

MATILDA OLKINAITĖ

POETRY 22 October 2020

The Brief Life of the Litvak Poet, Matilda Olkinaitė, 1922-1941



By Laima Vincė

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Poems by Matilda Olkinaitė, 1922 – 1941

The Cerulean Bird

Off in the distant skies
Soared the cerulean bird,
Flying endlessly ecstatic,
Singing a golden hymn
About happiness eternal,
Joy that cannot be broken,
A smile that never ceases.

Alongside barns, hillocks,
Through forests, deserts,
With heavy footsteps the giant
Made his way with a bitter glance,
Scanning the landscape, searching
For the cerulean bird,
Who flew along the heavens,
Singing a golden hymn
About happiness eternal.

Off in the distant skies
Soared the cerulean bird,
And three arrows pierced her,
Carrying black death within.
And they tore open the breast
Of the cerulean bird.



Matilda Olkinaitė

And the heavens were shattered,
And not with the ecstatic hymn
About happiness eternal,
But with the cry of the cerulean bird,
Her last trembling breath,
Her bottomless longing.

Oh, the quivering bow,
Why ever did you release
That most poison arrow?
Who will sing now,
About happiness exquisite,
Ecstasy that never ceases,
And a hymn that rings eternal?

1940

Published in *Lietuvos žinios* (*Lithuania's News*), March 30, 1940, Number 71, page 6.

**

Your tiny room
Was white, filled with sunlight.
And your shutters were white too.
You dried mint on your windowsill.

Every spring you picked violets
And kept them in water on your table.
And every night you wound
Your ancient clock.

Tell me, why, that night,
The wind blew out your candle?
Who rapped on your window,
Paused a moment, then left?

It was your fate calling, knocking
 Quietly on your white shutters.
 It stopped your old clock.
 It snuffed out your white candle.

Your tiny room
 Was white, filled with sunlight.
 But the world is so wide.
 Where will you go, beloved?

Matilda Olkinaitė dedicated this poem to her friend Liucija Neniškytė-Vizgirdienė in 1940. Liucija committed the poem to memory and recited it to Laima Vincė and Neringa Danienė on July 10, 2018.



**

Oh, how many have gathered
In my home of mourning.
I hold an infant in my arms,
And my infant—is Death.

They brought a silver sash
And armfuls of lilies, white.
And I cannot thank them,
And I cannot smile.

All around me are lilies, white, white,
And faces wearing bright smiles.
But my hands are so cold.
A black ribbon is tied in my hair.

Someone has trampled my love—
The whitest of white blossoms.
And among the wilted lilies,
I see them, I speak to them.

Oh, how many have gathered
And no one will see love.
I hold an infant in my arms—
And my infant—is Death.

November 14, 1940

From Matilda Olkinaitė's diary, November 14, 1940.

A Jewish Lullaby

My tiny little baby
Why won't you fall asleep?
Longing overwhelms you tonight.
Longing crouches beside your cradle.

The nights are long and dark,
And the road leads far into the distance.
On such a night you will leave me,
My tiny little baby.

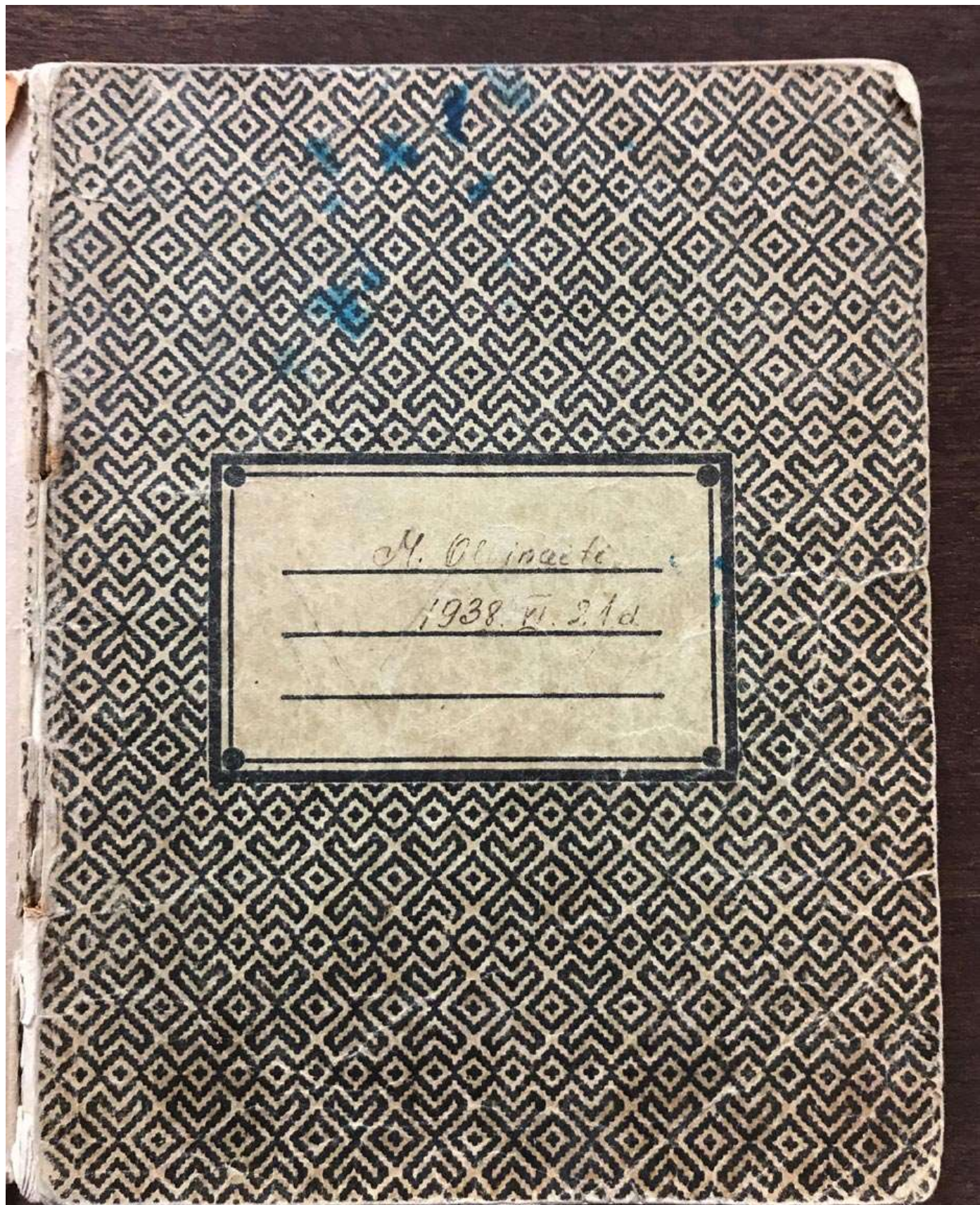
And suffering will wait for you,
Like a beloved friend, beside the gate.
Great suffering and hardship
Will carry you silently through long generations.

Long generations carry suffering
From the cradle to the grave—
Suffering immense and deep,
And as endless as the night.

Fall asleep now. It is a long road
That will lead you into the night...
Go to sleep. I will sing to you,
My tiny little baby.

March 1, 1940

The poem was written in Matilda Olkinaitė's notebook of poems, pages 82–83.



Matilda Olkinaitė poetry notebook. Photo by Laima Vincė

Night

Fall asleep. Through fields
Darkness walks in silence.
Heavens ablaze with stars,
The earth ablaze in violence.

Fall asleep. In the West
Death has dawned.
You will not see death.
Death will not see you.

A silver star will tumble
Up in the heavens.
Death will walk the earth,
Longing for the night.

Fall asleep. Suffering
Will languish all night,
Lulled into a dream,
You will not see death.

You will not see
How the silver star falls.
Only the night will sigh,
And darkness will tremble.

April 6, 1940

The poem was written in Matilda Olkinaitė's notebook of poems, pages 89–90.

An Idle Evening

Evening comes and howls under your window,
Calling longing in a creaking voice.
What to expect, you no longer know,
When under the window sits blue longing's poise...

Evening comes carrying the ancient moon,
And a crackling star glistens beyond the window.
Somewhere behind the stove is the cricket's abode,
And under the floor—lives a quick small mouse.

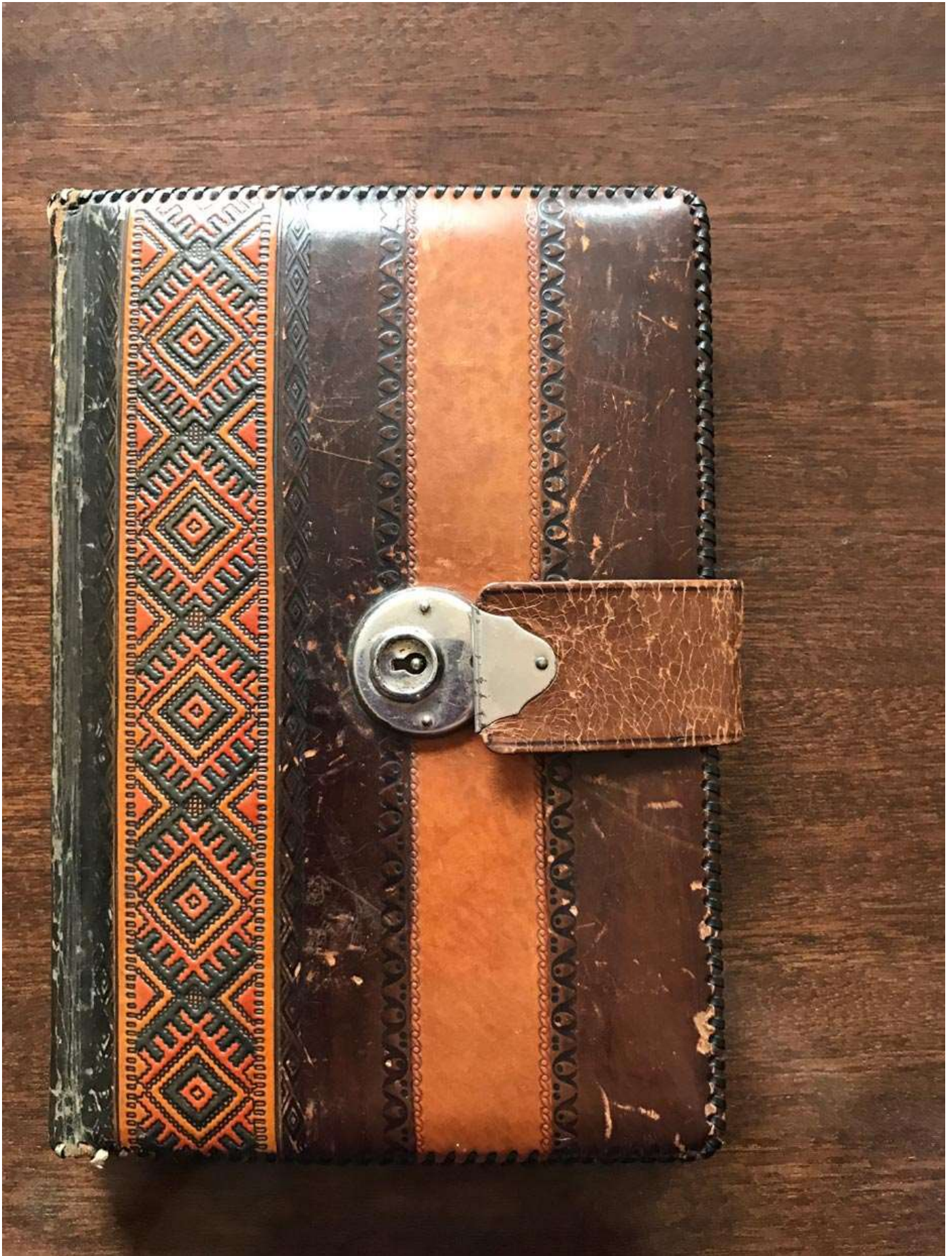
Longing comes carrying an old violin
And plays a serenade under the window.
And how could you ever ask him to leave
When he is so sad and so polite?

And you feel so hopelessly sorry for yourself,
When longing plays its song on the windowsill.
And it all seems so ridiculous to you—
The mouse, the moon, the cricket.

And it seems to you, that you've gone mad,
And even turned to poetry,
When, gazing at the moon,
You sigh hopelessly.

October 19, 1939

The poem was written in Matilda Olkinaitė's notebook of poems, pages 61–62.
Above the poem, Matilda wrote: "Ilya went to visit Liza. I remain all alone."



The diary of Matilda Olkinaitė. Photo by Laima Vincė

For My Dear Idealist

The Sun has drowned in the sea.
And You? What awaits You?
The world's road is bloody,
Without love, without heart...

The Sun has drowned in the sea,
And the night will be dark.
Oh, but your eyes are brilliant,
And full of love, full of heart.

The Sun has drowned in the sea
Beyond blue hills...
Will You return our Sun?
Will You bring her back?

The world's path is bloody
Without love, without heart.
Perhaps Your brilliant eyes
Will lead us to the Sun?

October 11, 1939

The poem was written in Matilda Olkinaitė's notebook of poems, pages 58–59.

Blaze in the Sea

We will dance a wild dance,
Between swells, surge, fire.
Howl, waves! Cry, mothers!
We will dance a wild dance.
We will dance one final time for the sea,
And then we will crumple in the burning boat.

There is no road—we will not turn back.
There is no road—we will not go forward.

We will dance a wild dance—
Waves twist and howl, and crash.
Wreak havoc, storm! We will wrestle yet
With surge, with swells, and with fire!

If we grow weary and quietly collapse,
Our skiff will sink silently to the depths.
If our words freeze on our lips,
If our eyes and hearts stop dead,
Do not say that we died not fighting
The surge, the swells, and fire.

We danced a wild dance
Between surge, swells, fire.
We danced our last dance
As our skiff sailed a burning sea
Between swells, surge, and fire.

July 25, 1939

The poem was written in Matilda Olkinaitė's personal notebook of poems, pages 46–47.

Translated by Laima Vince