

Translating Bunin's Conjuring

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Ivan Bunin (1870-1953) is a celebrated and respected contributor to the Russian literary canon, yet, either due to an accident of history, difficulty of translation, or nuances of his sentiment, his genius is not widely known in the contemporary English-speaking world. Despite such accolades as a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1933, and two Pushkin Prizes, in 1903 and 1909, Bunin's brilliance is presently lost to the west and awaits reclamation by discerning readers.

The story "Лёгкое дыхание," which appears in these pages in a new translation, is a testament to his extraordinary poetic sensitivity, astute choice of detail, and mellifluous quality of prose. I read this story in the original Russian as a teenager and it, along with the rest of his oeuvre, has stayed with me as a touchpoint of the great tradition. The tragic tale, woven through the admixture of conflicted tenses, perspectives, and memory—naturally overseen and guided by the narrator—took over two years to translate, despite its brevity.

Two key challenges cropped up in the work that required much deliberation and careful restatement. The first challenge was dealing with the shifting usage and connotations of words. It is said that in every generation Talmudic scholars must recover, and therefore renew, the wisdom passed down through the ages in a process that combines creativity and tradition in order to endow the next generation with access. In this translation I endeavored to reanimate the style to be closer to the author's original intent, and to be interpretable and aesthetically appreciable by modern readers. The resulting synthesis led me so far as to retitling the story as "Barely a Breath," as opposed to the direct translation of the title, "Light Breathing," in order to preserve the gestalt connection betwixt the Russian title and the story's content. "Light Breathing" carried none of the poetic wholeness contained in the Russian that "Barely a Breath" does, albeit mildly transfigured. The new title resonates with the budding womanhood of our subject, with her first foray into adult life and relations, and her tragic abrogated existence at the embodied hand of unbridled jealousy.

The second major challenge was capturing the sentiment of the story's fatalistic atmospherics. Bunin's love and tragedy was so comprehensive and utterly discernable that Russians of his time coined the now colloquial phrase "Бунинская любовь," a form of love named after the author. In that complex lies the friction between fantasy and reality, the impossible perfection of memory reconstructed, and the cold separation of time and irrecoverable loss.

The protagonists found in one of Bunin's major collections of short stories, *Dark Alleys* (1937-1944), often interact with recollections; for instance, the main character of the eponymous "Тёмные аллеи" (1938) encounters the aged love of his youth in a village along his route and does not recognize her until she hints at her identity during their conversation as she arranges his lodging. She remained unwed in the intervening thirty-five years or so, and, during the course of the conversation, she leaves no doubt that it was due to her love for him, onto which she so achingly held, for life. Forgiveness, beyond the pale. This simple story's cascading realizations, raw feelings, and matter-of-factness in setup, brings to the fore the strands of Bunin's world, a world of misunderstanding, irreparable harm, and unbridgeable chasms. Yet for all the pain and loss that appear on the surface of things, Bunin is a prophet of love, and where there is love there is hope. His stories don't resolve in bitterness but in acceptance, not in acrimony but in grace, not in discord but in poetic, even aesthetic, appreciation of one's complicated fate. Genuine sentimentality pours from his pen and reminds us blessed readers to heed the callings of our hearts, and exercise the necessary caution with the hearts of others.