

Boris Pasternak, “Evening” [formerly called “Reliquimini”] (1910)**translated by Angela Livingstone. c. 2790 words.**

It's growing dark. How many roofs and spires! And all of them, catching and tearing, have bent the sky down like a misty bush, then let it go, and it's risen up and is shivering, shivering with the tautness of tiny accumulated stars. But it is not yet black, it's a straw-pale sky drawn on fading parchment, and whenever an illuminated advertisement is placed in the distance it doesn't rouse or cut into the dark but is itself lulled and wan like smoky sunburnt leather. And now, down below, the blossoming black darkness and the hats and the breathings of ovals around eyes and oaks, and various inexplicable posings and slidings, all are being knotted and tied together in big moist glistening excited bunches; the street will fasten one of these bunches, now here now there, with the thorn of a gas-lamp, and tie it to the next one, so that these drooping throngs and bunches are moving, moving, like posies pinned on by the street-lamps. Glimmering drawing-rooms come together with a tongue-tied whisper of curtains, while, in the damp flushed shop-windows below, unbridled crockery and copper in music-shops, melodious fainting book-bindings, and even toys – dolls and stoves – and even, even the desolate unalive window-panes of technical offices have flung themselves after the street with exultant sensuality, and in mirror-like apartments the doubles of the street, its rubbed-out drafts, run out to a meeting with it. Its reflections float like spirits in these cubic flasks of windows; and, wherever the lamps are not lit, remnants of half-brewed greenish-pink sky float fragrantly in the lawyers' flasks in front of the town square, together with petals of the monument and its admirers.

There a whole small volume of maple leaves has flown to pieces, like sadness

or a briefly written story, over the meek washed asphalt. A little further off, a girl has bought a cupful of maize from a little old woman stiff with cold, and the pavement has flooded with pigeons.

Here's evening, the air like a denuded avenue, buildings casting down their eyes, the girl with pigeons, and the wind that has conquered everything and turned everything into weather-vanes and index fingers; and the entire dusk is like an immense rusty weather-vane beginning to groan, and like the pointing melancholy of coast-lines. At this moment, through shifting crowds and horse-cabs, someone cuts across the square in my direction, walking straight ahead without deviating, and passing the monument to a great man; he must want his manner of walking to make up for a lot, it is so unnatural, so joyfully frenzied. Here he comes, here he comes, almost breaking into a run – and now something strange happens: with a diving movement he throws himself down under the feet of some passing students and drops to the pavement with all its commotion of tossed up maple stubs; he takes a small pencil from his right-hand pocket and with an ecstatic movement raises it above the muttering leaves and the buzzing circlet of the gas-light's reflection, as if about to write something on the asphalt. He is so close to the scattered maize that the old woman thinks he is stealing and she starts to swear, shouting fragments of abuse into the lonely, desolate, fallen air; while the girl runs off and the pigeons shatter the quietness, taking it apart in tiny bits, and the students seize the surprising fellow powerfully by the elbows – they are medics and they think he is suffering from epilepsy.

Now pedlars come running towards one another with empty trays, while, in the cold gloom, church-bells burst out in finely shredded chimes which try to cover the pavement and road with tin. They are dishevelled by side-streets. I too approach. The

fellow is standing up now and, unable to form a sentence, is trying incoherently to prove that he's quite all right, he just lost a button; he has large eyes and a tie like a black flood; good Lord, it's Reliquimini, I used to go to secondary school with him and he was so good at writing my essays . . .

Soon he and I are standing beside the monument to the great man, carriages are flying in the air, the crowd is being stitched and unstitched by tiny claws of light.

Here is our conversation.

“Tell me, Reliquimini, are you quite well?”

“Yes, yes, thank you, but goodbye, I've got an appointment.”

“Wait, look here, we know each other, don't we? - what is the meaning of your behaviour over there on the asphalt?”

“Oh, I beg you not to mention that . . .”

“For one thing, we know each other, and for another, listen . . .”

[At this moment a slender lady comes out from behind the shadow of the great man, walks past and looks round haughtily in our direction; her chin is chiselled like the statue's, and the chin and lips are holding back all the enraptured frenzy of her figure and eyes, she is so . . .]

“Look, Reliquimini, we used to be friends – well, if you don't want to, goodbye.” (I feel hurt and want to go away.)

Then he says: “You know, I am the son of an artist, oh dear, that's not what I meant to say; yes, over there on the asphalt, it's ridiculous now. But just look around, how this square has tilted and has finally scooped and scooped the sky with its branches. And, you know, in the sky cracked stars are diluted, dissolved as if in blue egg-white, they quiver like embryos in the stirred-up puddles of the sky. And it's dusk here, look, by the monument and on the square, streaks of dusk, and look, faraway

phosphorescent carriages flicker, like striking a match, when brakes go on and carriages start up again.

“Just look at this chaos of shadows and silhouette-patches, all this buzzing and flowing thaw of blackened colours feathered with soot, look at them, and: there’s the horizon, naked and eternal, and the verticals of buildings, naked and regal, and here’s the square for you, bitterly compressed pure angles. [. . .] So look at the lines of the roofs and porches and you’ll see – no, you’ll feel, so that your knees start to shake – the difference between the first and the second; or rather you’ll immediately see whole parishes, frenziedly growing and dying away – parishes of colours and shadows praying to lines, to outlines and to edges, those bright inexorable gods; heroic lines, heroic outlines – it’s these the colours deify as they melt in fanatic rapture. Look, they’re descending from every possible side, scourging themselves and sobbing and laughing and blowing their noses, to lay themselves down in the liberated lines of their pure God.”

“My friend, I don’t understand a thing, but I see that you are in a state of excitement. I wouldn’t have put my questions to you except that I wanted to know the reason for that incident on the pavement.”

“Yes, yes, on the pavement . . . God is an outline, a fence. God is a limit for the god-creators, a limit to prayer, oh it’s so hard for us just now . . . [There are some who have a god, an archaic eternal outline to archaic eternal prayers; perhaps those prayers were once like colours tossing about without forms, and they found their outlined reservoir, their form.] Oh, excuse me, Koinonievich, I’ll be back in a moment, there’s someone I know, I’ll go and say hallo and bring him back here . . .”

And off he went, as directly as ever, not making a turn towards his acquaintance, who was buying dahlias from a small boy, or maybe not dahlias but it *is*

autumn now; he switched the dahlias to his left hand and started shaking Reliquimini's fingers, then put an arm round his neck and began to kiss him. The dahlias must have tickled Reliquimini's neck with their coldness, but at this moment two or three silent couples got up from the benches and walked away arm in arm. Really, how sad; what is he saying, this eccentric fellow; it's some kind of neopythagoreanism, and those couples have gone so we can sit down for a while. And now a wind coming from various angles, collapsing like a seamstress after work, began creeping out through the yellow birch leaves, and the leaves crept together, a pond was in store for them, and in the pond the urban street was rowing whole towns of inarticulate little lights. And the leaves went creeping all round the pond, glancing, peering, scarcely stirring, sniffing at the earth.

Meanwhile over there, walking along with Reliquimini, his acquaintance is making gestures with the dahlias, probably as thoughts arise in his mind, and he keeps smelling them, burying himself in them, perhaps chewing or smoking them like tobacco, and he slows down his pace when Reliquimini speaks, leaning his head to one side and making circles with his right arm like an orchestra-conductor or a discus-thrower. So there they are, walking along, and there's the creeping damp of thousands of extinguishers; and the gas mantles of the damp, incited by foliage, begin blowing the puddles with their lights and reflections; and a chiming of church-bells rolls once again through autumn; as if the sky were being carried across the road and it got dropped and smashed, splashing out a shrill wet sediment - already the puddles and gutters are immersed. [. . .] And now – here he is himself, and his acquaintance is finishing a sentence: “. . . that's why I said it is a grief we share.”

Then the acquaintance presents himself to me, looking into my eyes with an unnatural directness and a sort of heartfelt conviction, leaning forward significantly:

“Makedonsky, yes, yes, Alexander of Macedon – same name as that other; insurance company for insuring against damage to timber huts . . .” – and seeing that his witticism has failed he knits his classical brows and says impetuously: “Tell me . . .”, then, as if with an inward struggle, he soundlessly continues the intonation of this “Tell me . . .”, scrutinizes the dahlias in his fist, knocking one unfortunate little leaf into place with his stick; then raises the stick, puts it under his arm, hands me the dahlias, leans forward, lights a cigarette and, with the shaven seriousness and profundity that come from having a cigarette between one’s lips, he repeats: “Tell me . . . you saw him in that idiotic pose . . .” and he laughs a forced laugh. I feel I am being mocked and I want to leave and, as if guessing my thoughts, Reliquimini says:

“Sasha, you ought to explain this to him – and afterwards to me . . .” and we walk towards the benches through the mildewed air, and the benches gape in the mist like toothless gums, as if the quietened square contains a sort of cold astonishment and the monument is just getting ready to sing of it; altogether it looks as if we are being dreamt by the objects. And altogether there’s this bald, bald square with only individual leafless branches protruding, fingered by the cold. We sat down, Makedonsky, Reliquimini and I: Makedonsky – flat, smoothed out, Reliquimini in relief and unnaturally close, both of them resembling a wax seal dripped onto layers of mist and printed off, the mist was so thick. [. . .]

Reliquimini suddenly started lamenting: “What am I saying this for? Why do I say all this to you? See, I am an artist and I can’t bear it when I see a poem of lines and outlines around me: a flowing lyricism aches and aches inside me then, for I see the pure clarified family of the heroic, it needs worship and I want to summon a whole parish of worshippers, ecstatic colours, to these lines, for the lines, as I told you, are worshipped by colours gone crazy. Or – the other way round, which happens

more often or even always – I see a whole pilgrimage which overthrows, vanquishes, inundates and drowns in its prayer the outlived outlines. But in the evenings [. . .] even the external outline – God, the horizon - even the horizon is weathered away like an edge of sandstone or like the skirt of a garment which smoulders and is burnt through by big ashily burning-out long cigarette-ends; the evening streets – they are stubbed out against the horizon. Yes and just imagine all that religious revolution of the dusk, when even the god-created lines break into pieces, multiply and bend and they themselves suddenly begin to float, to go down on their knees and want to tell some kind of rosary, press towards an altar, beat against the altar-rail, and now everything you see swells like a kind of spiritual highwater and there you are, it's twilight, a great steppeland of nomads that has risen up, a campaign of ghosts, spots, clumps, which embrace and weep and scourge themselves – and it's a kind of sorrow belonging to that godlessness when, Sasha don't interrupt, when there are whole squares full of singers but there is not the one who can be put in the vocative case, because all lines, oh dear this is boring you, all lines, vocative cases of colours, have bowed over, stopped being themselves, become an impetus, and there are no pure chiselled hands to accept the reciprocal frenzy.”

“Ah, that was well said, Reliquimini,” says Makedonsky, “that's what godlessness is, it's a path with nobody coming towards you.”

But I ask, bewildered: “Surely there's either God or there isn't, and after all God is not an outline, and look, in all this chaos of twilight a god could be manifest as the unity of the twilight, and what has God got to do with it, anyway?”

“Again you're not understanding me. I don't feel a need for God in life, in morality or in matters of truth, although even there I understand him as a great outline, a contour within which your joys and sorrows circulate. [. . .]” For some

reason he gave a shout in a moist, breaking sort of voice; then, more quietly: “And see, the lyric poet, who doesn’t understand all this so rationally, feels for the twilight, and what is creativity if not compassion for twilight? And the artist comes rushing and, with a sort of inspired miming, shows you that all the sacred cages have begun to rot, and he begs: enclose the twilight with God, for the forms have split, they have become the content [. . .] Well, these are thoughts, this is consciousness, but there is also unmediated feeling and it leads to reflexes: I was just walking along and it was twilight.

“Twilight, do you understand that twilight is a thousandfold homeless agitation that has missed the path and lost itself; and the lyric poet has got to find places for twilight, and suddenly the maple leaves on the asphalt swarm and swarm like a multitude of twilights, and the asphalt is such a great distance, and there needs to be a colourless, tightening outline for the sake of which they would tremble and burn, and that’s when I flung myself down headlong, to draw a god around the leaves, an outline for the blotches, peace to the frenzy.”

So that was the sort of conversation we had: it was becoming boring and suddenly Makedonsky jumps up. “I ought to have been at my fiancée’s long ago. Let’s go together, Reliquimini, and you too” – he turns to me. I decline, and I go away, taking my leave. For the rest, let the facts speak.

Reliquimini and Makedonsky walk to the little road where the tram passes. It is not a lively line, and it has bumpy tram-cars of an old-fashioned kind. A noise begins booming and singing in the distance, and a minute later, far off, a spectre, swollen in the mist, turns the corner into the lane; it has a decayed red lamp like a single tooth; it comes rolling up and the roadway gleams. Reliquimini and Makedonsky get in.

“What are you doing now, Reliquimini?”

“I’m breaking down, and you, Makedonsky?”

“I’m going to my fiancée with you.”

At the next stop, four very big students wearing overcoats get in, stooping; the tram sets off, they sway, they clutch at the backs of the seats and at one another, and the seat-backs break off, but the conductor just stands there on his two feet.