

F R O M K O M A R O V O , 1 9 6 2



C H A R L E S M A R T I N

Two opposites, each in a wicker chair,
Grandfather Frost and I: could our nations
Not have produced a less unlikely pair
Of poets unlike in their situations?

That almost sounds like something he would say,
Given the chance – a chance he would be given,
With all the honors that have come his way.
– Did he imagine that I really live in

The dacha where he found me? Or understand
What my life has been like? Wasn't it clear
That our meeting had been wholly planned
By those in charge? Could I have said,

“My dear,

You are your president's honor-laden guest,
The apple picker picking one last apple
Before you sleep. My writing was suppressed,
While yours received all that a grateful people

Could offer up to someone not yet dead:
All fame, all glory, accolades, distinction!
My poems cling to their lives by the thread
Of memory, fraying toward the extinction

They've been rehearsing as the years went by,
When no one was allowed even to mention
My name in print, and my poems and I
Cooperated to avoid attention.

Some still exist, others have been burned
By 'the responsible organs of the state,' or
Were copied out and given to be learned
By those who could be executed, later.

You've always had the freedom to make free,
And yet you write, as though somehow you hadn't:
'The strong are saying nothing till they see.'
But over here the strong are always prudent,

For long ago the strong learned not to speak
Until the strongest raised his hand and voted.
Theirs is a concentration that the weak,
Whose speech may be ignored as it is noted,

Can somehow never manage to achieve.
The weak are free in their own estimation
And may smile back at smiles meant to deceive,
Or note the censure in the long ovation . . .

But here we are, two poets of our time,
Each one a cipher, really, to the other.
Two old people, practitioners of rhyme,
Sitting in our wicker chairs together –

Perhaps we're not that unlike at all:
The curtain that so long ago ascended
On our age is now about to fall
After the toasts and banquets have all ended . . .”

It's said that we are both up for the Prize.
Let him have it, then: my doctors have forbidden
Me to travel – my health, you see!

They advise
Especially against a trip to Sweden.