

## **Poem of the End (1923)**

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Adapted for the stage by Pria Dahiya

### **Characters**

Marina

Konstantyn

### **Setting**

Prague and a recollection of Prague.

It is 1923.

**Konstantyn is always speaking to Marina.**

**A - indicates a character cutting the other off.**

## ONE

*MARINA waits.*

*The sound of a rusty sign swinging in the wind, creaking. A little bit of rain. A clock strikes six.*

MARINA

A single post, a point of rusting  
tin in the sky  
marks the fated place we  
move to, he and I.

*KONSTANTYN appears. He is a shadow.*

MARINA (*to us*)

on time      as death is.  
prompt      strangely.

*Konstantyn approaches. Signals to her.*

MARINA (*to us*)

too smooth the gesture of  
his hat to me

*Konstantyn bows as Marina continues.*

MARINA (*cont.*)

menace at the edges of his  
eyes      his mouth tight  
shut      strangely too low is the  
bow he makes tonight

KONSTANTYN

on time?

MARINA

that false note in  
his voice, what  
is it the brain alerts to and the  
heart drops at?

under that evil sky, that sign of  
tin and rust.  
Six o'clock. There he is waiting  
by the post.

*They begin.*

MARINA (cont.)

Now we kiss soundlessly, his  
lips stiff as  
hands are given to queens, or  
dead people thus

round us the shoving elbows of  
ordinary bustle  
and strangely irksome rises the  
screech of a whistle

*CUE:  
The sound of a  
the whistle begins.*

howls like a dog screaming  
angrier, longer: what  
a nightmare strangeness life is  
at death point

and that nightmare reached my waist  
only last night  
and now reaches the stars, it has  
grown to its true height

crying silently love love until  
---Has it gone —

KONSTANTYN

six, shall we go to the cinema?

MARINA

I shout it: home!

*Whistle ends.*

## TWO

*Clock strike. We have walked for a while. The sound of burning wood.*

MARINA (*To us*)

And what have we come to?  
tents of nomads  
thunder and drawn swords over  
our heads, some

terror we expect-  
listen- houses  
collapsing in the one  
word: home.

MARINA (*To Konstantyn*)

Is there even a building there?

KONSTANTYN

Ten steps before us.

MARINA

A house on the hill?

KONSTANTYN

no higher

*A burning house appears on the hill.*

MARINA (*to us*)

A house on the top of the hill and  
a window under the roof is it  
from the red sun alone

it is burning? or is it my life  
which must begin again? how  
simple poems are: it means I  
must go out into the night  
and talk to...

who shall I tell my sorrow  
my horror greener than ice?

KONSTANTYN (*Interrupting her thoughts*)  
You've been thinking too much.

MARINA (*to herself*)  
A solemn answer: yes.

### THREE

*Clock strike.*

*We have reached the river. We are on the embankment.*

*The sound of heavy rushing water, we can barely hear the sound of Marina's voice.*

MARINA *(to herself, rapidly, drowning)*

And the embankment I hold  
to water thick and solid as  
if we had come to the hanging  
gardens of Semiramis  
to water a strip as colourless  
as a slab for corpses  
I am like a female singer holding  
to her music. To this wall.

*She holds to the wall. Rushing water. We are under the surface of the river.*

MARINA *(cont.)*

Blindly for you won't return  
or listen, even if I bend to  
the quencher of all thirst, I am  
hanging at the gutter of a roof.

*She lets go of the wall. The water dies down. We are on the embankment.*

MARINA *(cont.)*

Lunatic. It is not the river  
that makes me  
shiver now, she was a hand I held  
to, when you walked beside me, a lover  
and faithful.

The dead are faithful  
though not to all in their cells; if  
death lies on my left now,  
it is at your side I feel it.

*A beam of light appears. For the first time, Konstantyn ceases to be a shadow, though his face is obscured by the brim of his hat. Konstantyn is laughing, briefly, nervously?*

MARINA (*to herself*)

Now a shaft of astonishing light, and  
laughter that cheap tambourine.

KONSTANTYN

You and I must have a talk.

MARINA (*to herself*)

And I shiver:

MARINA (*to him*)

let's be brave, shall we?

## FOUR

*Clock strike.*

*The sound of water cuts out, the sound of chatter cuts in, but there is a dark white noise below it. We are sitting outside, in a cafe. There is nothing on the table except a paper napkin.*

KONSTANTYN

You and I must have a talk.

MARINA *(to him)*

let's be brave, shall we?

MARINA *(to us)*

I catch a movement of his  
lips, but he won't speak

MARINA *(to him)*

You don't love me?

KONSTANTYN

*(looking around like an eagle)*

Yes but in torment  
drained  
and driven to death

MARINA *(to us)*

He looks round like an eagle.

MARINA *(to him)*

You call this home?

KONSTANTYN

It's  
in the heart-

MARINA

What literature!  
For love is flesh, it is a  
flower flooded with blood.



*Did you think it was just a  
little chat across the table  
a snatched hour and back home again  
the way gentlemen and ladies  
play at it?*

Either love is/

KONSTANTYN

A shrine?

MARINA

or else a scar.

*Chatter cuts out.*

MARINA *(to herself)*

A scar every servant and guest  
can see

MARINA *(to us)*

(and I think silently:  
love is a bow-string pulled  
back to the point of breaking).

*Chatter cuts back.*

MARINA *(to him)*

Love is a bond.

KONSTANTYN

That has snapped for  
us.

MARINA *(to him, with irony)*

Yes, love is a matter of gifts  
thrown in the fire, for nothing.

*She sees his grin.*

MARINA *(to us)*

The shell-fish crack of his mouth

is pale, no chance of a smile:

KONSTANTYN

Love is a large... bed.

MARINA

Or else an empty gulf.

*Konstantyn drums his fingers on the table, thinks of a response. White noise is louder.*

MARINA *(to us)*

Now his fingers begin to  
beat.  
No mountains  
move.

KONSTANTYN

Love is---

MARINA *(to him)*

Mine: yes.  
I understand. And so?

*His fingers drum faster. White noise gets louder.*

MARINA *(to us)*

The drum beat of his fingers  
grows (scaffold and square)

KONSTANTYN

Let's go.

MARINA *(simultaneously)*

Let's go, he says.

MARINA *(to herself)*

For me, let's die would be easier.

MARINA *(to us)*

Enough cheap stuff rhymes  
like railway hotel rooms, so

MARINA *(to him)*

love means life although  
the ancients had a different  
name -

KONSTANTYN

Well?

MARINA (*gaining momentum*)

A scrap  
of handkerchief in a fist  
like a fish-

*Konstantyn stands up, prepares to leave.*

KONSTANTYN

Shall we go?

*White noise is unbearably loud.*

MARINA (*to him*)

How?!  
Bullet?  
Rail?  
Poison?

*Chatter cuts back in. Konstantyn prepares to leave.*

MARINA (*to herself*)

death anyway, choose: I make no  
plans. A Roman, you  
survey the men still alive  
like an eagle:

KONSTANTYN

Say goodbye.

MARINA (*simultaneously*)

Say goodbye.

## FIVE

*Clock strike.*

*The scene is frozen. The sound of rushing water.*

MARINA (*to herself*)

I didn't want this, not  
this.

MARINA (*to us*)

(but listen, quietly,  
to want is what bodies do  
and now we are ghosts only.)

MARINA (*to herself*)

And yet I didn't say it  
though the time of the train is set  
and the sorrowful honour of leaving  
is a cup given to women

*She approaches Konstantyn's frozen silhouette.*

MARINA (*to herself*)

or perhaps in madness I  
misheard you polite liar:  
is this the bouquet that you give your  
love, this blood-stained honour?

Is it? Sound follows  
sound clearly: was it goodbye  
you said?

*Konstantyn remains a frozen, silent silhouette.*

MARINA (*to us*)

(as sweetly casual  
as a handkerchief dropped without  
thought)

MARINA (*to him*)

in this battle  
you are Caesar

MARINA (*to us*)

(What an  
insolent thrust, to put the  
weapon of defeat, into my hand

like a trophy).

MARINA (*to herself*)

It continues. To  
sound in my ears. As I bow.

*The sound of water dies down, becomes diegetic. Konstantyn unfreezes, and they are walking along a bridge.*

MARINA (*To him*)

Do you always pretend  
to be forestalled in breaking?  
Hammer the last nail in.  
screw up the lead coffin.

KONSTANTYN

A last request.

MARINA

Of course.

KONSTANTYN

say nothing  
about us  
to those who will  
come after me.

MARINA

May I ask the same thing?

*They look at the water. They are halfway across the bridge*

KONSTANTYN

Perhaps I should give you a ring?

MARINA

No.

*They look at the water:*

MARINA (*to herself*)

So now without any scenes  
I must swallow, silently, furtively -

KONSTANTYN (*cutting in*)

A book then?

MARINA (*to him*)

No, you give those  
to everyone, and don't even write them.

KONSTANTYN (*at a loss for words*)

books . . .

*A million clocks begin to chime, a million rivers flood, and thunderous claps of lightning split the sky in two. The loudest sound ever recorded.*

MARINA (*to God*)

SO NOW MUST BE NO  
SO NOW MUST BE NO  
MUST BE NO CRYING

IN WANDERING TRIBES OF  
FISHERMEN BROTHERS  
DRINK WITHOUT CRYING

DANCE WITHOUT CRYING  
THEIR BLOOD IS HOT, THEY  
PAY WITHOUT CRYING

PEARLS IN A GLASS  
MELT, AS THEY RUN THEIR

WORLD WITHOUT CRYING

NOW I AM GOING AND THIS  
HARLEQUIN GIVES HIS  
PIERRETTE A BONE LIKE  
A PIECE OF CONTEMPT

HE THROWS HER THE HONOUR  
OF ENDING THE CURTAIN, THE LAST  
WORD WHEN ONE INCH OF LEAD IN  
THE BREAST WOULD BE HOTTER AND BETTER

AND CLEANER. MY TEETH  
PRESS MY LIPS. I CAN  
STOP MYSELF CRYING

PRESSING THE SHARPNESS  
INTO THE SOFTEST  
SO WITHOUT CRYING

SO TRIBES OF NOMADS  
DIE WITHOUT CRYING  
BURN WITHOUT CRYING.

SO TRIBES OF FISHERMEN  
IN ASH AND SONG CAN  
HIDE THEIR DEAD MAN.

## SIX

*Clock strikes backwards.*

*We are at the end of the bridge, walking along the other side of the river. The sound of spring rain.*

*They walk side by side, but apart. Marina has cried.*

MARINA (*to herself*)

And the embankment. The last one.  
Finished. Separate, and hands apart  
like neighbours avoiding one another. We  
walk away from the river, from my

cries. Falling salts of mercury  
I lick off without attention.  
No great moon of Solomon  
has been set for my tears in the skies.

*They pass another rusted post.*

MARINA (*to herself*)

A post. Why not beat my forehead to  
blood on it? To smithereens! We are  
like fellow criminals, fearing one  
another.

MARINA (*to us*)

The murdered thing is love.  
Don't say these are lovers? Going into  
the night? Separately? To sleep with others?

*The burning house appears on the hill.*

KONSTANTYN

You understand the future is up there?

MARINA (*simultaneously*)

You understand the future is up  
there?

MARINA (*to us*)

he says. And I throw back my head.



MARINA *(to him)*

take my  
arm, we aren't convicts to walk like this.

*Konstantyn takes her arm. The sound of rain grows.*

MARINA *(to herself)*

Shock! It's as though his soul has touched  
me as his arm leans on mine. The electric  
current beats along feverish wiring,  
and rips. He's leaned on my soul with his arm.

*Konstantyn embraces her. The rain is thunderous.*

MARINA *(to herself, to us, to anyone)*

He holds me. Rainbows everywhere. What is more like a  
rainbow than tears? Rain, a curtain, denser  
than beads. I don't know if such embankments can  
end. But here is a bridge and -

*The sound of light spring rain. Konstantyn pulls away, suddenly.*

KONSTANTYN

Well then.

MARINA *(to him)*

Here?

*Konstantyn turns to the burning house.*

MARINA *(to herself)*

Peaceful his eyes move  
upward:

KONSTANTYN

couldn't you see me home?  
for the very last time.

## SEVEN

*A clock strike.*

*A bridge appears, leading to the burning house. For the first time, there are no sounds, no rain, no rushing water, no burning, no whistle.*

MARINA (*in one breath*)

Last bridge I won't  
give up or take out my hand  
this is the last bridge  
the last bridging between  
water and firm land:  
This bridge.  
Lovers for the most  
part are without hope: passion  
also is just  
a bridge, a means of connection  
It's warm: to nestle  
close at your ribs, to move in  
a visionary pause  
towards nothing, beside nothing  
no arms no legs  
now, only the bone of my  
side is alive where  
it presses directly against you  
life in that side  
only, ear and echo is it: there  
I stick like white to  
egg yolk, or an eskimo to his fur  
adhesive, pressing  
joined to you: Siamese  
twins are no nearer.  
The woman you call mother  
when she forgot  
all things in motionless triumph  
only to carry you:  
she did not hold you closer.  
Understand: we have  
grown into one as we slept and  
now I can't jump

because I can't let go your hand  
and I won't be torn off  
as I press close to you: this  
bridge is no husband  
but a lover:  
I bite in like a tick  
you must tear out my roots to be rid of me  
like ivy      like a tick  
inhuman      godless  
to throw me away like a thing,  
when there is  
no thing I ever prized  
in this empty world of things.  
Say this is only a dream,  
night still and afterwards morning  
an express      to Rome?  
Granada? I won't know myself  
as I push off  
the Himalayas of bedclothes.  
But this dark is deep:  
now I warm you with my blood, listen  
to this flesh.  
It is far truer than poems.  
If you are warm, who  
will you go to tomorrow for that?  
This is delirium,  
please say this bridge cannot  
end  
as it ends.

*Marina and Konstantyn break in two. The house is no longer burning.*

KONSTANTYN

*(with a flick of the wrist)*

Here then?

MARINA *(to herself)*

His gesture could  
be made by a child, or a god.

## EIGHT

*Clock strike. The sound of crashing waves. Marina turns. She looks down from the top of the hill. She sees all of Prague.*

MARINA *(to him, to herself, to us, to God)*

Dense as a horse mane is:  
rain in our eyes. And hills.  
We have passed the suburb.  
Now we are out of town,

Ugh, what a lost cause  
it is, ladies and gentlemen,  
for the whole world is suburb:  
Where are the real towns?

Rain rips at us madly.  
We stand and break with each other.  
In three months, these must be  
the first moments of sharing.

*Konstantyn cries. Marina takes his face in her hands.*

MARINA *(cont.)*

There is no more I can lose. We have  
reached the end of ending.  
And so I simply stroke, and  
stroke. And stroke your face.

*Konstantyn becomes a shadow. The sound of crashing waves fades.*

MARINA *(to us)*

And into the hollow waves of  
darkness---hunched and level---  
without trace---in silence---  
something sinks like a ship.

*The sound of a rusty sign creaking, back and forth, back and forth.*

*End.*