

Susan Terris
Runner-up

Sonya, The Doll-Wife

*"I opened my eyes...and saw—not the Sonya you and I have known—
but a porcelain Sonya!"*

—Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy

*Yasnaya Polyana is lovely, my life so quiet, my husband devoted to me; I have no
money worries—why am I not happy? Is it my fault? I am really terribly lonely.*

Have I told you about the doll? How when we're alone at night, he turns
Me into a doll? Cold-shine face, protruding eyes, painted hair and cheeks?
A hard porcelain person with fused arms and legs and a porcelain stump
To prop me up. Arms too stiff to hold a tablet, fingers too brittle for a pen.

*My fate has been to serve my husband, the author. Perhaps I ought not to complain;
for I have served a man who was worthy of the sacrifice.*

Other nights, candlelight and us with our diaries and stories, pens leaking,
Scratching. I steal looks at his. But does he, when I am in Moscow or with
My sister, read mine? Always? Never? Secrets creep vermin-like on floors,
Under doors, and into the crevices of my body. They itch beneath the skin.

*It used to be wonderful when I could look at the moon and speak with the man I loved,
knowing that he was looking at the same beautiful moon...*

Spirited, some say about me. Or *du chien*. But others say: shrew, bitch, succubus.
By day, I mind his children, pay bills, copy his inky manuscripts. The master.
The genius. No one who has not lived in the shadow of a great man can know
How invisible I have become. So how do I measure the years?

*This morning, Sacha said: "How cheerful Daddy is today; and when he is cheerful
everybody is." If only she knew Daddy was cheerful thanks to the love he condemns...*

Do I count our lives by births? Thirteen. Or by our living children? Ten, nine,
Eight. Or by my age: fifty-three. Or by his books? His religion, the fanatic
He's become, who preaches celibacy yet violates me as he, fancying himself
A *muzhik*, unredeemed peasant, no longer bathes nor trims his hair or nails.

Love gives inspiration, energy and happiness; it brings a new ability to work to the artist, the scientist, the philosopher, to women, and even to children...

What is it that makes a life? Paragraphs, chapters, publications. Or is it Measured by births, fevers, money, fame, or by deaths? And how have I let Myself become that doll? Paper doll, wooden doll, doll of straw, doll of wax, As well as one of cold, powerless porcelain. Puppet, poppet, marionette.

I haven't written anything for four days — they were uninteresting and very busy. No music, no reading, no joy — nothing. How I hate this kind of life!

Money and fame won't save flesh. My body, no longer soft and sweet, is puckered With flayed mother's apron of a belly and withered teats like a cow or goat. But, still, he conjures me into a pint-sized thing, places me in a chamois-covered Morocco box lined in raspberry velvet, moldy now with the smell of spilled tea.

I got up late and am in an unhappy old-age, autumnal mood. I feel as though all the threads around me were broken, as though I were alone and idle...

Outwardly I grow stout. But in our room, I'm shrunken to manageable size, Lips sealed, chipped shoulder, broken leg mended with egg-white cement. Little cheeks—hectic red. Tiny unblinking eyes. Hollow hands, hollow body. Little hollow head. So empty. So fragile and unprotected. No autonomy.

The snow was dazzling white, and a huge moon was setting on one side and a brilliant sun rising on the other. But my wings were clipped...

Oh doll, stunted doll, and inside that porcelain poppet another one, like Marioshkas, growing smaller and smaller and ever smaller to insignificance. Even the innermost, a hollow thing. When he tires of us, he pushes us aside Under the pillow, or beneath his beard, and sometimes tipped on the floor.

And I felt a cold tremor in my heart; I realised how terribly indifferent he was towards me, and the children, and our life in general.

Cold, stupid doll, bored and boring. No thing of beauty is a joy but out of sight
And mind. No-account doll. Doll of his sadistic dreams. Doll in her coffin of
A box. One who cannot argue, frown, or bleed. One who has no life and will
Have no afterlife. Doll not deserving the equality he wishes for every man.

*A letter from Lev Nikolaevich says: "I've been thinking of you and have understood you and feel
sorry for you." He has never taken the trouble to understand me, and does not know me...*

Doll useless and annoying. Ungrateful doll, misunderstood, worthless and unable
To reclaim the hot pulse of a life. No more Anna doll or Natasha doll. No more
Doll of his innermost heart. A plaything. Doll so insignificant he finally
Offers her / me / us to the dog. Tooth and growl. Toy fit only for a dog.

*I have just been telling my own fortune, and twice the cards showed death. I shuddered
at the thought. However, Thy will be done. What does it matter?*

** The italic portions have been taken from The Countess Tolstoy's Later Diary
1891-1897, translation by Alexander Werth, Ayer Company Publishers, Inc.,
1929.*

*** In 1863, Leo Tolstoy wrote a letter to Sonya's sister Tanya in which he described
how Sonya had turned into a doll. When published as a short story, it's known
as "The Porcelain Doll."*