

2021 PRIZE: JUDGE'S REPORT

Dominique Hecq

The fragment from Russian to English chosen by the winning entry is the opening of *White Moss*, a novel by Anna Nerkagi, a Nenets writer, novelist, and social activist from Siberia. The excerpt sets up the novel's main event: a loveless wedding. The translation has a strong rhythmic sense and pronounced cadence. Instead of long formal words rarely used in intimate everyday speech, the translator has chosen short, basic words that rhythmically force the reader to go slow, to weigh each simple word. As a consequence, the translation communicates a visceral feeling, a sense of urgency, a sensation of impending doom. The tone is serious, yet lyrical. From the first paragraph, the reader is acutely aware that they are about to cross some barrier and the prose elegantly crosses the barriers between ethnicities. The world of the novel is familiar, yet strange.

Curiously, there is a film adaptation of Nerkagi's *White Moss* directed by Vladimir Tumaev with English subtitles, but no English translation of the novel exists yet.

WHITE MOSS (EXCERPTS)

Anna Nerkagi, translated by Irina Sadovina

For Petko, his young neighbour's wedding was like scorching salt poured on a healed wound. This was a vital, necessary matter. No grief, however intense, should stop the flow of life, just as a boulder thrown into a river does not turn its current. The water will move around it and flow once again as it was meant to.

Last year his wife, the woman Lamdo, not yet old, had departed into the eternal night. Now there was no one to set the family tea table in the morning, no one to fix the boots, to kindle the fire. When a woman dies, she takes half of your life with her. You then begin to understand that the one with whom you have shared your days also takes away a part of your soul.

The poles and the deer skins of his tent were placed on the sleigh by the Three Trees, where for centuries the Nenets had been leaving sleighs that were no longer in use. Old man Petko himself began living on the vacant side of the tent of his old friend, the Nenets Vanu. *Living across the fire*, old people would have said: in other words, not in one's own tent.

Somewhere, in some town, he has two daughters. The eldest left a long time ago, Petko doesn't even remember when. But the youngest would visit often. How he and his wife used to love when their daughter would visit in the summer. Like two old birds, they admired her from two sides. Just as bird parents clean the feathers of their only chick, he and his wife dressed her in the best furs their sleigh carried. But the daughter always left, like a fragile bird that fears winter and leaves for places that are warm.

The woman Lamdo died in winter, on a very cold day. Maybe that's why the bird-daughter did not come to her funeral.

And how much their young neighbour, the one who got married today, had admired their bird-bride. She and the neighbour used to play together as helpless children, they grew up together, and once he, the father, saw with his own eyes how they rocked a toy cradle made of an old mud boot.

He remembers something else, too. During one of the visits, in the spring, her bed stood empty for a whole white night. When she came back, her cheeks were scarlet as ripe red cloudberry. Mother and father did not ask her anything. Feeling embarrassed, they did not dare to ask.

How much pain there was in Alyoshka's eyes every time he touched the harness of the sleigh on the back of which their daughter left on her long journey.

And now, as the small camp prepared for the wedding, an inexplicable resentment would not leave Petko. Although it was difficult to call what was happening a wedding. People did not get married this way. There had been times when family pots rung out with emptiness and life did not allow for games. The old man remembered rich and poor weddings. In all of them, guests were sacred. The more guests, the better. The more kind words were said, the more happiness would come to the family that was born anew.

This wedding had no guests. That's what the young neighbour wanted. No word about the wedding was sent to any camp. No relatives, close or distant, were invited. Though it's a sin not to do it, they did not even slaughter two calves, one from the groom's camp, the other from the bride's; they did not sanctify the sacred sleigh with their blood. And

there was no wedding in the bride's tent, either. They just sat down at the table with her people, as though they were having ordinary tea, and drank a glass, without a good word. The bride was brought to the groom's camp as though she was not a woman, the mistress of the tent and of life, but a cart of firewood. Without song, without joy. They were tired and irritated by Alyoshka's incomprehensible stubbornness.

Alyoshka's mother, who had recently grown much older, lived during those strange days as though in a dream. The woman could not understand what was happening. Was this a wedding? Or had her son turned these grey-haired old men and women into mere puppets, children's toys made of rags, and he was free to treat them as he wanted? The bride's parents, sensing that something was amiss, cited the long journey and did not go to the groom's camp. And when the sleigh caravan with the bride was about to leave, Alyoshka's mother, holding the goad ready, turned back to look at the bride's mother, a woman her age, and suddenly she wanted to leave quickly, to run away like a beast with its prey, before someone could snatch it away. And while they were on the road, she looked back often.

'Is that what it was like? Is that how it's supposed to be?' thought the woman. Her secret thoughts caused her to mistrust the Big Life, but one had to keep living, so she kept moving, she didn't turn back, like an old she-wolf who had hungry, skinny cubs waiting for her in the den.

And when they got back and needed, at least for the sake of appearances, to perform the sacred ritual of bringing the new mistress into her new tent, into a life that is easy to enter but very hard to leave, the woman held her young daughter-in-law's hand tightly, more tightly than necessary, and froze before the curtain of the entrance. She was overcome by a soul-scorching fear: is this auspicious? Will this girl be happy in her tent, with her son? Should they come to their senses?

Maybe her son is right? He is not sixteen after all, he is twenty-six, a fully grown man, who by this time of life should already have not one, but two or three children in every corner of the tent. After all, he, too, has a head, not a hillock, on his shoulders. Maybe the truth of their old, not always abundant, life had died, as everything else dies? And some new, entirely other truth had been born? Every time has its own face, and therefore its own truth. But the woman straightened herself out. To think too long is to stay too long in one place. It's too late to think. The truth of life is the same and its meaning remains this: to live and to work, honestly.

Everything will work out. In vain do they, the old men and women, weep like stupid loons on the lakeshore before rain. There will be no rain, the sun will come out.

The woman entered through the door first, not letting go of the nervous girl's hand and almost dragging her inside. She stopped for a moment before she could find the strength to say the old words that were said to her in her time by her own mother-in-law:

– This is now your tent. This is where you will live.

Not letting go of the girl's hand, she led her to the bed and sat her down, understanding with her sensitive heart how unwelcoming and cold the tents of strangers can be, and that, however tender the mother-in-law's words, young people perceive them in their own way.

Quickly and skilfully, the woman kindled the fire and cut up some meat. Filling a black, soot-stained pot to the brim with the meat, she hung it over the flame. The whole time, while the hands did their usual work, the heart and the mind did their own. The mind, importunate and nagging, whispered:

– How the people of the tundra will laugh at the wedding of your son. Women will caw like crows, and the word-worm will crawl across the snows with the speed of wind: herself the groom's mother cut up the meat for the pot, herself, with her sinful hands, she kindled the pure fire of new life. She did everything herself, like an errand girl, who, at normal weddings, runs around doing small tasks like a nimble mouse. Neither the bride nor the mother of the groom can or should work. That is a sin, and it does not bring honour to any wedding, poor or rich.

– Let it be ... – the heart objected cautiously and shyly, – this may be shameful, but you did get your son married. Is that bad? You won't have to thrash in anguish like a mother bird over a ruined, empty nest. The home nest won't be empty, it will live with a new life, and the same women who now wear out their tongues with their own spit will, in time, come and sit at the table of your daughter-in-law and your son.

When the meat was cooked, and her son entered the tent, she slipped outside and ran to the neighbouring tent, afraid that her son would hear. Neighbours must be invited to the table. He is not a stranger to them, and they are no strangers, and then maybe her son's heart will soften, too. Not outsiders but their own dear elders will sit the bride down by their knee, the woman with whom her son will not play games but live a life.

The elders were expecting her. They sat side by side, taking sniffs at the tobacco, quacking softly like *avlik* birds, and talking quietly. She lowered

herself to the edge of the floorboards near the entrance curtain, and after a moment of quiet that befits a woman, she requested:

– Come, let's sit the children down,

– and she left without waiting for an answer. She was certain that they would come and together they would convince her son that this was how it should be. This was how the Nenets have always done. The woman would sit down by the man's knee, becoming part of him. This was the truth of life.

The elders did come. Alyoshka threw them a dark look but did not say a word. The adults seemed to him like stubborn children who did not understand the gravity of the game they had started. He has been silent for a few days now. Words, whether they're the loudest or the softest, are all empty just the same. No word will – no word can – express love. Words are dust. If people spent more time being quiet, then how well and how long they would love. In silence, there is a special tenderness and suffering. In suffering, there is the blood of love ...

Her hands trembling, the mother led the bride through and sat her down where a Nenets woman sits only once in a lifetime. Not on the floor planks, where her eternal place will be for all the days of her life, but on the bed next to her groom. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed her son's lips quivering with disgust, and once again she became anxious for this wedding.

Not showing her feelings, she poured tea for the elders and sat down near the table, but immediately jumped up and began throwing the dry, easily broken branches into the fire. It seemed to her that if she stopped moving, her bird-son would certainly stand up, spread his shoulders –

his wings – move the table away with his strong hand, and say harshly: 'That's it, I was just kidding ... I don't want to marry.' He'll stand up and she'll have no strength to sit him back down.

Not the thick hot tea, not the tasty meat nor the downed glass could liven up the heavy wedding. The elders, although they sat imposingly like two rocks that had grown into each other, felt like children, unable to understand anything. And they were silent like autumn birds, afraid to bring misfortune on their nest.

They had some thick broth and drank another glass, not daring to raise the cup as would be required on such a day. Alyosha took a drink too, looking straight ahead, as though it was not people but long-dead shades who surrounded him. To expect a word or to say something himself would be ridiculous and absurd. A powerless rage was flaring up within him. Oh, to stand up, fling the table to the floor, chase away the respected elders, overturn both the tent and everything that people had come up with to hide the squalor of life and the soul.

Is it for him, one who likes to play pretend he's living their old life? This is a funeral, not a wedding. Today he buries that which is dearest and brightest of all that he understood in all his years. That which lived within him in secret from people, lived sweetly, tormented and gladdened him.

He buries love. No one dares to rejoice or laugh at a funeral. No one! And it's no one's business how he celebrates his funeral wedding. It's his life and in it he is free to do anything he likes. No one can say how to get married: not the ancient tradition, not the people's language. Alyoshka wanted to cry, so that hot tears would run down his cheeks, scalding his soul. Not to get pity ... It's just that he needs to help himself somehow. He is alone now. People trample on the earth's flowers without noticing

broken stems and crumpled petals, so they also don't notice when they murder love themselves. One moment of cowardice, a little bit of self-deceit – and love is dead.

The elders stayed for a little while longer. As soon as the woman cleared the table, they started getting ready. They took a sniff of the tobacco, to prolong their stay a little, to delay leaving the poor woman alone with her son for as long as possible. Vanu was the first one to get up. Turning a stern face to Alyoshka, he stopped at the curtain, but then only waved his hand as though giving up, and left. Petko hastened after him.

And while Petko scurried, Alyoshka looked at his helpless bent back. He wanted so much for the father of the one for whom his heart ached to not leave but to stay. To sing a song about his daughter in order to spite him, Alyoshka. They would get drunk together and together have a cry about what happened. He is getting married without love, and Petko's daughter, the only person who could keep him warm in his last days, did not come back.

Petko couldn't find the curtain with his untrustworthy hands and kept bumping his head against poles. And when he figured it out, he looked back, and reproach flared up in his eyes, as though he were saying, very quietly:

– Oh, you.

Alyoshka clenched his teeth. Many days and years will pass, but eyes full of tears that won't fall will always be a reminder of this night. His head was spinning from the drink and his blood hummed loudly in his ears. Falling back on the pillows, Alyoshka lay there, not understanding how to be and what to do now. He lit a smoke, trying to avoid looking at the girl who sat by the fire. Her back, turned to him, was bent, and

along it crawled two long black braids with antique beads and copper adornments.

'Just sits there,' Alyoshka thought with anger. He felt no pity for her, frozen as she was in the eternal pose of the Nenets woman, indifferent to what had happened. As though they have already lived a long, difficult life without love, both grew tired and jaded, and at the end of bitter days that no repentance can make right, sitting by the fire that never warmed her soul, she was burying her anguish and dislike for him in the ashes.

He needed to calm down and think of everything. Calmly and soberly, and most importantly, without anger. On a road such as life, anger was an unreliable walking stick. What had the people of the camp, closest people to him on the whole earth, done to him? There was no one closer than them. They had lived together through more than one winter, more than one hungry spring, and pulled through. And, of course, they had helped him live through more than one or two griefs, even his father's death. And just because he got married without love, the sun would not refuse to rise in the sky tomorrow morning. He needed to understand their truth, too.

TRANSLATOR'S STATEMENT

The fragment I chose is the novel's opening, which sets up its main event and conflict: a loveless wedding. A young man, Alyoshka, is in love with his childhood friend Ilne, who has left the tundra and rarely comes to visit. Because of his feelings for Ilne, Alyoshka has delayed marriage, but tradition and necessity require it. In this excerpt, Alyoshka is marrying another woman, more out of spite than a desire to do the right thing.

But this romance plot is not what drives the novel. This excerpt also reveals the novel's polyphonic nature. Even as Alyoshka goes through his own developmental arc, characters like his mother and the old man Petko, Ilne's father, follow their own. *White Moss* is indeed a novel about the impossibility, the frustrations, the indispensability of love. It's a novel about love that holds together a community in a process of mutual understanding, misunderstanding and care, in the face of inevitable change.

Nerlagi writes in a laconic language that reflects the Nenets' approach to speech: silence is preferable, so every word must count. This approach guided my translation. However, it would be inaccurate to describe the prose as minimalist. It includes extended metaphors reminiscent of Old Norse kennings, which in translation often result in beautiful alliteration: 'bird-bride,' 'word-worm.'

Pronouns turned out to be far trickier. Russian grammar allows for more ambiguity in pronoun use, so translating several sentences into English, I opted for clarifying the subject while striving to preserve an economy of expression (e.g. translating 'they' as 'she and the neighbour').

The biggest challenge were the terms that describe traditional lifeways and are associated in the Russian context with indigenous Northern peoples: for example, *chum* – a tent dwelling (pronounced 'choom'), or *narty* – a long sleigh. I judged against using 'indigenous-sounding' terms in English (e.g. *tipi*), which would introduce cultural inaccuracies and exoticism. In the spirit of Nerlagi's language – clear,

not overburdened with 'exotic' detail – I opted to simply use ordinary English terms like 'tent' and 'sleigh.'

White Moss counteracts mainstream representations of indigenous life, which are often simplistic, even when well-meaning. The novel sensitively depicts multiple irreconcilable perspectives that make up the life of a community. As a member of another indigenous group (the Mari), I recognise the importance of telling nuanced stories about these issues. I believe that English-language readers deserve an opportunity to experience this challenging and moving novel.