

Natalia Gorbanevskaya

“Who will hold out his hand to me? I am roasting over a slow fire.”

Natalia Gorbanevskaya was born in 1936 in Moscow. Poet and political activist, Gorbanevskaya was one of the eight demonstrators who protested in Red Square on 25 August 1968, against the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia. Because Gorbanevskaya was a young mother, she was not tried with the other demonstrators, but continued to agitate on their behalf—compiling an account of their trial published in Red Square at Noon.

In December 1969, Natalia Gorbanevskaya was arrested and placed in a psychiatric prison hospital—first in Moscow, then in Kazan—where a course of drug treatment was administered. Released in 1972, she emigrated in 1975 to Paris—where she published her poetry and edited journals which focused on the situation of human rights in the Soviet Union.

“And there is nothing at all—neither fear,
nor a stiffening before the executioner.
I lay my head upon the hollowed block,
as on a casual lover’s shoulder.”

Natalia Gorbanevskaya’s poetry transcends politics. Her love lyrics evoke “the old Russian mystique of regeneration through suffering—a poetry of pain, separation, isolation, despair, of threatening disaster, of disaster present”.

Gorbanevskaya is the first recipient of Roots in Time: The Spiros Vergos Prize for Freedom of Expression—presented by the Prague Writers’ Festival.

Natalia Gorbanevskaya died in Paris aged 77.