaning on her friend,
and she has been sick over his trousers.

He carried her still sleeping to the toilets.
He thought to himself 'No creature could be so poisoned'.
The wino body flooded with dreams
writhed darkly on the toilet seat.

'O set yourself free! I am on bended knee,
I kiss your shoulder again and again through your damp
cotton blouse.
Give back to me in sincerity your essence,
set yourself free. Set yourself free.

from reality that is gloomy, from a secret that torments us,
from music, brazenly bursting out and rising,
from life that has raced past, but cannot ever pass.
Set yourself free, set yourself free.

Set yourself free, o woman who cannot be woken.
I wash you as a baby after childbirth is washed.
Perhaps your essence is unique
and a step towards freedom and years of caring.

Water falls off your Afro ringlets,
like lazy lenses in black frames.
My present is unwanted, my present is in vain:
set yourself free.

He stowed away in the rowing boat
and crossed the river with me.
They won't accept the ant
from the other side in those anthills.

He's black, with little white balls,
perhaps a little too white.
But he's an ant from the other side,
an ant from the other side.

Coming from the other bank,
he must be like an Old Believer to Catholics,
who have to drag needles
sharp-end down not up.

I would ferry you back, my little refugee,
but I cannot spot you in the crowd,
and I don't have the precise bearings
on that other bank either.

The bank with its pinkish
strawberry sides.
Even I don't have the technology
to bring these banks together.

In a month, he'll float back across on a twig
back to his family.
but he'll get the same reception on that side:
'You're an ant from the other side.'

1973
NEGROES SING

We,
Homeritic tombs with doleful eyes, we wreath
like smoke . . .

You,
white as refrigerators, absorbent cotton, deadlier white
than the dead . . .

of what can we sing to you, gentlemen?

of your hands waxen and white as chalk,
of how they left their print on sad shoulders, those hands,
of how they branded our wives with shame

—Ol

Whoa!
Beaten like nags, we beg for tips, in the ring and marketplace
our eyes dim,

but
in bed at night our backs, star-filled windows, gleam.

( con't )
В нас,
боксерах, гладиаторах, как в черных радиаторах,
или в пруду карась,
совзвездье отражаются
торжественно и жалостно —
Медведица и Марс —
в нас...

Мы — кегры, мы — поэты,
в нас плещутся планеты.
Так и лежим, как мешки, полные звездами
и легендами...

Когда нас бьет ногами,
Пинают небосвод,
У нас под сапогами
Вселенная орет!

1961

In us—
boxers, gladiators—as in black radiators,
reflected like carp in a pond, constellations swim,
solemnly, pitiously—
the Bear and Mars
in us . . .

We Negroes, we poets,
in whom the planets splash,
ilike sacks full of legends and stars . . .

Trample upon us
and you kick the firmament.
The whole universe howls
beneath your boot!

1961

Translated by William Jay Smith