

## THE POET FIGHTING A LOSING BATTLE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

I

A Russian bureaucrat  
said to an American feminist:

*My wife produces only damaged goods;  
We have three daughters.*

In the audience, I gasp audibly  
as if struck in the face  
and then

apologize  
for making such a loud noise.  
Damaged goods?  
Oh, yes, I've been damaged.

Words can mutilate.  
How they injure us  
flay us, lay us open  
raw and bleeding  
beneath their insults!  
Each time I see the generic "he"  
Another line is added to this  
network of scars  
deforming me.  
The Amazons, I've heard, learned Scythian  
but refused to teach their language to the Scythians.  
Wise decision.  
Bad enough to be insulted in a foreign idiom.

I walk among words  
soldier in an arsenal  
learning the handling characteristics of each;  
when it's best used  
how deeply it will wound  
how to wield it like a labyris  
so both edges strike home with a single sweep.

This is a war.  
Words are my weapons.

## II

Two years ago, I began to  
forget  
occasional words, the names of simple things.  
Mid-sentence I would  
falter  
mind suddenly blank, conversation  
halted.  
I think even then I began to see  
though certainly not consciously that  
*this is not my language;*  
*this is their language.*

What name should I call you, my love?  
Must I call you “woman”?  
                    woman: out of man.  
How they twist the truth of life!  
How are we truly called?  
Must I always call to you in their language?  
Gallop down the Sarmatian Plain  
muscle calves tight against mare flank  
hair streaming in wind off the Caucasus  
how did the Amazons call to each other?  
What was our name then?

I don't know  
how long I can  
continue  
scanning centuries of silence for  
echoes of those cadences  
straining our  
                    “history”  
through their words.  
How their words wound me as I speak:  
grenades exploding in my mouth!  
Oh, my love  
we are in a war  
and these words are *their* weapons!

More and more I fever  
after the sanctuary of our lost, our mother tongue.  
more and more  
the oppressor's tongue  
sticks  
in my throat.