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Moscow Trefoil

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I am delighted to be able to say something about this book because I am an admirer of all the four poets concerned in it and I should like to begin by saying that I do not regard it as primarily a book of translations from two Russian poets by two Australian poets, though some of the renderings are good translations as well. In essence the book consists of a series of independent poems standing in their own right on themes treated by the two Russian poets and taken up by the two Australians in something the same way that Pope’s *Epistle to Augustus* is based on Horace’s *Epistle to Augustus*. Pope’s poem is the equivalent, in another language, of Horace’s — and the poems by Rosemary Dobson and David Campbell are to be seen primarily as the equivalents in another country and another language of those by Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam. Some of them are also close and successful translations, but their aim is not in the first instance to act as subordinate introducers of these distinguished foreigners, but to explore a foreign territory, to absorb and recreate it in a new medium. It is not so much to sink the translator’s identity and spirit in that of the poem and the poet translated as to present the one interpenetrating the other in a new entelechy representing both but also, in a sense, transcending both. This is rather different from the art of translation as it is ordinarily understood and is very different indeed from those dispirited and flabby productions, neither faithful to the original nor good poems in themselves which so often pass for verse translations today.
This quartet of poets is particularly interesting because they are so different as persons and as poetic personalities. Anna Akhmatova, it has been said, had no need of the influence of the Acmeist school, devoted to poetry of clear and definite statement in recoil from the vagueness and allusiveness of the dominant symbolist school of the early years of this century. Akhmatova was naturally what the Acmeists aimed at being. Her poetry is always crystal clear, pure in language and unambiguous in syntax. Mandelstam was never much in the Acmeists' camp; his poetry, haunting and often elusive, moved further and further into regions of private association and personal imagery and symbol. There could be no greater contrast and no more exacting test of a translator, since success with one method requires qualities and habits of mind quite different from those required in the other.

What interests me above all is that David Campbell and Rosemary Dobson, poets as outstanding in this country as Akhmatova and Mandelstam in theirs, poets as different in temperament and in poetic habit, should have met this challenge in different ways and I think with equal success. Because I am a poet myself I can best bring out this difference by a poetic image. David Campbell, it seems to me, descends like the eagle of Zeus on the poem he is to render, and, with something of the Olympian lightning flash he carries it off and transmogrifies it; it becomes a poem in his manner, he will even change the form to a sonnet as in 'Take from my hands' or a ballad as in 'Cold tickles the crown'. This is common enough with poets. They steal without shame and they re-create with triumph. But here is the curious thing; the poem so taken over

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re-emerges with a kind of second life: the transforming magic has not turned the frog into a prince or the prince into a frog – it has caught and illuminated with another poet’s vision the central ideas and images, the essence of the original poem, so that the original is illuminated in a way that no mere faithful or even the most loving translation could hope to achieve.

Rosemary Dobson, it seems to me, works in quite another way. She flows round and over and through the poem until it is totally absorbed into her own sensibility and assimilated to her personal habits of language, of rhythm, of feeling; and then, with delicate care and exquisite adjustment of detail the poem so dissolved is encouraged to re-crystallise itself in the medium of another language and another poetic personality.

The results in each case are to present the reader with some astonishing contrasts and with the equally astonishing fact that a poem can preserve its intrinsic integrity under these conditions and indeed grow in force and meaning. It is of course a phenomenon long recognised in the art of music, where good variations add to rather than diminish the original theme – but not as well recognised in the art of poetry.

These are large claims and I should like to illustrate them by considering two examples, one from Akhmatova, ‘Cleopatra’, and one from Mandelstam, the unnamed poem which here appears under the title ‘Take from my hands’.

Akhmatova’s poem is almost Parnassian in its clarity and perspicuous design, its solemn and orderly movement dropping away cadence by cadence to the final silence. David Campbell has made some changes to the poem which strengthen the tragic harshness: Rosemary
Dobson has softened the outlines, given it a gentler tone though her translation is almost a literal one. One strikes a more masculine, the other a more feminine note but each in a different way has caught the spirit of the sustained music of the original.

One could hardly have a greater contrast than Mandelstam's poem which they have called 'Take from my hands'. That we are in the world of the dead is almost all that is certain about this strange and haunting poem which is as elusive as it is allusive. Are the references to the bees of Aristaeus and the fate of Orpheus and Eurydice? Is the offering made to the dead as in those mysterious rituals figured on some Minoan gems or is the offering made from the dead to the living? There are a dozen ways in which almost every phrase and every image might be taken and David Campbell has in fact produced a very different poem from Rosemary Dobson's. Here we have variations on a theme where with Akhmatova's poem we have something closer to conventional translation. And once again the characteristic voice of each Australian poet is clearly audible and yet through both versions comes unmistakably the tone and overtones of the voice of Mandelstam.

This achievement cannot be a matter of accident and of course it is primarily due to the exercise of that power of entering into the life of other beings which Keats calls 'negative capability'. In other words it is due to the fact that good poets are here exercising all their powers. But the transference from one language to another is not to be explained in this way. It must be due to a power of another to enter into the spirit of all four poets. Here I should like to say something about the fifth element in this collaboration, Natalie
Staples, not herself a poet of the standing of the other four, but, deeply read and steeped in the poetry, both Russian and English, she has been the essential catalyst which has made this miracle possible. Because it is a miracle. In the past ten or twenty years I have read hundreds of poems translated from the Russian by English or American poets of high standing who know no Russian and who work with a native Russian speaker, usually an academic, who is not a poet. None of them, in my opinion, has been worth a cracker, either as poems or as translations; at best they provide a blue-print guide to the original which could be better given by a literal prose rendering. What they chiefly lack is 'tone'. Every good poem has a sort of speaking voice of its own, as original and personal to it as the speaking voices of people we know. This is what comes through in the versions of David Campbell and Rosemary Dobson, along, of course, with their own speaking voices. This 'duet' is often extremely beautiful and exciting in itself to anyone who knows the original.

Now how was this miracle achieved? I think I have the answer: looking at the translated versions of Natalie Staples, closely literal and yet suggesting, at each step, other equally 'literal' variants or equivalents, I was at first inclined to see them as no more than that, rough sketches, which would then be filled in by conversation and discussion with poets, till they had as good an idea as possible of the 'tone' of the original. And basically, of course, they are just this. But, in a quiet way, they are also poems — not poems in their own right exactly, but, as it were, embryo poems in the process of their re-birth from the Russian into the English language. And here I found my clue. Every
poet will recognise a stage in writing a poem at which its general shape and feeling is clear, but at which it has not quite ‘jelled’ or ‘crystallised’, there are still lots of alternatives in language, image and direction of detail. The poem is still in a comparatively fluid state though ‘crystallisation’ has begun. At this stage it is manageable. Every poet also knows that at a later stage a poem tends to ‘set’ and it can no longer be radically changed or manipulated.

Now this seems to have been Natalie Staples’s peculiar gift. The problem with most translation is that the translator, even when he knows the language well and is a gifted poet, is confronted with a finished product, a poem intractably ‘set’ in form, in tone and medium. This, and not the problem of finding equivalent words and expressions in another language, is the basic problem of translation. But Natalie Staples has, as it were, re-dissolved the original back into a stage at which its ‘character’ or ‘tone’ is already there, but its elements are still in a fluid and manageable state for another poet to work on it and continue and direct the process of crystallisation. This I am sure is the secret of the success of this remarkable experiment.

A. D. Hope
The three of us arrived independently at an interest in the poetry of Osip Mandelstam and, discovering this shared enthusiasm, decided to work together. We had regular meetings during 1972 and 1973, and decided to extend this experiment in translation by attempting versions of poems by Anna Akhmatova also.

The choice of poems was largely determined by Natalie Staples, whose native language is Russian. In a three-way discussion of this enterprise which we broadcast in August 1973 she described our procedure. First, she read the published poetry of David Campbell and Rosemary Dobson and then looked for poems by either Akhmatova or Mandelstam likely to be of special interest to either. However, after a while, she found that in our weekly conversations we touched on matters — pottery, architecture, or music, for example — which subsequently dictated her choice. Each week she supplied a literal version of a poem, and in discussion suggested alternative lines or phrases. David Campbell and Rosemary Dobson each took away a copy and in the ensuing week they attempted to make their own satisfactory versions of the poem in English.

Translations of poetry are bound to fail. What we had to decide was what to sacrifice in order to succeed to some extent. We decided to aim first at producing poems of quality in English, while observing and retaining as scrupulously as possible the quality and character of the original poem. We wished to do no disservice to Akhmatova and Mandelstam and this has been our first consideration.

We have often sacrificed approximation to the
original form and technique. Natalie Staples has always given some description of the structure of the poem in the original Russian, and has indicated the place of each poem in the poet's life and thought. We have all three found intense interest in entering into the minds of these two Russian poets. This has been particularly so with Mandelstam, whose world view, whose strong feeling for history and the philosophy of history, and whose strict observance of poetry as a vocation to be taken with great seriousness and dedication has made a very strong impression on us all. In Akhmatova's poetry we have seen nobility, humanity, integrity and great emotional force.

We had hoped to include the Russian-language version of the poems for purposes of comparison. Copyright provisions did not permit us to do so, but readers interested to make the comparisons may wish to consult the revised editions of both poets' works published by Inter-Language Literary Associates in 1967.

To quote Natalie Staples's broadcast words we have been 'as faithful to the spirit and to the precise words of these two poets as possible'. By publishing these versions we feel we are providing other readers of poetry with some insight into what has proved to be a most enriching experiment for us, and more importantly, with an introduction to the work of two of the truly remarkable poets of this century.

David Campbell
Rosemary Dobson
Natalie Staples

Canberra, 1975
Osip Mandelstam
For some, winter, arrack and blue-eyed punch,
For some, wine fragrant with cinnamon,
For some the cruel stars' salty commands
To carry across into a smoky hut is given.

A little warm poultry droppings
And foolish sheep warmth;
I will give all for life — I need care so much —
And a sulphur match could warm me.

Look: in my hand is only a clay crock,
And the chirp of stars tickles the feeble hearing,
But the yellowness of grass and the warmth of the loam
One cannot help but love through this pitiful down.

Quietly to stroke fur and turn over straw,
Like an apple tree in winter to starve in bast matting,
To be drawn with tenderness meaninglessly
towards the alien
And to grope in the emptiness, and patiently wait.

Let the conspirators hurry along the snow
A mob of sheep, and the frail snow-crust squeaks,
For some winter is wormwood and bitter smoke is
shelter for the night,
For some the sharp salt of ceremonious mortifications
Oh to raise up a lantern on a long pole,
And, with a dog in front, go under the salt of stars,
And with a cock in a pot to come to a fortuneteller's place.
And the white, white snow eats into the eyes until it hurts.

Osip Mandelstam 1922
N.S.
'For some, winter . . .'

Winter, for some, means blue punch, samovars;
For some, arrack and wine with spice in it;
For some the salt-white orders of malevolent stars
To carry at night into a smoky hut.

Droppings of fowls are warm, and simple sheep,
The sheep have warmth; yet I will give up all
For life, although my need is care and sleep,
And a sulphur match could warm me like a candle.

Look, in my hand there is a crock of clay;
Like crickets the stars sing in my frail ear;
But the warmth of loam and yellow coloured hay
Under this shrinking skin of snow grow dear.

Quietly to turn straw over, stroke fur or down;
To starve like an apple in winter in its wrapping of mat;
To be drawn with a crazy pity towards the unknown;
To search in emptiness and patiently to wait.

Let the conspirators hurry through the snowfall
While the snow creaks as under driven ewes:
For some winter is smoke for shelter, and gall;
For some the ceremony and salt of abuse.
How good to lift up a lantern on a long pole
And with a dog out front, go under salt stars,
And come with a cock in a pot where they've fortunes
to tell;
But the white, white snow eats into my eyes like burrs.

D.C.
'For some, winter . . .'

For some winter means arrack and blue-eyed punch,
For some, wine, laced sweetly with cinnamon;
For some the salty commands that carry into
A smoke-filled hut from the distant, cruel stars.

For myself I look for a few warm poultry droppings,
For the animal comfort and warmth of foolish sheep;
I would give all for life, though I need such caring
The flame of a sulphur match would give me heat.

The tiny chirp of the stars teases the hearing.
Look: in my hand only an earthen crock.
I love the yellowing grass and the warm loam lying
Under the thin-spread pitiful quilt of the snow.

I want to turn over straw, to stroke fur's softness,
To hunger in cold like an apple-tree wrapped in felt,
To be drawn like a tree in the air tenderly outwards,
To grope in an alien void and patiently wait.

Let the conspirators hurry along the sheep-tracks
Where the fragile snow-crust shrieks at their single file,
For some winter is wormwood, smoke is shelter,
For some sharp salt rubbed in offences' wounds.
Oh, to lift on a pole a lighted lantern,
To walk with a dog under a sprinkle of stars,
To come with a cock in a pot to a fortuneteller!
The white, white snow eats into the smarting eyes.

R.D.
I was washing at night outside —  
The firmament shone with rough stars.  
A ray of starlight, like salt on an axe,  
The barrel full to the brim is getting cold.

The gates are locked shut,  
And the earth is honestly severe —  
Cleaner than the truth of a fresh canvas  
It is doubtful that a foundation will be found anywhere.

Melts in the barrel, like salt, the star,  
And the chill water is blacker,  
Death — cleaner, trouble — saltier,  
And the earth more truthful and terrible.

Osip Mandelstam 1921
N.S.
I was washing at night out in the yard,
The sky pitted with rough stars,
Starlight like salt on an axe-blade
And the water-butt freezing hard.

The gates are locked so none can pass;
The earth is honest and austere.
Where else would you find but here
A truth as clean as a new canvas?

A salt star melts in the water-butt;
Chill water is blacker still:
Death is cleaner, care tastes of salt,
Earth is truthful and terrible.

D.C.
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'I was washing at night'

I wash at night in the yard outside
The sky is sprinkled with coarse-ground stars
Light rays down like salt on an axe-blade.
The barrel of water is icy cold.

The gates in the yard are all locked up
Earth is truthful, severe, and clean,
Clean as the truth of an untouched canvas.
Where but here is such honest ground.

Melts like salt in the water, starlight.
Oh water's blacker than death is cleaner,
And trouble's bitter. And under all
Earth is truthful and terrible.

R.D.
Cold tickles the crown
And you cannot confess all of a sudden,
And time is cutting me down,
As it cut crooked your heel.

Life overcomes itself,
Little by little sound melts,
Always something is lacking,
To recall something there is no time.

It was better before, wasn't it?
And I think you can't compare,
How you used to rustle,
Blood, how you rustle now.

It seems it must be paid for
The movement of these lips,
And the top plays around,
Doomed to felling.

Osip Mandelstam 1922
N.S.
'Cold tickles the crown'

Cold prickle in my hair;  
There is so much to tell!  
Time wears me down like a pair  
Of shoes to a crooked heel.

Life gets over its shock,  
Sounds slowly melt and chime;  
But something is always held back  
And there is no time, no time!

It was better once, green blood,  
There is no comparing how  
Leaves rustled then in the wood  
With how they rustle now.

No doubt we must pay and pay  
For the act of the lips' telling:  
The tree-tops stir and sway,  
Axe-marked for felling.

D.C.
‘Cold tickles the crown’

A sudden chill. My words are stopped.  
Is it a footfall on my grave?  
Time wears me through and cuts me down  
As use wears down a leather heel.

I learn to overcome, recover,  
Little by little sound comes through,  
But there’s this constant want — this need  
For something that one cannot name.

Wasn’t it better long ago?  
There’s no comparing then and now —  
The stir and fever in the blood  
With this dry rustle on the bough.

The poet pays the highest price  
Who, like the flautist, shapes his words  
With moving lips. He is that tree  
Whose leaves are tossing as it falls.

R.D.
For the resounding [high] valour of the coming ages
For the lofty tribe [immortal glory] of man
I lost both the cup [my place] at the feast of the
fathers,
And my gaiety and my honour.

On to my shoulder [neck] flings itself the wolf-hound-
age
But I am not a wolf by my blood [skin],
Thrust me rather, like a cap, in the sleeve
Of the hot fur of Siberian steppes, —

To see neither coward [cowards] nor thin mud,
Nor the blood-covered bones in the wheel,
So that all night should shine the blue foxes
For me in their primeval beauty.

Lead [carry] me into the night, where the Enisei flows,
And [where] the pine reaches up to the star,
For I am not a wolf by my blood [skin]
And only an equal will kill me.
[And by falsehood my mouth is twisted.]

Osip Mandelstam, 17-28 March 1931
N.S.

Note The variations in brackets are Mandelstam's.
‘For the resounding valour’

That the centuries may walk in pride and grace,
And for the exalted destiny of man,
At feast and council have I lost my place:
Both my light heart and my good name are gone.

Like a wolfhound the age hurls itself at my throat,
But I am not a wolf. I am like a cap:
Thrust it into the sleeve of a warm fur coat
Against the cold of a Siberian steppe.

Under the wheel, no more blood-spattered bone;
No cowards, no muddy water to choke my song;
Ah then for me shall ice-blue foxes shine
In their primeval beauty all night long.

Where the Enisei flows, lead me into the night;
The pine tree reaches up to a star in the sky:
For I am not a wolf by my blood’s right,
And only falsehood twists my mouth awry.

D.C.
'For the resounding valour'

Because I looked for the reputation
Of valour in succeeding ages
I lost the cup at the feast of the fathers
And all my gaiety and honour.

This age like a wolfhound leaps to my shoulder
But I am not a wolf by nature,
Thrust me, rather, like a cap in the sleeve
Of the thick fur pelt of Siberian steppes,

And then I'll not see shame nor squalor
Nor bloody bones that the wheel has broken,
All night long for me blue foxes
Will shine in their primeval beauty.

Lead me to darkness, the river flowing
And the pine tree reaching up to the star,
For I am no wolf by blood, and only
He who is matched in kind will kill me.

R.D.
Take from my hands for joy
A little sun and a little honey,
As the bees of Persephone commanded us.

A boat that is not fastened cannot be untied,
A shadow shod in fur cannot be heard,
Fear of impenetrable life cannot be overcome.

Kisses alone are left to us,
Furry, like little bees,
Who die, on flying out of the hive.

They rustle in the transparent thickets of the night,
Their home is the impenetrable forest of Taygetus,
Their food is time, borage and mint.

Take then for joy my wild gift,
A plain dry necklace
Of dead bees, who transformed honey into sun.

Osip Mandelstam, November 1920
N.S.
Take from my hands

A little sun, a little honey,
With delight take from my hand.
The flowers of Persephone
Blow us bees at her command.

Who can cast off a drifting skiff
Or hear a shadow shod in fur?
The dark underworld of life
Is inscrutable to fear.

Only kisses furred like bees
Dying as they leave the hive,
In Taygetus' thickets thrive.

Take my gift, wild necklaces
Of dead bees who in the night
Change black honey into light.

D.C.
'Take from my hands'

Take from my outstretched hands for joy
A little sun and a little honey,
As the bees of Persephone told us to.

A boat that drifts cannot be loosed,
A fur-shod shadow cannot be heard,
We cannot conquer the fear of life.

Kisses alone are left to us,
Furry kisses, like little bees
Who die as they fly from the sheltering hive.

They rustle, the bees, in night's clear thickets,
They live in the forest of Taygetus,
Their food is time, borage, and mint.

Take then with joy this gift from my hands,
This plain dry necklace of dead bees
Who turned their honey into sun.

R.D.
When Psyche-life goes down to the shades
Into the half-transparent forest, in the tracks
of Persephone,
A blind swallow flings itself at the feet
With Stygian tenderness and a green branch.

Towards the fugitive hurries a crowd of shades,
Meeting the new companion with lamentations,
And they wring their weak hands before her
With bewilderment and timid hopes.

One holds a looking-glass, one a perfume jar —
The soul is but a woman — she likes trinkets,
And in the leafless forest the dry complaints
Of transparent voices spatter like fine rain.

And in the tender commotion, not knowing what to
start with,
The soul does not recognise the transparent groves;
Will breathe on the glass and hesitates to hand over
The brass token from the misty crossing.

*Osip Mandelstam 1920*

*N.S.*
'When Psyche'

When, Psyche, life descends to the retreat
Of Persephone through migraine woods of bone,
A blind swallow flings itself at her feet
With Stygian tenderness and a branch of green.

Towards this fugitive, wraith after wraith
Hurries with cries of anguish, and in bands,
In bewilderment, yet with a flicker of faith,
Before her they twist and crack their bloodless hands.

One holds a looking-glass, one a phial of scent
For what is the soul but a girl in love with fine
Trinkets? -- and in bare woods the dry complaint
Of fretted voices patters like small rain.

Diverted by such a milling of tender love,
The soul forgetful in that transparent grove,
Breathes on the glass, reluctant to hand over
The coin of passage from the misted river.

D.C.
'When Psyche'

When Psyche, who is life, descends to the shadows,
Into the forest, following Persephone
A blind swallow casts itself at her feet
With Stygian grace and a branch of green.

And all the ghosts crowd round the newcomer
Meeting her and greeting her with lamentations,
And they wring their frail hands before her
In timid hope and bewilderment.

One holds a looking-glass and one some perfume
For the soul is a girl and she will be pleased with trifles.
In the leafless forest the dry complainings
Of ghostly voices sprinkle like rain.

And in all this disturbance, not knowing where to begin
The soul does not recognise the transparent forests
But breathes on the glass, and hesitates to hand over
The fee for ferrying across the river.

R.D.
It is as if I have forgotten what I wanted to say.
The blind swallow will return to the hall of shades,
On cut wings, to play with the transparent ones.
In unconsciousness the night song is sung.

No birds are heard. The immortelle does not bloom.
Transparent are the manes of the night herd.
On a dry river drifts an empty shell.
Among grasshoppers unconscious lies the word.

And slowly grows, as if a tent or temple,
Now feigns to be mad Antigone,
Now as a dead swallow flings itself at the feet
With Stygian tenderness and a green branch.

Oh to return both the shame of seeing fingers,
And the vivid joy of knowing.
I fear so much the sobbing of the Aonides,
Mist, ringing and hiatus.

To mortals power is given to love and to come to know,
For them sound, too, will spill into the fingers,
But I have forgotten what I want to say,
And the incorporeal thought to the hall of shades will return.
Always the wrong thing the transparent one repeats,
Always swallow, friend, Antigone . . .
And on the lips like black ice burns
The recollection of Stygian ringing.

_Osip Mandelstam, November 1920_
N.S.
I have forgotten the song I wished to sing once. The blind swallow returning to the hall of hell On clipped wings, plays with the transparent ones. In the unconscious, a night song rings its bell.

The nightmare manes run water. The immortelle Does not flower there, no singing birds are heard; On a mirage river drifts an empty shell; Unconscious among crickets lies the word.

Yet the word grows, a tent, a temple. It May wear the crazed mask of Antigone; Or, a dead swallow, fling itself at your feet With Stygian love and a green twig from a tree.

How to get back to the intimate eyes of touch, The naked joy of knowing, finding. Must The Muses weep whose tears I fear so much, Ears ringing in a vacancy of mist?

Man has the gift of love and a lover’s knowing; Sound can be cupped in the hands while it spills and fades; But I have forgotten what I should be saying: Abstract, my thought returns to the hall of shades.
Time after time the ghost repeats its lies:
Antigone, swallow, friend, it keeps on singing.
My moving lips burn with the black ice
And recollection of a Stygian ringing.

D.C.
‘It is as if I have forgotten’

I have forgotten what I wanted to say.
The word, a mutilated swallow,
Returns to the underworld of shadows.
Night sings to itself in silence.

No song of birds. No immortelles.
The horses shake transparent manes.
An empty skiff drifts on the river.
Even the grasshoppers are silent.

Yet the word swells like a tent or temple,
Now takes the form of crazed Antigone
Or feigns to fall like a dead swallow
With Stygian grace and a branch of green.

Oh for the shame of seeing fingers
And the tactile joy of recognition!
I fear the sobbing of the Aonides,
Mist, echoes, and yawning darkness.

Mortals can love and know in loving,
Even sound can be held in the fingers.
But I have forgotten what I wanted to say
And the formless thought returns to the shadows.
Falsely, falsely the shade tells over
Its rune of 'swallow, friend, Antigone . . .'
On the lips the recollection
Of Stygian echoes burns like ice.

R.D.
The Greek flute's theta and iota —
As if fame were not enough —
Unshaped, unaware,
Was ripening, languishing, going over moats.

It is impossible to abandon it,
Clenching of teeth does not silence it,
And it cannot be pushed forward into words with the
tongue,
And it cannot be kneaded with the lips.

And the flautist does not recognise rest —
It seems to him that he is alone,
That once the native sea he
Moulded from lilac clays.

With the ringing ambitious whisper,
The recollecting patter of lips,
He hastens to be frugal,
Gathers sounds, is neat and sparing.

Following him we shall not repeat him,
Lumps of clay in the palms of the sea,
And when I filled myself with the sea,
A torment to me my measure became.
And my own lips to me are not pleasing
And murder is on the same root.
And unintentionally to a waning, to a waning
The resultant of the flute I bend.

Osip Mandelstam, April 1937, Voronezh
N.S.
The Greek flute

The Greek flute’s almost-silence sounds
And, as if fame did not suffice,
Its note, unshaped, unconscious, wounds
And ripens, feathering over ice.

A gift, it will break out in song
And through clenched teeth lend silence lips,
Though striving makes it hold its tongue
And lies foretell their own eclipse.

The player does not find the peace
That he creates, he is alone:
His song is of his native seas
Moulded and glazed in lilac stone.

Ambition shouts without a noise,
The tongue remembers in the bell:
He makes haste with deliberate voice
That sounds both resonant and still.

Follow, his song is always new
In vessels fashioned by the wave;
But when it fills my throat I know
Torture: I am my music’s grave.
My songs and I no more rejoice,
And murder springs from the same root:
Unconsciously I drop my voice
And lend the flute a dying note.

D.C.
Great in potters is the blue island —
Happy Crete, baked is their gift
Into the ringing earth. Do you hear
The underground dolphin blow of their fins?

This sea is quick to turn up at a mention
In the clay made happy by firing,
And the vessel's chill power
Has split into sea and eye.

Give back mine to me, blue island,
Flying Crete, give me back my toil,
And from the nipples of the flowing goddess
Quench the fired vessel.

This happened and was sung, blueing,
Much long before Odysseus;
Before the time when food and drink
Was called 'mine' and 'my'.

Recover, then, beam out,
Star of the ox-eyed heaven,
The flying fish is a chance thing
As is the water, which says 'yes'.

*Osip Mandelstam, March [1937], Voronezh*
N.S.
'Great in potters'

Blue-rimmed island, happy Crete
Is famed for potters. See their gift
Baked in this ring of earth, and hear
Deep-down their song as dolphins lift.

Rejoicing from the fire, the clay
At the mere thought fills up with ocean,
And the thill bowl overflows
With the twin blues of sea and vision.

Flying Crete, give back to me,
Blue island, my work and my desire;
Let the breasts of the abundant goddess
Fill and quench my vessel's fire!

This song was sung in blue flame
Before the time of Odysseus,
When the red wine and the brown loaf
Were divided evenly among us.

Restore your influence then, shine out
Star of heifer-lidded Hera,
Though a flying fish is a chance thing
Among affirming tongues of water.

D.C.
'Great in potters'

Blue island, happy Crete, most blest
Whose potters fuse their gifts by fire
In ringing clay. Do you not hear
Far down their dolphins blowing by?

Now, summoned by the hardening fire
The sea appears upon the clay.
The vessel's cooling glaze reveals
Division between sea and eye.

Blue island, flying Crete, give back
My needed toil, and let the scorched
Vessel be quenched with coolness from
Divine Cybele's flowing breasts.

All this befell so long ago,
Was sung before Odysseus' time,
Before man put his hand on food
And drink and said 'for me' and 'mine'.

Star of the ox-eyed heaven, the sky,
Dispel your radiance over all.
The fish that flies is chance's gift
As is the swift assenting sea.

R.D.
Of a long thirst the guilty debtor,  
Wise go-between for wine and water  
On your sides dance small goats  
And fruit ripens to music.

The flutes whistle, slander and rage,  
That there is trouble on your rim  
Black-red — and there is no one to take  
You up, to remedy the trouble.

*Osip Mandelstam, 21 March 1937, Voronezh*  
*N.S.*
You owe a toast to end my drought,
Wise middle-man of wine and water:
To music twine the ripening fruit
About your girth and young goats caper.

But spite and fury brim the cup
Fired black and red, and I’ve no roubles:
Who while flutes snarl will take it up
And drain the dregs and end our troubles?

D.C.
THE PITCHER

Good go-between for wine and water
A long thirst makes a guilty debtor,
Round your sides the young goats caper,
Grapes ripen to the call of music.

The flutes are shrill, they rage and slander,
They warn of trouble at your edges —
That angry black and red. There’s none here
With wise, calm hands as his who made you.

R.D.
Hagia Sophia — here God
Decreed peoples and Tsars to stop!
Is not your dome, according to the word of an eye-

witness,
As on a chain suspended from the heavens.

And for all ages is Justinian's example,
When Ephesian Diana allowed
One hundred and seven green marble columns
To be abducted for others' gods.

But what did your generous builder think,
When, lofty in soul and in intention
He laid out apses and exhedrae,
Having pointed out to them the west and the east?

Beautiful is the temple, bathed in the universe,
And forty windows are light's celebration;
On pendentives, under the dome, four
Archangels, most beautiful of all.

And the wise spherical building
Will outlive peoples and centuries,
And the reverberating sobbing of the seraphim
Will not warp the dark gilding.

Osip Mandelstam 1912
N.S.
Santa Sophia — kings and men,
For so God wishes, here alight!
Is not your dome to holy sight
Swung from high heaven by a chain?

Justinian’s precedent holds good
Who stole for alien deities
These hundred-odd green marble trees
While Dian nodded in her wood.

What was his thought, Anthemius blest
With such high reach and breadth of soul,
As he laid apse and vestibule
That lead the sun from east to west?

Sweet cosmic temple drenched in light
Which forty windows celebrate!
Your dome’s curved pendentives create
Four heavens where archangels shine bright.

This wise and spheric concept shall
Outlive nations, outlast time;
The keening of the seraphim
Will cause not one gilt flake to fall.

D.C.
Hagia Sophia! Here, God says,
All the world must pause, draw breath.
Serenely floats your golden dome
Swung on a chain from pensive heaven.

And let succeeding times take note
How in the great Justinian’s reign
Diana of the Ephesians gave
Columns to house the unknown god.

Was he, too, stayed with wondering —
The framer of your high design
Who bodied forth exhedra, apse,
To east and west for all the world?

Hagia Sophia! Beautiful
The timeless light in which you float.
I name your forty windows: name
Four archangels beneath your dome.

Wisdom’s embodied in the sphere
That turns and turns through infinite time.
From the dark gilding far above
Eternally cry the seraphim.

R.D.
Where a Roman judge tried an alien people —  
Stands a basilica, and joyous and first,  
As Adam once, spreading out the nerves,  
Flexes its muscles the light cross-vault.

But on the outside the secret plan gives itself away:  
Here the power of girding arches took care  
That the cumbrous mass should not crush the wall,  
And idle is the battering ram of the audacious vault.

Elemental labyrinth, inconceivable forest,  
Rational precipice of the gothic soul,  
Egyptian might and meekness of Christianity,  
Next to a reed — the oak, and tsar everywhere — the perpendicular.

But the more attentively, stronghold Notre Dame,  
I studied your monstrous ribs,  
The more frequently thought I: from an evil weight  
I, too, one day shall create beauty.

Osip Mandelstam 1912  
N.S.
Rome’s courts of law made way for this
Cathedral singing in the mist
Like Adam opening a fist
To form the vaulting and to bless.

Yet step outside if you need proof
How flying buttresses may rear
To keep a mass of stone in air
Against the downthrust of the roof.

Such woods kept Dedalus at work.
Its soul is gothic yet a tsar’s,
Falling, it mounts towards the stars:
Here will is blessed, reeds are oaks.

Ah Notre Dame, you steel my eyes
Yet weigh like evil on my skull:
Ambiguous and beautiful
One day like you my songs shall rise.

D.C.
39 NOTRE DAME

Where once the Romans judged the tribes
This great basilica outspread
Flexes — as Adam first, amazed —
Muscle and nerve in rib and vault.

Netting of light within. Without
All's strength and tension. Arches spring
To take the massing masonry.
The vault's great battering-ram is still.

Primeval maze or thicket dense,
The reasoned gulf of gothic soul,
Egyptian might and Christian calm,
And Tsar: these join, are vertical.

Stronghold of power. I watch and wait
And learn your giant, tensile frame.
I too will spring an arch and make
Poetry of my burdened time.

R.D.
The artist has drawn for us
The deep faint of lilac,
And the resounding steps of colours
On the canvas, like scabs, has laid.

He understood the thickness of oils —
His dried out summer
Is warmed up by a purple brain,
Widened into airlessness.

And the shadows, the shadow is more and more purple —
A violin bow or is it a whip, goes out like a match —
You’d say: the cooks in the kitchen
Are cooking fat pigeons.

A swing can be guessed,
Veils underpainted,
And in this sunny disintegration
The bumble-bee is already settling in.

Osip Mandelstam, 23 May 1932, Moscow
N.S.
The artist is willing to oblige:
Shadows in lilac skirts
Rustle as colours fill the stage,
Their paint laid on like warts.

He understands oil’s turgidness:
The summer days dry out
And breathless from his brain’s excess
Of purple, turn to drought.

More purple grow the shadows: hear
The bow-string’s guttering cry!
In steaming kitchens, cooks you swear
Are cooking pigeon pie.

Swings are a guess and veils a must
And as the painterly sun
Crumbles the world to gilded dust
The bumble-bee moves in.

D.C.
Degas, Matisse, Renoir, Cezanne —
Some artist paints in lilac tones
And puts his colour on like scabs
Or sounding treads on stepping-stones.

How well he knows his paint's resource!
The lilac, deepening, makes more clear
His dried-out summer sky. It is
A widening canopy of air.

And deeper still his shadows turn:
One thinks of violin bows and whips
That flick and darken: roasting birds
Suffer a similar eclipse.

Degas, Matisse, Renoir, Cezanne —
I guess this painting shows a swing,
Under its sunny disarray
A bee already folds its wing.

R.D.
In northern capital languishes a dusty poplar,
The transparent clock-face is tangled in the foliage,
And in the dark greenery a frigate or acropolis
Shines from afar, brother to water and to sky.

Airy craft and touch-me-not mast,
Serving as rule to Peter’s successors,
He teaches: beauty is not the caprice of a demi-god,
But the keen eye of a common joiner.

Rule of four elements is familiar to us;
But a fifth created free man.
The superiority of space does
This chastely built ark not deny?

Fiercely cling the capricious medusae,
Like ploughs thrown down, anchors rust —
And torn apart are the bonds of three dimensions
And universal seas are opened up.

Osip Mandelstam 1913
N.S.
Time's face is tangled in the leaves.
Who hastens to the city sees
That frigate sailing high which might
Belong to water or to sky.

Oh airy wind-borne craft, you teach
To building Peter's later line
Beauty's no whim of gods: it's in
The joiner's keen, equating eye.

Four elements are known and kind;
Out of the fifth steps man alive.
Sail, frigate, on, through space and time
And sailing so their power deny.

Like barnacles medusa heads
And rusty anchors cling and clutch —
Dimensions' bonds are torn apart,
Man sails on universal seas.

R.D.
Smile, angry lamb from Raphael’s canvas —
On the canvas are the lips of the universe, but it is no longer the same . . .

In the light air of the pipes dissolve the pain of pearls,
Salt has eaten into the blue blue colour of the ocean’s chenille.

The colour of aerial plunder and the thickness of the cave,
The folds of stormy rest are poured over the knees.

On the cliff, harder than stale bread, are the reeds of the young forests,
And enchanting power swims in the corners of the heaven.

Osip Mandelstam, 9 January 1936, Voronezh N.S.
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‘Smile, angry lamb’

Smile, angry lamb, Christ child of Raphael —
The lips of the world have touched this canvas.

Melt, pearls, in the light air. Salt has eaten
Into the ribbed blue cloth of ocean.

Storm robs a cave to fill the sky,
Blue folds of storm spill over the knees.

On the cliff the reeds of the forest harden,
From heaven’s four corners brims enchantment.

R.D.
V

The infantry dies well,
And well sings the nocturnal choir
Over the squashed smile of Schweik,
And over the bird's spear of Don Quixote,
And over the knight's birdlike instep.
And the cripple is friends with man:
Work will be found for them both.
And raps on the outskirts of the century
A wooden family of crutches —
Hey, fellowship — earth!

VI

Is it for this that the skull must develop
Across the whole forehead — from temple to temple —
So that into its precious eye sockets
Armies could not avoid pouring in?
The skull develops from life
Across the whole forehead — from temple to temple —
With the cleanness of its sutures it teases itself,
Clarifies with the understanding dome,
Foams with thought, dreams of itself —
Cups of cups and homeland to the homeland —
Bonnet sewn with a starry seam —
Bonnet of happiness — Shakespeare's father.
VIII
The aortas are swelling with blood
And along the lines sounds the whisper:
— I was born in ninety-four,
— I was born in ninety-two ... 
And clenching in my fist the worn
Year of birth together with the crowd and in unison
I whisper with bloodless mouth:
— I was born on the night of the second to the third of
January in the ninety-one
Unreliable year, and the centuries
Surround me with fire.

Osip Mandelstam, February-March 1937, Voronezh
N.S.

*A sequence of eight poems.
V
The infantry knows how to die,
And the choir boys of the spheres
Sing vespers songs
Over the squashed smile of Schweik,
Don Quixote's lance and quill
And the knight's birdlike footprints:
Cripples are a man's best friend,
Work will be found for them.
In the suburbs of the century
The wooden family taps and knocks,
A good fellowship of crutches.
Hey, the good earth!

VI
Is it for this the skull hardens
From temple to temple over the brow:
So fluid armies may
Pour into the precious sockets of the eyes?
From temple to temple the skull broadens,
With a clean sureness mocks itself,
Rings clear with understanding,
As thought bubbles, dreams of itself —
The high cup, home's homeland —
Cap stitched with stars and happiness; from here
Shakespeare stepped out.
VIII
The arteries fork with blood,
And along the grape-vine runs the whisper:
— I was born in ninety-four,
— I was born in ninety-two . . .
And clutching in my hand the rubbed
Year of my birth, at one with the crowd,
I murmur with my white mouth:
— I was born on the night of the second
To the third of January, ninety-one,
A year not to be trusted, and the years
Ring me about with fire.

D.C.
NORTHERN ELEGIES

All in sacrifice to your memory
— Pushkin

The First

Prologue

I now live elsewhere . . .
— Pushkin

Dostoevsky’s Russia. The moon
Almost quarter concealed by the bell-tower.
Taverns are trading, carriages fly,
Five-storeyed vastnesses are growing
On Gorokhovaia, near Znamen’e, by Smol’nyi.
Everywhere dancing classes, money-changers’ signs,
And splendid coffins: ‘Shumilov elder’.
However, the city is little changed.
Not I alone, but others too
Have noticed, that it sometimes knows
How to appear as an old lithograph,
Not first rate, but quite decent,
Of, it would seem, the seventies.

Especially in winter, before daybreak,
Or at dusk – then behind the gates
The hard and straight Liteinyi,
Not yet dishonoured by the modern,
And vis-a-vis myself live – Nekrasov
And Saltykov . . . For each one a plaque
Memorial. Oh, how frightening it would be
For them to see these plaques! I walk past.

And in Staraya Russa there are splendid canals,
And in the little gardens summerhouses somewhat rotted,
And the glass of windows as black as an ice-hole,
And it seems, that such a thing there happened,
That better not to look in, let’s go away.
It is not with every place that one can come to an
agreement,
That it should open up its mystery.
(And in Optinaya I will not find myself again . . .)

Rustle of skirts, tartan rugs,
Mirrors with walnut frames,
Amazed by Karenina’s beauty,
And in the narrow corridors that wallpaper,
Which we admired in childhood,
Under a yellow kerosene lamp,
And that same plush on the armchairs . . .
   All unclassed, hurried, anyhow . . .
   Fathers and grandsires are incomprehensible. Lands
   Are mortgaged. And in Baden is the roulette.

And a woman with clear eyes
(Of such deep blueness, that the sea
One cannot fail to recall, having looked into them),
With the rarest of names and a white little hand,
And kindness, which in inheritance
From her I seem to have received, —
An unnecessary gift to my harsh life . . .

The country shakes in fever, but the convict from Omsk
Has understood all and placed a cross on all.
Now he will scramble everything
And over the primeval disarray, himself,
Like some spirit, will ascend. Midnight strikes.
The pen squeaks, and many pages
Reek of the Semenov parade ground,
So this is when we took into our heads to be born
And, unerringly having measured off the time,
So as to miss none of the spectacles
Unseen, parted with non-being.

Anna Akhmatova 1945
N.S.
NORTHERN ELEGIES

All in sacrifice to your memory
— Pushkin

The First

Prologue

I now live elsewhere . . .
— Pushkin

Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Russia. The moon
Is quartered by the bell-tower; pubs are full;
Hackneys flit by; lit windows pave the night
On Gorokhovaia, near Znamen’e, by Smol’nyi.
Dancing classes, money-changers’ signs,
And ‘Buy snug coffins cheap at Shumilov’.

Yet the city is little changed.
Others have remarked how it
Can look like an old lithograph,
Hardly first class but passable,
Of itself in the seventies.

Especially at winter daybreaks
Or at dusk behind gates
On the hard straight Liteinyi
Not yet desecrated
By the modern; and close by my house
Nekrasov’s and Saltykov’s,
Each with a memorial plaque.
How shocked they would be
To see these plaques. I pass.

And in Staraya Russa there are grand canals
And in the gardens rotting summerhouses,
The glass of the windows black as a hole in the ice,
And such things have happened there
It is better not to look.
Shall we go away? Not every place
Will turn on its mystery if you ask;
(And Optinaya will not see me again).

Rustle of skirts, tucked tartan rugs,
Mirrors in their walnut frames
Struck dumb by Karenina’s brilliance;
And wallpaper in corridors
That we fingered as a child
Under the rim of yellow lamps;
And the musty plush of armchairs.

A classless lot, breathless, awry,
Fathers and grandfathers seem
To speak a different language. Lands
Are mortgaged. Roulette in Baden Baden.
And a woman with clear eyes
(Of such fathomless blueness we
Would bathe there as in the sea)
With the rarest name and a small white hand
That gave and gave, an inheritance
Hardly in keeping with the facts of life.

All Russia shakes with fever, but the convict from Omsk
Has seen through all and signed it with a cross.
He tosses the kitchen in the pot
And over this primal disarray
On a nimbus he ascends.

Let midnight strike.
The pen squeaks, pages rustle down
Reeking of the Semenov execution ground.
And this is when we chose,
Having a flair for calculus,
To be born so that none
Of the happenings should go unseen,
And parting with the privilege of not being.

D.C.
NORTHERN ELEGIES

All in sacrifice to your memory
— Pushkin

The First

Prologue

I now live elsewhere . . .
— Pushkin

Dostoevsky’s Russia. See how the moon is
Partly obscured behind the bell-tower.
Taverns are trading, hansom hummings
And new five-storey apartments rearing
On Gorokhovaia, near Znamen’e, by Smol’nyi.
Dancing-teachers and money-changers
And nudge the coffins of ‘Shumilov elder’.
Nevertheless, we can say, the city
Is little changed. For not I only
But others notice its prospect shifting
Into a lithograph from its history.
Neat, not remarkable. Done in the seventies.

Especially, that is, in winter, early
Before first light, or at dusk, by the gateway
Of the hard and straight Liteinyi,
Not yet dishonoured by modern meddlers —
And I too lived in that street — there also
Lived Nekrasov, Saltykov. To each his memorial
Plaque. Imagine! To see one’s past so!
My footsteps quicken.
By the canals of Staraya Russa
Summerhouses decay in gardens,
Pock-like windows black as ice-holes.
Maybe, one thinks, oh, something happened —
Something tragic. Quick, let’s vanish.
Certain places disturb, unsettle.
(I shall never return to Optinaya.)

Rustle of skirts, and drapes of tartan,
Bevelled mirrors framed in walnut
Once enshrined Karenina’s beauty.
And papered walls in narrow hallways
Recede, recede to distant childhood
Haloed and hallowed by kerosene lamplight.
Remember the bobble-edged plush on armchairs?
Memory jumbles it all together —
Confused collaterals, mortgaged landholds,
Birthrights gambled away at Baden.

Eyes remembered as sea-blue, limpid,
Candid, pure; and small white hand
Of one named only for me, who gave me
The gift of kindness; a gift disturbing
Now that weapons to wield are wanted.

The country’s feverish. Dostoevsky
Makes the sign of the cross in blessing.
The scenes are shifting, the times are changing.
Over all his spirit is brooding.
Midnight strikes; he writes of Semenov;
Parade-ground, terror, near-execution.
And we — well — this is where we enter.
The curtain rises, the themes are stated.
We come from non-being into being.

R.D.
NORTHERN ELEGIES

The Second

So here it is — that same autumn landscape
Which I so feared all my life:
And so the sky — like a blazing abyss,
And so the sounds of the town — as from the other world
Heard, alien forever.
As if all, with which I within myself
All my life struggled, was given a
Separate life and was incarnated in these
Blind walls, in this black garden . . .
And at that minute over my shoulder
My former house still followed me
With a narrowed, malevolent eye,
With that, to me forever memorable window.
Fifteen years — seemed to pretend to be
Fifteen granite centuries,
But I too was myself like granite:
Now pray torment yourself, call me
Sea princess. It makes no difference. Let it be . . .
But I needed to assure myself,
That all this happened many times,
And not to me alone — to others also —
And even worse. No, not worse — better.
And my voice — and this, truly was
The most frightening thing of all —
Said from the darkness:
‘Fifteen years ago with what song you
Met this day, beseeched the heavens,
And choirs of stars, and choirs of waters
To greet the solemn meeting
With him, from whom you went today . . .
So here is your silver wedding:
Call then the guests, display your beauty, exult.'

*Anna Akhmatova 1943*

*N.S.*
I have been here before. This is the known landscape
Of fall that I have always feared: the sky
Like this, flames flickering in the abyss,
And the sound of the city alien, from another planet.

There is no way back. It is as if the secret
I wrestled with within me my life long
Achieved a haunting will of its own, embodied
In these unseeing walls and this dark garden.

Yet at this very moment over my shoulder
My turncoat house, I sense, is watching me go
From a window that loiters in the memory
With the slit malicious eye of one in the know.

Fifteen years: in my mind they appear
Like fifteen granite centuries; but I have been
Myself like granite. Entreat and tear your hair,
Call me Aphrodite. Who cares? The need has gone.

Yet I need to be reassured that this has happened
Before, and often, and not to me alone
But to others also, and worse than this, far worse.
But no, it could only be better, for my voice runs on.
It cries from darkness and I hear with dread:
‘Fifteen years ago with what fine songs
You met this day and sent up prayers to heaven,
To the choir of stars and to the tongues of water,
Seeking their help to celebrate the meeting
With the man you left today. Call in your friends,
This is your silver wedding,
Stand in your beauty’s circle and be gay.’

D.C.
NORTHERN ELEGIES

The Second

I arrive. I arrive at autumn's expected landscape,
The landscape and the region of my fear.
The sky, yes, still ablaze with falling fire,
And far away the busy hum of living —
A world apart and alien for ever.

Now all that I have ever struggled against
Within myself becomes a part of these
Blind walls, this black foreboding garden . . .
Over my shoulder as I turn away
I feel the window's narrowed, evil eye,

And I am stone, and all those fifteen years
Are fifteen granite centuries between.
What if you pray, implore, and supplicate,
Call me 'sea princess' as you used to do?
Nothing makes any difference any more.

All this has happened before, over and over.
Others have felt this pain — but suffered less.
I ache for assurance, something to hold against
The terrible sound of my own voice speaking to me
Out of the darkness of the comfortless:
‘This is your silver wedding. Silver too
Were the stars and singing waters on that day
When you stood and rejoiced with him you have left for
ever.
Your guests are here. *Now* call to them and say,
Look upon me. How beautiful I am.’

*R.D.*
NORTHERN ELEGIES

The Third

Me, like a river,
The harsh epoch turned.
They have supplanted my life.
    Into another source,
Past other things it began to flow,
And I do not know my own shores.
O, how many sights I have missed,
And the curtain arose without me,
And likewise fell. How many friends
Of mine I have not met once in my life.
O, how many shapes of towns
From my eyes could call up tears,
But in the world I know one town
And by feel will find it in my sleep . . .
And how many verses I have not written,
And their mysterious choir wanders around me
And, perhaps will yet some time
Strangle me . . .
To me are known origins and endings,
And life after end and something,
Which one should not now recall.
And some woman my
Only place has taken,
Bears my most legitimate name,
Having left me an alias, of which
I have made, perhaps all that is possible.
Not in my own grave, alas, I shall lie down . . .

.................................................

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But if from somewhere I were to glance
Upon my present life,
I would know jealousy at last . . .

Anna Akhmatova, Leningrad, 1944
N.S.
NORTHERN ELEGIES

The Third

Me, like a river, the harsh age turned aside.  
How many songs of mine, unwritten, sing  
In secret! I may choke of songs denied.  
To me are known beginnings and their fall,  
And life after a kind of death, and something  
That it is better now not to recall.

How many friends of mine I have not met  
Once in a lifetime! How many shapes of towns  
Start tears in my understanding! An epoch drowns  
My life and alters my life's limits. — Let  
The curtain rise and fall without me; yet  
Though forms change, in the place my spirit owns  
And walks in sleep, another woman crowns  
Her hair and calls herself legitimate.  
She steals my name, I'm left an alias  
Of which I make the best. And yet this woman,  
This woman bears his name and I that was,  
Go to my grave alone, lonely, inhuman. —  
Set me apart a moment. Separate I  
Look on my present life with jealousy.

D.C.
NORTHERN ELEGIES

The Third

This epoch turns my life
As though a stream were turned
To flow through foreign lands.
I long for shores I know.
Time and events go on
And curtains rise and fall
On acts I have not seen.

Friends: you who should have been
My friends, we have not met.
Tears stand behind my eyes
For cities I forget.
In the whole world I know
One city, and in dream
Blindfold, could find it still.

How many verses now
Unwritten circle me
In wandering choirs, and may
Still catch me by the throat.
I know the first and last,
Life after death, and thought
That formless must remain.

Some other woman steals
My name, identity,
And leaves me with this one,
Not mine — but I have done
Bearing it, what I can.
Even the grave towards which
I go is not my own.

And yet were I to look
From somewhere else upon
Myself, my life, here, now,
How I would rage and burn . . .

R.D.
Recollections have three epochs.
And the first is like a yesterday.
The soul is beneath their blessed vault
And the body is blissful in their shade.
The laughter is yet unstilled, the tears stream down,
The blot is unwiped on the table
And, like a seal on the heart, the kiss —
The only, the farewell, the unforgettable . . .
But this does not last long . . .
Already it is no arch overhead, but somewhere
In a remote purlieu a solitary house,
Where it is cold in winter, and hot in summer,
Where there are spiders, and dust lies over all,
Where burning letters die away to ashes,
Furtively portraits are changed,
Where people come as to a grave,
And, on returning, wash their hands with soap
And shake off a fleeting tear
From tired lids — and sigh heavily . . .
But the clock ticks on, one spring
Relieves another, the sky grows rosy,
The names of towns change,
And already there are no witnesses to the events,
And there is no one with whom to weep, no one with whom to recollect.
And slowly from us go the shadows,
Whom we no longer call up,
Whose return would be frightening to us.
And, awakening once, see that we have forgotten
Even the way to that solitary house
And, breathless with shame and anger,
We run there, but (as happens in a dream)
There all is changed: people, things, walls,
And no one knows us — we are strangers!
We have come to the wrong place . . . God!
And this is when the greatest bitterness arrives:
We become aware, that we could not have contained
That past within the limits of our life,
And it is almost as alien to us,
As to our next door neighbour;
That those, who have died, we would not recognise,
And those, from whom God has sent us separation,
Have managed excellently without us — and even
Everything has turned out for the best . . .

Anna Akhmatova 1953
N.S.
NORTHERN ELEGIES

The Fourth

Memory has three eras. The first is yesterday:
The soul still holy beneath an established heaven,
And the body blissful in pools of coloured shade;

Laughter and tears flow out spontaneously,
The inkstain dries unnoticed because one kiss
Unforgettable underwrites the heart at parting.

But this does not last; the sky falls; somewhere out there
Is a house like a recluse, as dull as the weather,
Where to the rites of spiders letters flare to dust.

On the sly the portraits alter, and callers come
As to a graveyard. They sigh and wash their hands,
Shrugging off tears, tired eyed, on returning home.

But the clock-hands spin, one spring repairs another,
The sky turns red, towns change their names; already
There are no witnesses to these events.

There is no one to mourn with, no one who remembers;
And subtly shadows thin. We don't wish to recall
Those whose return could only bring disquiet.
And at once the revelation: we have forgotten
Even the way to that lonely house. Out of breath
With shame and anger, we run as you run in a dream.

But all is changed, objects and people, even the walls!
No one knows us, we’re strangers. Good God, it’s the
wrong address!
Which uncovers the bitterest knowledge: we are forced
to admit

That we could no longer embrace in our way of life
Today, the life we lived; it is as unreal
To us as to the neighbour who shares our rooms.

Those who died we would no longer know;
Those we’re parted from have got on well without us; —
It even seems things have turned out for the best . . .

D.C.
NORTHERN ELEGIES

The Fourth

Memory divides in three. I live each part.
The first curves like a wing above the soul
And the body too is blessed and gently housed.
Laughter still echoes, tears are wet, the stain
Still spreads upon the table where it fell,

And still like a seal on the heart the last embrace,
The valedictory last kiss of all . . .
But I forget. Nothing can last so long.
Soon, soon, the arching curve that sheltered us
Dissolves and fades, and all that can be seen

Is a far lonely plain, one lonely house
Bitter in winter, scorching under the sun,
Where spiders spin and dust lies over all
And faces in the family portraits change
And burning letters die away to ash.

There, restless people wander as in dream
Like those who visit graves, who wash their hands,
Dry the last tears of an exhausted grief
And sigh — so heavily — while the clock ticks
And time goes on, and spring replaces spring.
Now the whole world becomes another world.
Where is the life we shared with vanished friends?
Whom shall I weep with, now that no one knows
If you could tell me could I bear to know?

I could not bear to find that you and I
Had lost the way back to that house we knew;
Or else, suppose that, as it were, in dream
We found our way, and everything was changed
And we were strangers where we loved . . . oh God!

The past must be relinquished as we go.
Those we were torn from soon learn to forget.
Bitterest of all is what I now must learn —
That love becomes a country that we knew
To which we have no passport to return.

R.D.
THREE AUTUMNS

To me summer smiles are simply inaudible,
And mystery in winter I shall not find,
But I have observed almost without fail
Three autumns in every year.

And the first is festive disorder
To spite yesterday’s summer,
And the leaves fly, like shreds of exercise books
And the smell of smoke is so frankincense sweet,
All is moist, motley and light.

And first into the dance step the birches,
Throwing on transparent dress,
Shaking off in a hurry fleeting tears
On to the neighbour over the fence.

But this happens — scarce started is a tale . . .
A second, a minute — and now
 Comes a second, dispassionate as the conscience,
Sombre as an air raid.

All appear at once paler and older.
Looted is summer cosiness,
And the distant marches of golden trumpets
In the odorous mist float . . .
And in the cold waves of its incense
Is closed the high heaven
But the wind rends, it flies open — and straight
It becomes clear to all: the drama in ending,
And this is not a third autumn but death.

Anna Akhmatova 1943
N.S.
THREE AUTUMNS

Though summer smiles, a smile's inaudible;
And winter keeps her secrets up her sleeve.
My season is the fall:
There are three turnings in the turning leaf.

First, to spite summer, is this gay disorder:
The leaves fly by like bright
Pages from an artist's notebook. There's the odour
Of green fires, and in motley goes the light.

The birches take their partners for the dance
Wearing next season's dress:
Their griefs and cares have skipped the neighbouring
fence,
Leaving a wanton nakedness.

Yet scarcely has the holiday begun
Than in a moment's minute all is staid:
Dispassionate as a judge act two comes on
As sombre as an air raid.

And all is older, paler, all at once
Summer's cupboard is bare;
And yellowing, the sound of Ares' horns
Drifts on the rotting air
Whose incense clouds the sky, but now the wind Springs up and rips it wide. The watching earth Knows as the season's drama nears its end. There is no third persona, this is death.

D.C.
THREE AUTUMNS

Summer beguiles but I make no reply.
Winter has secrets which I will not find.
But I have kept a tally and I know
There are three autumns in each passing year.

The first a careless festival that mocks
The summer which is gone with yesterday:
Then leaves, like torn-up poems, flutter down
Through the sweet turmoil of the smoky air.

How moist and light and clear the day begins!
The birches with the tentative first steps
Of dancers, in their thin transparent dress
Shake off the dew like sorrow, and advance.

The day, the dance, begins. And once begun
Is over with the passing of a breath.
The second autumn enters, soberly, —
As sombre as an air raid's warning note.

The air is drained of colour in dismay:
Gone is the warmth and light, the splendid gold
Of trumpets in procession. Their retreat
Is hidden in the odorous milky mist
Which shrouds the heavens in cold advancing waves.
All's vague, diffuse: then, as a knife, the wind
Tears a wide rent to show with clarity
This is no third of autumns. This is death.

R.D.
THE FIRST LONG-RANGER IN LENINGRAD

And in the motley bustle of humanity
All suddenly changed,
But this was not a city,
And also not a village sound,
The roll of distant thunder
It, it is true, resembled like a brother,
But in thunder there is the moisture
Of high fresh clouds
And the desire of meadows —
Word of joyful downpours,
But this one was as dry as hell,
And panicked hearing did not want
To believe, by the way
It spread and grew,
How indifferently it carried destruction
To my child.

Anna Akhmatova 1941
N.S.
THE FIRST LONG-RANGER IN LENINGRAD

The crowd motley, busy,
And then everything changed:
No informer or farmer
Had wind of this stranger.

Who spoke aloud then?
Why, the thunder’s brother;
And a green rain cloud
Is the blond field’s lover.

But dry and unyielding
Spoke that voice from hell:
Though I block both ears
I fear for my child.

D.C.
THE FIRST LONG-RANGER IN LENINGRAD

Everything changed in a moment of time
And the noise began.

It was not the commotion of the city we heard
Nor the stir of the town.

You must think, rather, that it was like thunder
For so it was.

Not thunder meaning desire, rainfall,
And flowers after,

But the dryness of death in the eye of a whirlwind,
Hell without shadows —

And I ran with my hands held over my ears
In a terror of knowing

That nothing could turn from its on-course projection
Death to my child.

R.D.
And in books the last page I
Always liked more than all the others, —
When already completely uninteresting
Are the hero and heroine, and have passed
So many years, that no one's to be pitied,
And, it seems, the author himself
Has already forgotten the beginning of the tale,
And even 'eternity has turned grey',
As is said in one splendid book,
And now, now
All will end, and the author will again
Be irreversibly alone, and he
Still tries to be clever
Or caustic — God forgive him! —
Fixing up a grand finale,
Such, for example:
. . . And only in two houses
In that town (name unclear)
Has remained a profile (outlined by someone
On the snow-white plaster of the wall),
Neither a woman's nor a man's, but full of mystery.
And, they say, when the beams of the moon —
Green, low, middle eastern —
Over these walls at midnight run,
Particularly on New Year's Eve,
Then some kind of slight sound is heard,
And some consider it to be weeping,
Others hear words in it.
Everyone's tired of this wonder,
Visitors are few, the locals are accustomed,
And, they say, in one of the two houses,
The damned profile is now covered with a rug.

Anna Akhmatova, Tashkent, 1943
N.S.
‘And in books’

And in books it is always the very last
Page of all that I love most:
Already the hero and heroine
Are so boring, so utterly known,
And so many years have passed,
That pity itself is exhausted.
And the author too has somehow forgotten,
It seems, the beginning of the plot,
And even ‘eternity is turning grey’,
As one good writer put it.

And now although all is almost at an end
And the author again will soon
Be irrevocably alone,
He must still, God bless him!
Be clever and brutal for the grand
Trumped-up finale, for example this:

... While in two houses in that town
(Whose name I forget) a profile still remains
Outlined by someone on the plaster wall,
Neither a woman’s nor a man’s
But with a haunting mystery of its own.

And they say when the moon, low, middle-eastern, green,
Runs at the turning of each year
Over those walls, a sound is heard
Of tears, though some distinguish words.
But everyone is sick to death of all that:
Callers are few; the locals grow
Familiar; and in one of the two
Houses, the damned profile is covered up,
It’s said, by an oriental mat.

D.C.
‘Ballad’

Liked the last page best
In the books I’ve read:
Passion exhausted
And Pity sped.

And the puppet-master
Seems to say,
‘That’s the finish.
The world’s turned grey.’

At the very end
He tries to atone
With a fine set-piece
Here’s one I’ve known —

In just two houses
In an unnamed place
There’s a profile drawn
On the wall: a face

Not man’s nor woman’s.
Hard to believe —
When the moon is full
On New Year’s Eve
The sad slight sound  
Of tears is heard,  
But whether it's weeping  
Or whether a word,

The folk in those houses  
Listening, shrug.  
In one they have covered  
The wall with a rug.

R.D.
CLEOPATRA

I am air and fire . . .
— Shakespeare

The Alexandrian chambers covered a sweet shade
— Pushkin

Already she has kissed Antony’s dead lips,
Already on her knees before Augustus poured tears . . .
And the servants have betrayed. The victorious trumpets sound
Under the Roman eagle, and the evening mist spreads out.

And in comes the last one captivated by her beauty,
Tall and well-set up, and in confusion he whispers:
‘You — like a slave . . . in the triumph he will send before him . . .’
But the swan neck’s curve is still as calm.

And tomorrow the children will be shackled in chains.
O how little remains
For her to do in the world — just a jest with a fellow
And the little black snake, as if a farewell regret,
On the brown breast with an indifferent hand to put.

Anna Akhmatova 1940
N.S.
CLEOPATRA

I am air and fire . . .
— Shakespeare

The Alexandrian chambers covered a sweet shade
— Pushkin

Kissing the sweet dead mouth of Antony,
Weeping before Augustus on one knee,
Her subjects false! The victor’s trumpets blare
Under Rome’s eagles. Night mists clot the air.

And one came, beauty’s latest captive, tall
And soldierly, who stammered out, ‘You shall
Walk before at his triumph, a slave, my queen!’
No swan in every curve was more serene.

In chains her children go under the yoke;
But her brief world she bartered for a joke
And a snake black as mourning, which she pressed
With an indifferent hand to her gilt breast.

D.C.
CLEOPATRA

I am air and fire . . .
— Shakespeare

The Alexandrian chambers covered a sweet shade
— Pushkin

She has kissed Antony's dead lips.
She has knelt before the Emperor and wept . . .
Her servants have betrayed her. Trumpets sound
Under the Roman eagle. Darkness falls.

And here is the latest captive of her beauty,
This handsome soldier, murmuring his dismay:
'You will be led — a slave — in shame before him . . .'
The proud line of her neck remains serene.

Tomorrow the children will be chained. For now
There's little left to do — some farewell jest
And the taking and placing of the snake, with an understated
Shrug of regret, on the curve of the brown breast.

R.D.
LEAVES FROM ANTIQUITY

I
Death of Sophocles

*Then the king knew, that Sophocles was dead.*
— Legend

On to the house of Sophocles in the night an eagle flew
down from the heavens.
And sombrely the choir of cicadas suddenly rang out
from the garden.
And in that hour the genius was already going into
immortality,
Leaving behind the enemy camp by the walls of his
native city.
It was then that the king had a strange dream:
Dionysius himself commanded him to raise the siege,
So that the noise should not disturb the funeral ritual
And to allow the Athenians to honour his joy.

*Anna Akhmatova 1961*

*N.S.*
LEAVES FROM ANTIQUITY

I
The Death of Sophocles

Then the king knew that Sophocles was dead.
— Legend

An eagle spans the house
Of Sophocles tonight
And keening crickets rouse
Like winter-roses light.

The mountaineering ghost
Of genius vaults the sky
Leaving a Spartan host
Encircling the city.

Their king sweats in a dream
Who knows on earth no law:
The green god speaks to him;
With dawn the troops withdraw,

That at his rites no noise
Should startle those who raise
In Attic pride their voice
To praise the poet's praise.

D.C.

103
LEAVES FROM ANTIQUITY

I
The Death of Sophocles

Then the king knew that Sophocles was dead.
— Legend

In the night of his death the eagle descending
To the roof-tree of Sophocles. Cicadas darkening
The air with their shrilling, and Sophocles leaving
The city he honoured, besieged and encircled,

And the god in a dream confronting the alien
Enemy king, commanding the siege to be
Lifted; the battle-alarms to be silenced
That Athens might honour the noblest Athenian.

R.D.
3
The Muse

And how am I to live with this burden,
And they call it a Muse, too,
They say: 'You, and she, in a meadow,'
They say: 'Heavenly prattle . . .'
Shakes you about more cruelly than the ague,
And again for a whole year mum's the word.

Anna Akhmatova
N.S.

*Part of a cycle of ten poems*
SECRET OF THE CRAFT

3
The Muse

How can I live with this
Distraction they call a Muse?
They say, 'Obviously his mistress,
Walking the fields without shoes
And talking of higher things . . .'
This virus of song, a delirium
That leaves you twelve months dumb!

D.C.
With a burden I am laden.  
Other people speak of 'Goddess, 
Muse, a spirit, heavenly being. 
She,' they say, 'and you at play 
In flowery meadows all the day 
Speaking of celestial matters.' 
They mean Poetry of course — 
Pain that grips about the heart, 
Loneliness and chill and fever, 
Silence that may last for ever.

R.D.
MOSCOW TREFOIL*

Almost for an album

You shall hear the thunder and remember me,
You shall think: she wished for a storm.
The strip of sky shall be hard scarlet,
And the heart shall be, as then, afire.

And so it shall be on that Moscow day,
When I forever shall forsake the town
And speed to a longed for sentry-post

As yet leaving my shadow in your midst.

Anna Akhmatova 1961-3
N.S.

Thunder, and I start like a bird in your head;
And you think, she wanted this storm:
The strip of sky is like the robin, red;
And the heart, of course, a flame!

It will be like this in Moscow on the day
When I walk out of the town and in my mind
Hurry to a crenated sanctuary
Leaving with friends my shadow life behind.

D.C.

*A cycle of three poems
Without a name

Among a frosty festive Moscow,
Where our parting is taking its course
And where, most likely, you will read
The first editions of the farewell songs,
Slightly astonished eyes . . .
‘What? What, already? Impossible!’
‘Of course!’

And the turquoise of the Christmas sky,
And all around is blissful and without sin.
No, never has anyone so parted
From another — and this is our award
For our feat.

Anna Akhmatova 1961-3
N.S.

In this alert rejoicing city
Where our break-up is in progress
And where no doubt you will read
The first editions of our parting songs:
The dull will cry, ‘Impossible!’
And ‘What did I tell you?’ the witty.

How blue for boys the sky!
Gemlike, the day is joyful, without sin.
No parting was more unreal: but you and I
Enjoy our theatre, so I suppose we win.

D.C.

Holiday Moscow,
Frostily festive.
We are saying
Our last good-byes
And you are reading
Wide-eyed, astonished,
The first edition
Of farewell songs.
‘What? What, already? Impossible!’
‘Of course!’

The Christmas sky
Is turquoise blue
And the stainless air
Is a blessing bestowed
On those who part,
Like a medal given
For severance suffered
Heroically.
‘What? What, already? Impossible!’
‘Of course!’

R.D.
Another Toast

To your faith and to my faithfulness,
To that you and I are in this land,

Even if we are bewitched forever,
There has been on earth no winter more beautiful,

And in the sky there have been no crosses more patterned,
More airy chains, longer bridges . . .

To this, that all is swimming, soundlessly gliding,
To this, that we may not see one another,

To all that I dream of even now,
Though firmly nailed up is the door that leads there.

Anna Akhmatova 1961-3
N.S.
To your faith and to my loyalty,
And that we live in Time together,

And though we are ill-starred, spell-bound,
There’s never been such marvellous weather.

Snow-crystal crosses in the sky,
Bridges and chains that float for ever.

I drink to this bright air-borne world,
To never seeing one another.

And, though that way the door’s shut fast,
I drink to all I dream of last.

R.D.