

The Always Timely Poet Alexander Timofeyevsky

By [John Freedman](#)

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Alexander Timofeyevsky recites his poetry at Krokin Gallery against a backdrop of graphic works by Alexei Politov and Marina Belova.

I don't think it really had anything to do with World Poetry Day, which fell on Friday, March 21, this year. I don't think it had all that much to do with the fact that Alexei Politov and Marina Belova's "Fragments" exhibit was preparing to close last Sunday at Krokin Gallery. It was a little too late to have been organized in honor of Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko's birthday on March 9. And surely it had nothing to do with the controversial referendum last Monday whereby Crimea chose to become a part of the Russian Federation — it was scheduled long before anyone knew that would happen.

Still, a poetry reading on Tuesday by the esteemed Russian poet Alexander Timofeyevsky had strong connections to all these events. Good writers have a way of being timely like that — even when they miss out in other ways.

Timofeyevsky has been on the Russian literary scene since the 1950s, although that is a pretty well-kept secret. If you check his books you will see that his first, "To Wintering Birds," was published in 1992. His third collection, bearing the fitting title of "Late Shooter," came out in 2003.

Born in 1933, Timofeyevsky studied screenwriting at the State Cinema Institute in the 1950s while writing poetry that no one published. He continued to write poetry, about which only selected individuals knew, as he wrote scripts and/or songs for a long line of animated and feature films. His "Song of Crocodile Gena," a witty birthday ode from the massively popular "Cheburashka" animated film, is, for all intents and purposes, considered a folk song by an entire nation. Virtually every Russian knows it; almost no one knows Timofeyevsky wrote it.

In fact, Timofeyevsky is one of the most respected serious poets of his era. His work is philosophical at times, hard-hitting at others, and often very funny. He has a natural ease with language that gives his works a comfortable, conversational feel. His epic poem "Tramcar No. 37" is a remarkable poetic journey unpretentiously tying together the present day and the purges in 1937.

Rather like the character out of Alexander Pushkin's "Egyptian Nights," Timofeyevsky is also a masterful improviser. Hundreds of people in Moscow cherish tiny scraps of paper on which they have quickly scribbled down mini-masterpieces, or just plain funny ditties, tossed off verbally by the poet after a few seconds of thought. I know, I own six or eight myself.

Last week the poet came to Krokin Gallery to read some of his humorous poems and some of his serious ones. Due to the tense political atmosphere caused by the Crimean crisis, he began with the latter, giving voice to some of his most pointedly political work.

"I began with serious poems, for we live in the time of a great battle, and the field of this battle is our hearts," he said afterwards.

Late in the evening, in a move expressing solidarity with Ukraine, he read three of his own translations of poems by the great Shevchenko. He also partially recited the originals in Ukrainian. A [video](#) of this segment of the evening can be seen on YouTube.

Still, the overriding atmosphere at the reading was light and humorous. It was framed by a series of graphic works created by the artists Politov and Belova around 94 of Timofeyevsky's short, humorous poems.

"We tell her," one poem goes, "you forgot that beach, that garden, that car. That woman loved all the wrong things and remembered all of it wrong."

"Time and I missed each other," another declares, "such a joke, my friends: I was headed in the right direction but time took a different road."

Mixing elements of classical Greek illustrations, the atmosphere of comics and folk graphics executed in various shades of black and red, Politov and Belova provided clever visual renditions of each poem. As many of the original texts are risqué, many of the drawings have a jocular erotic feel.

That said, most of the works also contain an underlying sensation of anxiety, such as the image of a naked man and a naked woman backed into opposite corners with a bunch of unidentified shards and fragments lying about their feet. In three lines Timofeyevsky's text laconically transforms a sense of carefree romanticism into stark anguish.

"The rain chased us into the house," he writes. "We hid in the house from the rain — Each in our own corner."

If you missed the exhibit, a beautiful catalogue may still be available from Krokin Gallery, which can be reached at 964-564-0303.

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