Viktor Sosnora
six poems
translated, from the Russian, and with an introduction
by Mark Halperin and Dinara Georgeliani

Viktor Sosnora was born in 1936 in Alupka, in the Crimea, owing, he has said, to his mother’s belief that Leningrad was no place for a child. The family returned, however, shortly after that. During the Leningrad Blockade, Sosnora’s father, a professional acrobat and aerialist, was a commander of ski troops. In 1944 the young Sosnora was sent to his Estonian grandmother and from there to an uncle, the leader of a band of partisans. He witnessed their deaths, and saved himself only by playing dead. After the war, Sosnora joined his father in Warsaw and received his earliest education in Polish. Subsequently, he learned most Slavic languages, Greek, Latin, and a number of West European languages. In 1950, he attended a sports-school and studied music at the Institute of Applied Arts.

Sosnora returned to Leningrad, served in the army (1955-58), and, while working as a mechanic, studied at the Philosophical Faculty of Leningrad State University. His first poem was published in 1958, during the “Thaw.” His first collection, January Downpour, appeared in 1962. The critic V. Novikov wrote in Ogonok in 1966, “In the mid 60s, when no one had heard of postmodernism, [Sosnora] entered into a daring poetic dialogue with the classics, rewriting both Lermontov and Wilde, an ‘Alice in Wonderland/’ journey in our time.” In 1967 Sosnora backed Solzhenitsyn’s letter to the IV USSR Writers’ Congress: “By that time,” reads an article in the Krasnaya Encyclopediya, “Sosnora had written many works, which were not published as much from political considerations as their extreme poetic complexity. Finding himself under suspicion by the authorities ... in a class by himself, ‘an aesthetic dissident,’ he endured his solitude stoically.” He published his books in samizdat, adorning them with India ink drawings.

Sosnora has translated the poetry of Catullus, Wilde, Poe, Louis Aragon, and Allen Ginsberg into Russian. In 1970 and 1979 he lectured in Paris on Old Russian poetry; and in 1987, in the United States. The 1990s saw much of his work from 1960–1980 first appear in print. He has now published a dozen more volumes of poetry and prose. His collected poems, Nine Books (St. Petersburg, 2002), received the prestigious Apollon Griegoriev Award from the Academy of Russian Contemporary Literature.

Although Sosnora’s early poems are romantic and lyrical, with metaphors based on familiar images—trees, bushes, leaves, hills, and domestic backyards—he had already started his journey as an experimentalist. The poems of this period are frequently written in the first person, which heightens the sense of the personal. Sosnora creates a background of hope, unexpectedly switches to despair, and then withdraws, as in “House of Hopes.” This poem describes a wise house, perhaps the world itself, devoid of slanderers, blockheads, loners, where infamy, power and flattery don’t lure. Alas, the speaker doesn’t live in this house. He does exist, he insists, but elsewhere.

A different mood characterizes Sosnora’s later poems. He rarely communicates directly with his reader. His personal “I” often becomes a “we” or is obscure. He tries to find sense in the chaos of the world by creating a new style that employs unexpected images and metaphors, which are at times quite scanty. Despair and bitterness keep close company. As Yakob Gordin justly points out in his introduction to Sosnora’s collected poems of 1989, Return to the Sea, “The work of V. Sosnora of most recent years, turns out to be at the intersection of two traditions—Aseev’s play with phonetics, and Khlebnikov’s play with semantics.”

Striking metaphors, very much the poet’s own, fill Sosnora’s poetry. They articulate his attitude, mood, and perspective. A dictionary can tell us nothing about such words and word combinations; we must understand them in context. In “Poet,” Sosnora describes a poet “living under an oak,” then contrasts that, in the last lines of stanza one, with “But often in this empty-handed life / come luxury, the mountains of Georgia, bottomless money.” One of his metaphors here is a unit based on irony, its components opposed—“splat,” a tiny fish, and “one caught on, or striking a hook.” The combination refers to something that does not exist; anyone who attempts to catch a sprat on a hook will be left “empty-handed,” our version.

Historical allusions in Sosnora’s poetry are often at the crossroads of different cultures. In “Poet,” the lines “like a Georgian knight, under a hide I lay / to write in a language of Georgian Queen Tamar” refer to the Georgian epic, “The Knight in the Panther Skin” by Shota Rustaveli. Even within Russian culture, Sosnora can prove elusive, echoing a literary heritage that an American reader is unlikely to sense. In one poem, he writes of “divine genius, not dying,” playing off Lermontov’s elegy for Pushkin, “The Death of the Poet,” which has “divine genius has died.”

By dropping subjects, predicates, and/or prepositions, Sosnora often reduces sentences to fragments or even to phrases. In the eleventh line, the second stanza of “Poet,” Sosnora writes: “Charon machines or even to phrases. In the eleventh line, the second stanza of “Poet,” Sosnora writes: “Charon machines or even to phrases. In the eleventh line, the second stanza of “Poet,” Sosnora writes: “Charon machines or even to phrases. In the eleventh line, the second stanza of “Poet,” Sosnora writes: “Charon machines or even to phrases. In the eleventh line, the second stanza of “Poet,” Sosnora writes: “Charon machines or even to phrases. In the eleventh line, the second stanza of “Poet,” Sosnora writes: “Charon machines or even to phrases. In the eleventh line, the second stanza of “Poet,” Sosnora writes: “Charon machines or even to phrases. In the eleventh line, the second stanza of “Poet,” Sosnora writes: “Charon machines or even to phrases. In the eleventh line, the second stanza of “Poet,” Sosnora writes: “Charon machines or even to phrases. In the eleventh line, the second stanza of “Poet,” Sosnora writes: “Charon machines or even to phrases. In the eleventh line, the second stanza of “Poet,” Sosnora writes: “Charon machines or even to phrases. In the eleventh line, the second stanza of “Poet,” Sosnora writes: “Charon.”

And so, during a writing career of more than forty years, Viktor Aleksandrovich Sosnora has remained faithful to himself—his poetry doesn’t resemble that of anyone else in Russian literature. Although he is a contemporary of Alexander Kushner and Joseph Brodsky—members of the circle of Akhmatova, who have carried forward the Acmeist agenda of formal and semantic clarity—Sosnora continues a different experimental, side of the Petersburg poetic tradition.

Poet

1
I walked through the fenced streets of Moscow
some year, that year, no year, a wine year
one more Nikolai in Russia,
Zabolotsky, the gadfly of the lyres, told me:
there’s no way to shape the line with rhyme,
no help from nymphs or alcohol,
the pressure of glory wears holes in life,
like a Georgian knight, under a hide I lay
to write in a language of alien Tamars.
I am a prison corpse, fashionable again,
a cap crowned with laurels, an award-winner,

stout and centennial; I will be living under an oak.
But often, in this empty-handed life
come luxury, the mountains of Georgia, bottomless money.

2
That crazy wolf rises into the night
like the youth of lamb, like a pure genius.
And then I put on my glasses,
their multi-layered lenses, thoroughbreds,
and see one pledge on earth:
you don’t compose a New Testament with a rifle.
You mustn’t shine in the glory
of soldiers shot in the time of Herodotus.
Prince Pasternak wasted Shakespeare's