

## Poems by Rena Zhumanova

Translated by Shelley Fairweather-Vega – [translation@fairvega.com](mailto:translation@fairvega.com)

### From 20 Sonnets to Shoqan Walikhanov

**Translator's note.** Shoqan Walikhanov (spellings vary; real name Muhammed Qanafiya) lived from 1835 to 1865. He was a Kazakh scholar, ethnographer, historian and explorer. He was a great-great-grandson of the famous Ablai Khan. He was also a great friend of Dostoevsky, a member of the Russian Geographical Society, and a Russian spy. The complete cycle is now translated and available for publication.

1

Shoqan, let me begin with an acrostic.  
Only I'll boldly avoid ambiguities to  
Query a ghost (nothing wrong with it),  
And curtseys are just tricks of etiquette.  
No, our dialogue's no stretch of imagination,  
We beheld that distant destination –  
Anachronistic, yes, but consider our fate:  
Leaf through this cycle. My pen is my plough.  
In this virgin field, I believe there's a reason I've  
Harnessed myself to it, in love with the secret of  
Ablai's great scion. We've had our rendez-vous.  
Not then, but now, in this private hour,  
One knight in shining armor, his lady in a tower,  
Vining thoughts for a crown: my sonnets for you.

2

Perpendicular lines converged in an X  
and marked the spot, O idol of mine,  
where I plunge in, thoughts stubbornly fixed,  
headfirst through the ice. A flagging vampire  
thirsts just as much for red human blood.  
This spot is a landmark: all craters from blows  
where lightning struck thrice, sent in a flood  
by purposeful providence. Streetlamps glow,  
benches for settings in romantic seasons,  
here's my old school, my mom lived down the way.  
You are with me, in real life, not cinema scenes,  
set over us all in an endless array.  
With you alone I can forego translation  
to lament the destinies of our nation.

3

Rewind time a quarter century, mentally,  
to the land of a birthmarked premiere,  
where glasnost by coupons did slaves a favor  
and crashed in a steep mountain pass.  
I used to play you, like others played house,  
drinking in your precarious lot  
from the television, drop by drop,  
rejecting other kids' noisy company.  
Epaulets gleaming, there's Sagi,<sup>1</sup> still alive,  
handsome as a god – and my juvenile mind  
departed reality quite naturally.  
Prince of the blood, Muhammed Qanafiya,  
in uniform, your photograph, hagiographic,  
stood where our icons would otherwise be.

4

It's not bruderschaft, nor brotherhood;  
I'm older than you. Soon I'll be forty.  
My yesterday is what you'd call tomorrow;  
H.G. Wells could tell you that story.  
Rejoice for us from your oblivion:  
oil, wheat, metals mined, cosmonauts fly –  
yes, the transformation of this neighborhood  
would tickle your spiritual third eye.  
Your old Kokshetau<sup>2</sup> is a bigger place now,  
exporting barrages of mineral water,  
our gold to the treasury, our sand for the clocks.  
And if you fly back in your time machine  
to Kokshetau now, you'll see what I mean –  
ask how I am, I'll say "fine," in Kazakh.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Walikhanov was played in a late-Soviet movie by heartthrob actor Sagi Ashimov.*

<sup>2</sup> *Kokshetau, Kazakhstan is a small city, the poet's hometown, where Walikhanov lived for a while.*

5

“This brilliant scholar came into our world  
before his time.” That’s what people say.  
Not me. There’s nothing that I would change  
about your fate, as your right-hand girl.  
A little bit later and you would have been felled  
in the fight for independence – a figure disgraced –  
for the children of Ablai, and without a trace  
you’d have fled to China or joined the Bolshevik fold,  
then been mulched over and stowed away.  
Or else, consider a thousand-year delay –  
but that would be the dawn of the apocalypse, I bet.  
So you’d best come to us, be a military attaché,  
a UNESCO ambassador, and translate Beaumarchais  
to Kazakh for fun. Or Afanasy Fet.

6

You shaved your head and fit in fine  
in the land where Schlagintweit<sup>3</sup> lost his,  
and avoided becoming the domain  
of rumors, like a voodoo doll stuck with pins,  
about foreigners’ claws. As Alimbai<sup>4</sup>  
you raised no suspicions around Kashgar:  
you said *adieu* to your temporary wife,  
and documented the secrets of Altyshar.  
Were it ever discovered that your chapan  
concealed the uniform of a Russian spy,  
a furious revenge would have burst upon  
you, putting an end to my hero’s sly  
audacious journey, and certainly, never  
would the Geographic Society have had you as a member.

...

---

<sup>3</sup> *The most recent European explorer of the Kashgar and Altyshar regions during Walikhanov’s time, a German named Schlagintweit, was famous for having been arrested and decapitated.*

<sup>4</sup> *Alimbai was the fake name under which Walikhanov traveled, posing as a merchant, as he did Russian army work in eastern Kazakhstan and China (the Altyshar region).*



## Autumn poem

I leave you on the far side of good and evil  
I've stopped looking at your grins on Instagram  
damper days autumnally intentionally come upon us  
harsh weather cuts and presses all dull angles

in the season's leafy blaze a serenade smolders  
a howling again outside blowing  
chilly lonely ill  
inquisitions sinful souls there's bonfires burning  
spring is distant, dim and hopeless  
dragging cruel.

\* \* \*

## [Untitled]

around here we don't bother getting mad at the wind  
in times like these, dwelling on a crisis is silly  
somewhere, after all, children are bloated and thin  
and Josef's marrying Sarah in camouflage

our water flows cool and fresh from the wells  
and the radon will radiate away, we just know it  
uranium goes with gold like soot with Cinderella  
like a mouse with a keyboard and Jaeger with the beasts

the world is banked in snow till March or April  
devaluation can dance a desperate jig  
Snegurochka will sweetly melt to songs by Lel'  
and spring will show up even on our street.

*Snegurochka and Lel' – fairy-tale characters from Rimsky-Korsakov's ballet The Snow Maiden*

\* \* \*

[Untitled]

Alas, I'm not a Rubina or a Guberman,  
My great-grandfather's first name was Zhuman,  
the 'ova' a red rag blistering the eyes  
of kumiss-guzzling patriots. Here is my  
chill figure trembling in the wrong time and place:  
I am what I am, and Russian is the way  
I write and I think. Cyrillic words swirl  
in granular letters, I dart like a squirrel  
with no way off her wheel, minutes from a stroke,  
and the noose on her neck seems somehow bespoke,  
a blessing to her, but where's the catapult  
to fling her away before a deadly result?  
Poor thing, contradictions will tear her to ruins!  
An awkward relic of the Soviet Union  
is all she can be, and the whole country whispers  
"Shala-Kazakhs!" – people like her are fakers.  
We're learning our language, a choice not made lightly,  
but it's still secondary, sad as that might be,  
while the great, mighty, obsolete hump on my back  
in a post-mortem storm will be straightened at last,  
blanketing the weirdness of my torn-apart soul  
in a half moon shape. I'll open my throat  
for your slippery mercury, thrust an aspen stake  
between my ribs, inject in my vein  
a death-bringing venom, so they forever die out,  
these disloyal, treacherous lines in my mouth...

**Rubina, Guberman** – two well-known Russian Israeli writers, Dina Rubina and Igor Guberman

**'ova'** – starting in the days of the Russian Empire, people across Central Asia were encouraged or required to take last names (not a common practice previously) and to make them match the Russian cultural format, most often with a suffix of "-ov" (for men) and "-ova" (for women). Recently, there has been a trend among Central Asians who are not ethnically Russian to drop the added "-ov" or "-ova" to assert their non-Russianness.

**kumiss** – a drink made of fermented mare's milk, a stereotypical attribute of "real Kazakhs"

**shala-Kazakh** – a derogatory term used by Kazakhs to refer to fellow Kazakhs they deem not sufficiently Kazakh, or too Russian

**great, mighty** – Turgenev famously described the Russian language this way; he did not, however, add the "obsolete."