

The Head of the Department of Poetry (After Yevgeni Vinokurov)

I led the Department of Poetry.
The office of Head of the Department of Poetry
has its troubles.
It makes a man into a woman.
You are flattered, you are courted,
they bellow at you.
From one p.m. till five p.m., day after day,
I sat at my desk
and made me enemies.
My office was a one-man business.
My enemies multiplied themselves
according to the law of the geometric series.
The salary which had enticed me
to accept the office of Head of the Department of Poetry
was spent on buying drinks
for offended friends.
On the street, I met with evil looks,
which lasted up to the moment
when knowledge dawned on me like a flash:
authors do not want to be printed,
authors only want to be praised!
O self-love of the line-tinkerer!
The return of a manuscript is like a painful operation,
which I began to carry out under narcosis.
From then on, they left my office
with a radiant face,
the rejected manuscript pressed to their breast,
gushing, in spite of this, their thankful tears.
The accepted manuscript went
to the Editorial Committee.
The remarks of the Editorial Committee
are to be compared with artillery shots:
no single one strikes twice in the place
where another has already bored in.
Thus many a manuscript is like those target-discs
after a regiment has finished its practice-shots.
The poets came.
A youth. He writes in "Little Leader" ...
A greying poetaster. Asthmatic. Plumps into the chair.
His fleshy, decaying and beringed hand
rests on his walking cane ...
A lad, who always bumps his head on the ceiling.
Comes from the factory. Overalls full of chalk and paint.
He presses his cap onto the desk, where it remains stuck
so that he has trouble pulling it off as he goes ...
A corpulent lady. The children have got hooping-cough.
Her husband is mentally cruel. A monster,

so that she can only create while holding her breath.
Shopping disturbs her, cooking restricts.
She has to work alone without domestic help ...
A man. In his eye, black as pitch,
there burns a fever.
He demands: "I want someone
to nominate me as Laureate of the USSR."
An idiot ...
The poets came. They all rhyme.
The whole world rhymes!
But mankind is beginning to crap me off,
I'm beginning to mistrust everyone:
What does the Trust-Director do
when he closes himself in his office?
What does the policeman do who keeps watch in front of the embassy?

The poets came. Tons of poems,
Pulpy wads of words, sticky as cough-drops in a bag.
The poison in them is thinned,
but in heaped quantities it is not without danger.
Thus I was poisoned,
was like a supersaturated solution in which
crystallisation begins in a fraction of a second:
Poetry falls out of me
in rhombs and octahedrons.
I would have to hate it bitterly
to the end of my life,
if there were not perhaps a line ...

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