

Alice Friman

BIRCHES

— from Chekhov

What is paradise without longing?
Yesterday outside my window
four deer. This morning, a brilliant sun
splashing down a merriment of leaves.
All week, blessings and blue skies. And I
am Masha or Olga or a young Irina
yanked out of the sleep perfection put me in,
saying Moscow. Let's all pack up and go to Moscow.

The samovar hums, a cup rattles the saucer.
Whose hands are shaking? Look,
deer step out delicately, birds flap south,
and here we are imitating birch trees —
long white faces and mournful eyes. Remember
how Grandmother used to butter her bread
on both sides? What's not possible?

Get out the chocolates, Father's silver
letter opener, raspberry jam for the tea.
Load them up. Wrap the corsets and camisoles
in tissue paper, and don't forget pastels
in case it rains, and my good black dress
for afternoon charades. Where's the leash?
Where's my parasol? Perhaps in Moscow

I shall play lady with a dog and fall in love.
Stop giggling. Where are Mother's opera glasses?
We'll need them, hat pins, too, and, oh, yes,
galoshes. Remember the galoshes.

What did you say about the birches
seeming so pained to watch our going?
Well then, we'll take them too, replant them
in gaily painted pots up and down
Petrovsky Boulevard. Clap your hands.
Call for the carriage. Are we really going?

Who said that? Surely it's written
there's time enough before the curtain
to tie up our bonnets and board the train.
Already the servants are waving handkerchiefs,
wiping their eyes like extras in a play.
Look at them, such pinched faces.
If I didn't know better, I'd say they're calculating
just how long it will take for us to come back.