

Sample Translation (Pages 21 - 33)

The Song of the Cicadas

by Larissa Boehning

novel

Translated by Lyn Marven

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Contact: Iris Brandt

ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de

Larissa Boehning, *The Song of the Cicadas* (extract pp. 21-33)

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In Belorussky Station a sea of people surged, hemmed in by the walls. Once inside it was hard to keep your feet on the ground. All she could see was people's backs, clad in grey-brown coats, fur collars sitting on top, hat brims, hair scraped back under headscarves. The smell of damp wool, oversweet violet perfume, and burnt coal. And in the midst of it all, the staccato voices and hurried cries of departure. Then everything was drowned out as the air started to shudder and a train pulled in. The screech just before the locomotive came to a halt tore the hall in two. Nadja kept her eyes on her children. They were pushing through the crowd ahead of her, following their father who was the prow parting the water for the three of them.

There he was, with the four suitcases. He kept bumping into people as he passed, other passengers and their luggage, they cursed him, he apologised and tried to make himself even smaller. He kept turning around to look for his children, but didn't spare a glance for Nadja. She stopped moving, and immediately she was swallowed by the heaving crowd, she saw her children disappear, then her husband. She stood still, closed her eyes and did something she hadn't done for years, decades, maybe not since she was a child. She sent a wish up to the high roof of the station, this cathedral of departure. She could practically feel her tiny prayer get lost among everyone else's murmured hopes. No God here, nor anyone else. She stood still. Shoulders barged her, sharp limbs jostled her, forwards and back. She turned round as far as she could, and she could see the high light of the open exit, which was also an entrance, the way she had come in. She could go back out of it at any time. Back to her house, the flat, the theatre, prise the boards from the door, carry on as before. Not give up. Write to Stalin, put her faith in Stalin, fight for the common cause, with her art. She couldn't see her children now, the sea had swallowed them. Her husband too was long gone. Relief, maybe it really was a relief for Anton, he wouldn't have to put up with her moods, the distant coldness she was capable of. The way she could be irritable and withdrawn when she hadn't been on stage recently. Maybe solitude was the armour she needed in order to live. Everything else was just an illusion. Like being suited to a family? She could picture Anton, the way he just quietly got on with life. All day long he was a dependable worker, then he fell into a satisfied sleep and dreamed thoroughly pragmatic dreams. Or maybe it was indifference? While she on the other hand projected her body, her voice, her strength from the stage and no longer felt there was anything left for him. But then she remembered the warmth of her children, how they clung to her with their whole being, how her daughter sometimes announced, as if she had only just

realised herself: Mama, I love you so much. She was deceiving herself in thinking she could be alone. Right now she wished she could take Senta and Peter in her arms. Would it be better if Anton carried them through life alone? He would cope, no doubt about that. The children would just be left with a vague longing for a woman that smelled like her. Was that right? They were still young, they hardly had memories at that age. Anton wanted six or seven children, let him have them, with another woman, in Berlin, with a woman who liked having children, whose raison d'être it was to look after them, to raise them and be with them. Another woman who gave her life for her children. She admired women who could do that. She couldn't.

She took one step after another, using her elbows, trod on people's feet and didn't apologise. Until she found the collar of her daughter's coat.

"12", she heard her husband's voice calling, echoed by Senta, "12". "The platform", he shouted. "The platform", her daughter repeated. She was holding the glass with the tadpole above her head. None of them – not glass, animal, nor daughter – was equipped for this shifting world. Platform 12. The majority of the people had disappeared. Berlin, it said on the train. Fat-bellied letters on a white background. Trying to look angular, but instead they gave the impression of a sausage pretending to be a ballerina.

I am not German, Nadja decided to tell her loved one, talking to his high forehead and Lenin beard in her thoughts, to a troika that wasn't particularly threatening. I'm Russian, I'll always be Russian, what am I doing going to Germany?

"Mama, Mima", called Senta, "we're here".

The locomotive, matt black, with smoke belching out of the chimney and hissing noises escaping from under the footboard of the carriage, like a tongue licking at her ankles. The ice-cold handrail by the door: she was convinced it would tear her skin off if she let go. Mechanically she stepped inside. Dark wood, like the wood in a drinking den, a shebeen, with gargoyles sitting behind. She was boarding a theatre set which, like her, was only pretending to be there.

Let me explain it to you again, Nadja said to the goatee. Now, in the distance, in different light, he seemed to possess the great father's sympathetic features, he was someone you could speak to. It was the Tsar who brought my parents here, to build up our country, lay gas mains in the city, that's what happened. You see.

Her beloved was part of the stage set, she saw that clearly now, knock-kneed and thin as the wooden panelling. His high forehead too was a cardboard cutout, and she shrank away from him. She was seized by anger again, that familiar anger when something was unjust,

when one person was humiliating another, she was filled with rage, a deadly serious sense of justice. Like the first signs of the flu, her neck muscles tensed up, her temples began to throb. She tried to play down her opportunism: it was fear, of course. She turned round abruptly, pushed past the cases piled up in the vestibule. Resistance in her core, the belt of her coat was cutting into her stomach, Anton's voice, very close now, "what a scene. In front of the children", and her own, which retorted, "a mistake, it can't be right, I need to sort it out".

He gripped her even more tightly. He embraced her, held her in his arms, but it was the grip of a man who was struggling to control himself and didn't know whether he would manage to. He trembled in their embrace. Then he pushed her away, surprised by the strength of his embrace no doubt, together with the desire to hurt her. He let go of her as forcibly as he had grabbed her.

Anton had placed two suitcases in the netting overhead and two on the floor so the children could stretch their legs out on top of them. The window was pulled down halfway, and the two remaining places in their compartment were still empty. Nadja stayed standing in the doorway until Anton pulled the handle across and she had to step inside, towards him, or step away from him. That's when she saw the pouch hanging from his belt.

"You're not really going to take that with you".

"Don't start", he said. His cheeks were flushed, the skin underneath was sallow. "I'll carry it", he said, in a tone of voice that suggested the pouch weighed more heavily than anything else.

She made no attempt to hide how ridiculous she found it. She was still annoyed because of their wrangling at the door just before. She wished he wasn't so superior in his composure, so level-headed, knowing what to do and what not to do.

"What's that, Papulja?" asked Senta.

"Earth".

"Marvellous, something for our balcony in Berlin", said Nadja and sat down in the empty seat next to her son. He was twirling one of his coat buttons between two fingers, like he was practising how to open a safe.

"Yes, we'll find a nice flat with a balcony", Anton replied.

"Make up your mind at least whether you're leaving this country behind, or if you're intending to be homesick forever", she hissed with the intransigence of a woman who is acting against her own wishes.

They fell silent, until the train set off with a jolt. The pounding and vibrations underneath them worked their way up into the seating, and the walls of the terminal building began to flow, slipped out of their window frame, gave way to a view of houses, walls, inner courtyards, streets, trolleybuses, avenues, and finally meadows. They passed a few kilometres south of the land where their dacha was, their neighbour, the horse, last winter, the lake, the woods, the solitude and its beauty, the peace of the world. They were silent. At some point they seemed to forget the silence was unpleasant, at least Nadja was sure how it was for Anton. She turned her gaze away, tried to focus all her attention outside the compartment and onto the things flashing past, the white stockings of the birch woods, reddish pillars of pine in endless rows. But the further the train went, so her thoughts galloped more and more insistently back through the forest, across the lake, over the meadows, through the avenues, past the trolleybuses through the streets, inner courtyards, and into Belorussky Station. What if she had stayed there?

Some hours later she noticed that her fingers were touching her lips, in different positions. Sometimes three fingers covered her mouth, pressed together, as if to stop the words from falling out her mouth, sometimes all five, like a squid. One of Otto's gestures, along with another that he often made during group rehearsals when he criticised the performance or formulated a thought while he was speaking. Then he would bring his fingertips together, thumb and little fingers like joists almost, a pointed roof which he put up in front of his mouth and spoke through. A house for his words, his elbows leaning on the arms of the chair. Sometimes he knocked the chair flying, but the house's pointed roof never moved from in front of his mouth. Sometimes being in his presence was like being surrounded by a swarm of mosquitoes. She had never felt it was malicious, unlike some other people, but rather took it as a challenge, and she recognised the sadness which lay behind it. She didn't want to become a malicious woman who silently took revenge on everyone for something that she alone was responsible for. Definitely not. And yet she could feel this unnameable thing, this swarm of malice, coming closer.

"The children were sleeping in the kettles, Papulja, they were", Senta's voice appeared in her thoughts at some point.

"They don't have a home".

"But in the kettles, why there?"

The naive curiosity in her daughter's voice softened her temper for a moment. She turned towards the landscape rushing by. Senta's voice carried on the discussion, "but how

can they sleep on top of the tar which gets poured on the street during the day, it's still very hot. Even the workers don't walk across it".

"The kettles are empty at night sweetheart. The tar is on the streets. But it's still warm in the kettles. That's why the children sleep inside".

"But how can he let it happen?"

Anton went "sh", and Nadja, who was tapping three fingers against her lips, stopped and said "it's the fascists who are to blame of course". She saw her husband's lopsided smile, and her daughter's incomprehension, then she saw her husband nod briefly, he carried on nodding, as if that would alleviate the shock the word fascists had given him. They were travelling to the land of the fascists. Yes, that's where they were going.

"He doesn't let it happen", Anton said after a while, without taking his eyes off his daughter, "and if it did happen, it won't ever happen again". Then he began to pat Senta's hand, a strange gesture, something he didn't normally do, a helpless plea to his daughter not to say or to ask anything else, because there didn't seem to be any easy answers to anything, nothing was simple or explicable any more.

At night they slept. Legs entwined, Senta's right arm across Peter's bent knees. Anton's head had fallen forward, it dropped and he started and righted himself in his sleep, as if he wouldn't allow himself to lose his posture even while unconscious.

By now they had passed through Warsaw and Nadja was still sitting upright in her seat, her coat buttoned up like she was in the hallway of their apartment, her feet in ankle boots, her woollen skirt, smooth and uncreased, reaching down to her calves. The brooch on her lapel, her hands folded in her lap. Eyes fixed on a point far beyond the wall of the compartment, all the way to the end of the train. Proud obstinacy in her gaze, with just a hint of tiredness round the edge, like a shadow. She had wrapped her shawl around her head.

Anton positioned his coat in the hollow of his back and did what he always liked to do in difficult situations in life: he distracted himself with hopeful thoughts. "An apartment by the park", he said quietly to himself, "or at least, nearby. No, overlooking the park. Where my maternal grandparents used to live in fact".

"And our things?" asked Senta, who had just woken up.

"We'll get new things", Anton stated and cleared his throat, "we will rent them along with the apartment. Isn't that practical?"

"Mama's piano too?"

Anton looked at Nadja. Nadja seemed to be focusing on her hands. That was when he noticed the change under her shawl for the first time.

“Mama’s piano will be in the apartment, and there will be a cupboard and a table too. On a carpet, in the living room, together with a round stool, just the way she likes it”. He tried to catch another glimpse of her hair under the shawl.

“I want an aqua-drium”, Senta said.

“I see”.

“That’s where my frog will go”.

“We’ll see what we can do”.

“I don’t want to sleep in the same room as Peter”.

Anton tried to laugh, and sounded more worried than he actually felt. The children looked at him.

“I’ll see what I can do about that too”.

“Mama?” Peter asked, but didn’t say any more.

Nadja looked up, looked at her husband, her son, his careful smile, encouraging, Peter’s head was bowed slightly, waiting for a reaction. She breathed in through her nose, reached for her handbag, pulled out her notebook bound in Chinese silk, and on one of the blank pages at the back, she sketched the floorplan of an apartment with six rooms, a living room with a grand piano and a bookcase, a maid’s room, two balconies and a storage room. With determined hands, she sketched a determined picture, she even drew fish in an aquarium that filled the room, and in doing so, she sketched the enormity of the task that Anton was facing.

Senja stared.

Nadja thought she could hear him grinding his molars.

“And we will get one of those unaffordable cars as well, I’m sure, and lots of money too because Germany is so happy to have us back again. Hitler can’t wait for us to come back, it’s quite possible that there will be a brass band waiting at the station to play when we get off the train”.

Anton sent the children out into the corridor, they ought to go and stretch their legs for a bit. Senta held the door open for Peter, she glanced at her frog glass again, but didn’t take it with her.

“Punish me if you like”, Anton said once the children had disappeared.

Nadja looked at him.

“But let me remind you that all this wasn’t my idea”.

“I don’t know what Stalin’s got to do with it”, she replied, responded with a defiant steeliness, an absolute, childish desire for contradiction.

“Whatever”, Anton said “I don’t care. I’ll take the blame. Let it all be my fault, the fact that we’re sitting here, that we will live in an apartment at the back of the building, that you won’t be on the stage. Whatever it takes, just do it”. He turned demonstratively to look out of the window at the passing Polish landscape.

They heard the children talking and running in the corridor outside. For a split second their alienation became hostility, but Anton avoided looking at Nadja, in order not to make the rift any bigger. He tilted his head back. Looked up at the luggage underneath the ceiling. Rubbed the damp flat palms of his hands over the upholstered arms of the seats. “Sh”, he hissed, almost unconsciously, with an exhalation.

“I shan’t say another word”, Nadja said ironically.

“Good”.

“I’m glad we agree”.

Her coldness hurt him.

She undid the intricate knots in the scarf under her chin, and took it off.

“Your hair”, he said curtly.

“Should I have done my hair before we did a flit?”

He didn’t answer, just pressed his lips together tightly.

She stood up, left the compartment, walked down the corridor, opened the door to the toilet and saw a woman whom she didn’t recognise for a second. She ran her hands through her hair, pushed it forwards, back, looked either side of her parting, turned around, saw the same mottled grey everywhere, she tugged everything she could get hold of, as if it were a wig which was just particularly firmly attached, she tugged and tore, tore handfuls of her hair out, she stared at the hair in her hands, held it up against her head again, dropped the tangled mess and the hair floated, fleet-footed, down onto the toilet floor.

She returned to the compartment, the children weren’t back yet.

“Apparently it happened to Marie Antoinette too”, Anton said softly, and knew even as he said it that it would have been better not to say anything. He attempted a smile. Since she had come back, he felt relieved. His optimism was an imperturbable, trusty travelling companion, which couldn’t be outrun even by a train.

Nadja sat back down in her seat, upright as before, folded her hands in her lap, placed both feet side by side, knees at a classic angle. After a while she said: “Spare me your pearls of wisdom. I’m only twenty nine”.

He leant forward, propped his elbows on his thighs. She seemed to shrink back in her seat. “In my eyes”, he started to say.

“Is that supposed to be enough for me to live on, what I am in your eyes?”

“I’ll find a job, in an editorial office, or if necessary as a proof-reader, or the man doing the headlines, or a runner. I speak two languages, I’ve seen the world. Well, Moscow and Berlin at any rate. Germany and the Soviet Union are on friendly terms. There is even a Russian school in Berlin, maybe I could work as a teacher – there will be work, I’m sure, we’ll find an apartment by the Volkspark, maybe in Schmargendorf, or in Friedenau, or Steglitz”. He noticed that the names had a pleasant ring to them.

“There’s going to be a war”. Her tone of voice like a double line placed at the end of an account.

“Things are set to grow. To prosper. Friendship treaties. Not war”.

“You really are impossible”.

“Yes”, he said in a firm voice, “if you say so”.

He closed his eyes. A desire for harmony blew through him like a warm summer wind blows through a shadow. For a long time he had been aware that he was governed by this need, he was prepared to do almost anything to achieve it – moreover, he was prepared to let almost anything go. For him every conflict was a minefield, which you had to go the long way round to avoid, you never went straight through it. He simply couldn’t understand the necessity of a fight or a disagreement. But what they were doing here was conserving their hostility, it was just short of a declaration of war. As they sped along, they were standing still, wherever they faced, they kept aiming their weapons at each other, they sat there, and in the speed of the train they were fooling themselves about their instinct to flee.

“These rumours”, Anton murmured, “a rumour here, a rumour there. We are only interested in the ones that we want to hear, who cares about the truth. The truth is: there won’t be a war”.

In a single swift movement Nadja grabbed the frog glass, yanked the window down, and hurled it out. It flew in a rapid, broad arc back along the track and shattered somewhere on the stones on the other side of the lines. She banged the window shut with a thud.

The children were standing behind the glass pane in the door, Senta had her hand on the handle. Anton pulled the door open from inside. Peter clambered up onto the seat next to Nadja, Senta squeezed up next to her father.

“Well, we’ve come to some decisions”, Anton informed them. “About my job, and where we’re going to go first when we arrive in Berlin”.

He seemed to enjoy the children's attentive gaze.

"We're going to go to my old Auntie Ingje, she wrote to me that we could stay with her as long as we want."

"Where is it?" Senta asked, "Where's my frog?"

"Auntie Ingje", Anton said, "has a big, dark shop and in this shop you can buy something really special. Music. You can buy all the music in the world, everything that has ever been composed. She had a husband, Rudolf. When he died she inherited the shop. Rudolf knew exactly where to find every piece of music by every single composer. He went to the shelf, lickety-split he would pick out the sheet you wanted. But even today Auntie Ingje still doesn't know where everything is. She has a trick though, a way to find what the customer is looking for. Do you know what her trick is?" He reached behind his ear, curled his fingers round, made a fist, shook his other hand in his sleeve, rolled his eyes, emitting strange noises, and showed the children what he had conjured up with all his powers: Nadja's Chinese silk notebook.

"Where did that come from?" Senta asked.

"Ask Auntie Ingje". Anton smiled, his shoulders sloping gently forwards.

"Where's my frog?"

"I'll show you another one".

"Where, Papulja?"

Nadja sensed her daughter turning towards her, demanding an explanation, in the way that only a child can, by waiting stubbornly. And she reached out for the stiff cloth of Senta's coat, turned her collar over, brushed her thin girlish hair to one side, and suddenly she stopped, incapable of another movement, in the warm presence of her child, with whom she was travelling towards another world, which resembled Rudolf's dimly lit, old man's antique shop, stuffed full of inherited, forgotten and unnecessary objects. Sheet music that no-one wanted. A mausoleum, but without the necessary lustre. Or the unswerving belief that life after death was worth it. Just rejected artistry. Broken ambition. Tainted with the feeling of desire for revenge.

Senta broke free, planted her hands on her hips. "Now tell me where my frog is".

Anton looked straight at Nadja. Her mouth, shut tight like a clam. The corners of her mouth contained raging sorrow and determination. It was puzzling, but what was more puzzling than his feelings towards her – the sheer visibility of her contrariness took away his fear. Her trembling calmed him. The vulnerability of her grey hair. The slight gesture, the way

she folded Senta's coat collar, pushed the strands of hair out of her face. He said, "I set him free. It's better for him".

And Senta let out a shriek, which was almost a relief for all of them. It must have been audible all the way to the end of the train, because shortly afterwards one of the guards came along and asked if everything was alright.

- end of sample -