

**Anna Akhmatova**

**Selected Poems**  
**Including 'Requiem'**

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From: *Evening*, 1912

*The vines are in flower,  
And I'm twenty this evening.*

*André Theuriot*



## Love

A snake, it coils  
Bewitching the heart.  
Day after day, coos  
A dove on the white sill.

A bright flash in frost,  
Drowsy night-scented stock...  
Yet, sure and secret,  
It's far from peace and joy.

It knows how to weep sweetly  
In the violin's yearning prayer;  
And is fearfully divined  
In a stranger's smile.

## At Tsarskoye Selo

I.

Horses along the ride,  
Long waves of combed manes.  
O enchanting town of enigmas,  
I'm sad. I'm in love with you.

Strange to recall soul's longing,  
Suffocating, delirious death.  
Now I'm simply a plaything,  
Like the green parrot, my friend.

If you wish to, look in my eyes;  
There's no hint of pain in my heart;  
But I dislike the hour before sunset;  
Wind from the sea; the word 'depart'.

II.

And then...there's my marble double,  
Lying under the ancient maple,  
Giving his face to the waters,  
Listening to rustling leaves.

While a bright rain laves  
His clotted wound...  
Cold one, white one, wait,  
I'll turn to marble too.

### III - *Pushkin*

Dark-complexioned, he wandered these alleys,  
Was sorrowful on this lake shore,  
And a century later we cherish,  
The faint stir of his footsteps.

A litter of pine needles,  
Low stumps, a dense bristling mat...  
Here lay his dog-eared copy of Parny,  
And here, his tricorne hat.

'Now the pillow's,'

Now the pillow's  
Hot on both sides.  
A second candle  
Dies, the ravens cry  
Endlessly.  
No sleep all night,  
Too late to think of sleep...  
How unbearably white  
The blind's white deep.  
Hello, Morning!

## Reading Hamlet

To the right, wasteland by the cemetery,  
Beyond it the river's dull blue.  
You said: 'Go, get thee, to a nunnery  
Or get a fool to marry you...'

Though that's always how Princes speak,  
Still, I've remembered the words.  
As an ermine mantle let them stream,  
Behind him, through endless years.

'Hands clasped under the dark veil.'

Hands clasped, under the dark veil.  
'Today, why are you so pale?'  
– Because I've made him drink his fill  
Of sorrow's bitter tale.

How could I forget? He staggered,  
His mouth twisted with pain...  
I ran down not touching the rail,  
I ran all the way to the gate.

'I was joking,' I cried, breathlessly.  
'If you go away, I am dead.'  
Smiling strangely, calmly,  
'Don't stand in the wind,' he said.

'Memory of sun ebbs from the heart.'

Memory of sun ebbs from the heart.  
Grass fades early.  
Wind blows the first snowflakes  
Barely, barely.

Freezing water can't flow  
Along these narrow channels.  
Nothing happens here, oh  
Nothing can happen.

A willow against the sky  
Spreads its transparent fan.  
Better perhaps, if I  
Hadn't accepted your hand.

Memory of sunlight ebbs from the heart.  
What's this? Darkness?  
Perhaps! ...In the night  
Winter has overcome us.

‘A grey cloud in the sky overhead,’

A grey cloud, in the sky overhead,  
Like a squirrel skin uncurled.  
‘I’m not sorry your body,’ he said,  
‘Will melt in March, frail snow-girl!’

In the soft muff my hands grew cold.  
I felt afraid, somehow confused.  
How to recall the swift weeks’ flow,  
His short-lived insubstantial love!

I don’t want bitterness or revenge,  
Let me die with the last snow-storm.  
My fortune told of him at year’s end.  
I was his before February was born.



## Song of the Last Meeting

My heart was chilled and numb,  
But my feet were light.  
I fumbled the glove for my left hand  
Onto my right.

It seemed there were many steps,  
I knew – there were only three.  
Autumn, whispering in the maples,  
Kept urging: ‘Die with me!

I’m cheated by joylessness,  
Changed by a destiny untrue.’  
I answered: ‘My dear, my dear!  
I too: I’ll die with you.’

The song of the last meeting.  
I see that dark house again.  
Only bedroom candles burning,  
With a yellow, indifferent, flame.

'Drink my soul, as if with a straw'

Drink my soul, as if with a straw  
I know it's bitter, intoxicating taste.  
I won't disturb the torment with pleading,  
Oh, for weeks now I've been at peace.

Tell me, when you're done. No sadness,  
That my soul's no more of this world.  
I'll walk down that road nearby  
And see how children play.

The gooseberries are in flower,  
And they're carting bricks by the fence,  
Who are you, my brother, my lover,  
I don't know now, or need to know.

How bright it is here, and bare,  
My body, tired, rests...  
The passers-by thinking vaguely:  
Yes, she was widowed yesterday.

'I've written down the words'

I've written down the words  
That I've not dared to speak.  
My body's strangely dumb.  
Dully my head beats.

The horn cries have died.  
The heart's still confused.  
On the croquet lawn, light  
Autumn snowflakes fused.

Let the last leaves rustle!  
Let last thoughts torment!  
I don't wish to trouble  
Those used to happiness.

I forgive those lips, eyes  
Of yours, their cruel jest...  
Oh, tomorrow we'll ride  
That first wintry sledge.

Drawing-room candles will glow  
More tenderly in the day.  
Of conservatory roses,  
I'll bring a whole bouquet.

'I came here, in idleness.'

I came here, in idleness.  
Where I'm bored: all the same to me!  
A sleepy hilltop mill, yes,  
Here years pass silently.

Over convolvulus gone dry  
The bee swims past, ahead,  
I call to that mermaid by  
The pond: the mermaid's dead.

Thick with mud, and rusted,  
The wide pond's shallows:  
Over the trembling aspen  
A weightless moon glows.

I see everything freshly.  
The poplars smell moist.  
I'm silent. Silent, ready  
To be yours again, earth.

## White Night

Oh, I've not locked the door,  
I've not lit the candles,  
You know I'm too tired  
To think of sleep.

See, how the fields die down,  
In the sunset gloom of firs,  
And I'm drunk on the sound  
Of your voice, echoing here.

It's fine, that all's black,  
That life's – a cursed hell.  
O, that you'd come back –  
I was so certain, as well.

## Evening Room

I speak those words, today, that come  
Only once, born in the spirit.  
Bees hum on white chrysanthemum:  
There's the must of an old sachet.

And the room, with narrow windows,  
Preserves love, remembers the past.  
Over the bed a French script flows:  
It reads: 'Lord, have mercy on us.'

Those saddened marks of so ancient a tale,  
You mustn't touch, my heart, or seek to...  
I see bright Sèvres statuettes grow pale:  
Even as their lustre grows duller too.

A last ray, yellow, heavy,  
Sets on the dahlias' bright bouquet,  
And I can hear viols playing,  
A clavichord's rare display.

### Legend on An Unfinished Portrait

Oh, there's no reason for sighs,  
Sadness is pointless, a crime,  
Here, from grey canvas, I rise,  
Vaguely, strangely through time.

Arms lifted, freely curtailed,  
A tormented smile on my face,  
I was forced to become like this  
Through hours of mutual grace.

He wished it so, he willed it so,  
With words, spiteful and dead.  
Anxiety clotted my mouth: oh,  
My cheeks with snow were wed.

It's no sin of his, it seems,  
Other eyes, he left to see,  
No matter these empty dreams  
Of my mortal lethargy.

Imitation of Innokenty Annensky

And to you, my first vagary,  
I said goodbye. The east was turning blue,  
Though I didn't know what you meant,  
You said, simply: 'I'll not forget.'

Other faces appear and vanish,  
Dear today, and tomorrow, done.  
Why is at this page alone,  
The corner is turned down?

Forever the book opens  
To the very same place, strange:  
It's as if the years have not passed,  
From the moment of farewell.

Oh, who said that the heart is stone?  
I know: it is made of fire...  
I'll never understand: were you close  
To me, or simply loved me?



'I pray to the ray from the window-pane'

I pray to the ray from the window-pane –  
It's pale, thin, and straight.  
All morning I was silent,  
My heart – split in two.  
The copper of my wash-basin  
Is green with verdigris,  
But sunlight plays there,  
How joyously.  
So simple it is, so innocent,  
In evening quiet,  
Yet in this bare shrine,  
It's a gold celebration,  
A consolation, I find.

'He loved three things, alive:'

He loved three things, alive:  
White peacocks, songs at eve,  
And antique maps of America.  
Hated when children cried,  
And raspberry jam with tea,  
And feminine hysteria.  
...And he had married me.

From: *Rosary*, 1914

*Well forgive me forever! But know,  
That the names of two guilty parties,  
Not simply one can be found  
In my poems,  
In these legends of love.*

*Baratynsky*

## A Ride

My feather brushed the carriage roof.  
I was gazing into his eyes.  
The pain, in my heart, I failed to know,  
Caused by my own sighs.

The evening breathless, heavily-chained  
Under a heavenly cloud-bank,  
As in the Bois de Boulogne, stained,  
In some old album, with Indian ink.

Scent of lilac and benzene,  
And a quiet, guarded waiting...  
With his hand he touched my knees  
Again, and without trembling.

'I won't beg for your love.'

I won't beg for your love.  
It's safely laid aside....  
I won't be penning jealous  
Letters to your bride.  
But be wise, take my advice:  
Give her my poems to read,  
Give her my photos beside –  
Be kind to the newly-wed!  
Oh, knowledge is better for geese,  
Feeling they've won completely,  
Than sweet companionable speech,  
Or a tender first-night memory...  
And when you've spent all your  
Kopecks of joy with your dear friend,  
And your spirit's sated with it all,  
And suddenly you're ashamed –  
Don't come – I'll fail to know you –  
To me, night's crestfallen guest.  
For how could I help you?  
I've no cure for happiness.

## Evening

In the garden strains of music,  
Full of inexpressible sadness.  
Scent of the sea, pungent, fresh,  
On an ice bed, a dish of oysters.

He said to me: 'I'm a true friend!'  
And then touched my dress.  
How unlike an embrace  
The closeness of his caress.

Thus, you stroke birds or cats, yes,  
Thus you view shapely performers...  
In his calm eyes only laughter,  
Beneath pale-gold eyelashes.

And the voices of sad viols  
Sang behind drifting vapour:  
'Give thanks to heaven, then –  
You're alone at last with your lover.'

'Here we're all drunkards and whores,'

Here we're all drunkards and whores,  
Joylessly stuck together!  
On the walls, birds and flowers  
Pine for the clouds and air.

The smoke from your black pipe  
Makes strange vapours rise.  
The skirt I wear is tight,  
Revealing my slim thighs.

Windows tightly closed:  
Who's there, frost or thunder?  
Your eyes, are they those  
Of some cautious cat, I wonder?

O, my heart how you yearn!  
Is it for death you wait?  
Or that girl, dancing there,  
For hell to be her sure fate?

'...And no-one came to meet me'

...And no-one came to meet me  
Carrying a lantern.  
The house quiet: my entry  
By moonlight uncertain.

Under the green lamp,  
His smile was lifeless,  
Whispering: 'Cinderella,  
How strange your voice...'

Flames of the fire dying:  
Wearily, cricket chirping.  
Ah! Someone's taken my  
White shoe into their keeping.

Given me three carnations  
Without raising their eyes.  
O, dear tokens,  
Where can you hide?

My heart's bitter too  
Knowing soon, soon,  
My little white shoe  
Will be tried by everyone.



‘My imagination, obediently,’

My imagination, obediently,  
Conceives grey eyes.  
In Tver, in my solitude,  
It’s you I bitterly remember.

Happily captive in another’s arms,  
On the left bank of the Neva,  
My famed contemporary,  
You have all that you desired;

You who told me: Enough,  
Go now, quench your love!  
And I weakly, waste away,  
Though the blood beats more strongly.

If I die, who will write,  
These poems to you,  
Whose voice will ring  
With my still unspoken words?

'We shall not sip from the same glass.'

We shall not sip from the same glass,  
No water for us, or sweet wine;  
We'll not embrace at morning,  
Not gaze from the same sill at night;  
You breathe the sun, I the moon,  
Yet the one love keeps us alive.

Always with me, tender, true friend,  
And your smiling friend's with you.  
But I know the pain in your grey eyes,  
And my sickness is down to you, too.  
In short, we mustn't meet often,  
To be certain of peace of mind.

Yet it's your voice sings in my poems,  
And in your poems my breath sighs,  
O, beyond the reach of distance or fear,  
There is a fire...  
And if you knew how dear to me  
Are those dry, pale lips of yours now.

‘Always so many pleas from a lover!’

Always so many pleas from a lover!  
None when they fall out of love.  
I’m so glad it plunges, the river,  
Beneath colourless ice above.

And I’m to stand – God help me! –  
On the surface, fissured, gleaming,  
With my letters, for posterity  
To judge, in your safe keeping,

So that clearly, and distinctly,  
They can see you, brave and wise,  
In your glorious biography,  
No gaps revealed to the eye?

To drink of Earth’s too sweet,  
And Love’s nets are too fine.  
But may my name be seen  
In the students’ books in time,

And, let them smile, secretly,  
On reading my sad story...  
If I can’t have love, if I can’t have peace,  
Grant me a bitter glory.

'For the last time, we met,'

For the last time, we met,  
On the embankment, as ever.  
High water in the Neva,  
Fear of flood in the city.

He talked of the summer and said,  
How absurd – a woman poet!  
I remember the Tsar's great palace,  
The Peter and Paul fortress! –

Then, the air was not ours,  
But a gift from heaven – wondrous.  
And I, in that moment, was granted,  
The latest of all my mad songs.

'The high vault is bluer'

The high vault is bluer  
Than the sky's solid blue...  
Forgive me, happy boy,  
The death I brought you –

For the roses from every place,  
For your foolish words,  
That your bold dark face  
Pale with love, stirred.

I thought: your purpose –  
To show an adult's pride.  
I thought it's not possible:  
Love, as one loves a bride.

I was wrong in every way.  
When the weather grew icy,  
Everywhere, and always,  
You followed, impassively,

As if you wanted to show  
I'd no love for you. Forgive!  
Why did you take that vow  
On the path to suffering?

And death held out its hand...oh,  
Speak, why then, what for?  
I didn't know how frail your throat  
Was under the blue collar.

Happy boy, my tormented  
Owlet, oh, forgive me!  
Today, I find it hard  
To leave this sanctuary.

For Mikhail Lozinsky

It's endless – the heavy, amber day!  
Impossible grief, pointless waiting!  
And the silver-voiced deer, again,  
Under the Northern Lights, belling.  
And I think there's cold snow  
A blue font for the poor and ill,  
And a little sledge's headlong flow,  
To the ancient chime of far-off bells.

Memory's Voice

*For O. A. Glebova-Sudeikina*

'What do you see, on the wall, dimly alive,  
At that hour when the sunset eats the sky?

A seagull, on a blue cloth of waters,  
Or perhaps it's those Florentine gardens?

Or is it Tsarskoye Seloe's vast view,  
Where terror stepped out before you?

Or that one who left your captivity,  
And walked into white death, freely?'

No, I see only the wall – that shows  
Reflections of heaven's dying glow.

8th November 1913

Sunlight fills my room  
With hot dust, lucent, grey.  
I wake, and I remember:  
Today is your saint's day.  
That's why even the snow  
Is warm beyond the window,  
That's why, sleeplessly,  
Like a communicant, I slept.



'Evening hours at the desk,'

Evening hours at the desk,  
The page irremediably white,  
The mimosa's scent is of Nice, warmth,  
Over the moon some vast bird flies.

And, twining my braids for night,  
As if I must wear them tomorrow,  
I look from the window at sand-dunes, sea,  
Free of sorrow.

How much power a man has  
Who doesn't ask for affection!  
I can't even lift my weary eyelids  
When he chooses to speak my name.

‘My heart beats smoothly, steadily,’

My heart beats smoothly, steadily,  
What are long years to me?  
Under the Galernaya arch,  
Our shadows, for eternity.

Through half-closed eyelids,  
I see, I see that you’re with me,  
And forever held in your hand  
Is my unopened fan.

Because we stood together,  
In that blessed miraculous moment,  
The instant of the rose-red moon  
Lifting over the Summer Garden –

I’ve no need to wait  
At some hateful window,  
Or grow weary with meeting –  
My thirsty love is quenched.

You are free, and so am I,  
Tomorrow will be better than yesterday –  
Above the Neva’s dark waters,  
Below the Emperor Peter’s  
Cold smile.

‘As a silver, delicate strand’

As a silver, delicate strand  
Is woven in my dark tresses –  
Only you, silent nightingale,  
Can understand this torment.

Your sensitive ear hears distance,  
In the willow’s thin branches,  
Ruffled, you gaze – without breathing –  
If a strange song sounds.

But a moment ago, a moment,  
The poplars suddenly stilled,  
And your ineffable joy,  
Rang out, your poisonous song.

## Venice

Gold dovecote by waters,  
Tender and dazzlingly green;  
A salt-breeze sweeps away  
The gondola's narrow wake.

Such sensitive, strange eyes in the streets,  
The bright toys in the shops:  
A lion with a book, on a lace pillow,  
A lion with a book, on a marble pillar.

As in an ancient, faded canvas,  
The sky is a cool, dull blue...  
But one's not crushed in the crowd,  
Nor stifled in this damp heat.

## The Guest

All's as it was: the snowstorm's  
Fine flakes wet the window pane,  
And I myself am not new-born,  
But a man came to me today.

I asked: 'What do you wish?'  
He said: 'To be with you in hell'.  
I laughed: 'Ah, sadly,  
No: perhaps you wish me ill.'

But, his dry hand touched  
A petal with a light caress:  
'Tell me, how they kiss you,  
Tell me, how you kiss.'

And his eyes, dully gazing,  
Never lifted from my ring.  
Not a single muscle shifting  
Beneath that evil-glistening.

O, I understand: to know, passionately  
And intensely, is his delight,  
That there's nothing that he needs,  
And nothing I can deny.

For Alexander Blok

I came to the poet as a guest.  
Exactly at noon. On Sunday.  
Beyond the window, frost,  
Quiet in the room's space.

And a raspberry tinted sun  
Above tangles of blue smoke...  
How clearly the taciturn  
Master turns, on me, his look!

His eyes are of that kind  
Remembered by one and all:  
Better take care, mind:  
Don't gaze at them at all.

But I remember our words,  
Smoky noon, of a Sunday,  
In that high grey house  
By the Neva's sea-way.

From: *White Flock*, 1917

*For grief, even at night, the road is light.*

*Annensky*

## Solitude

So many stones are thrown at me  
That I no longer cower,  
The turret's cage is shapely,  
High among high towers.  
My thanks, to its builders,  
May they evade pain and woe,  
Here, I see suns rise earlier,  
Here, their last splendours glow.  
And often winds from northern seas  
Fill the windows of my sanctuary,  
And a dove eats corn from my palm...  
And divinely light and calm,  
The Muse's sunburnt hand's at play,  
Finishing my unfinished page.



'My voice is weak, but not my will'

My voice is weak but not my will,  
It's better even without love.  
High skies and mountain winds,  
And my thoughts now innocent.

Insomnia, my nurse, is elsewhere.  
I'm not brooding by cold ashes.  
And the curved hand on the tower clock,  
Is no longer a deadly arrow.

How the past loses power over the heart!  
Freedom is near. Everything's simple,  
See how the sunlight falls across  
The wet ivy this spring.

'The sky's blue lacquer grows dim,'

The sky's blue lacquer grows dim,  
And louder the song of the flute,  
It's only a pipe of clay,  
There's no need for its complaint.  
Who told it all my sins,  
And inspired it to absolve me?...  
Or is its voice repeating  
Your last poems to me?

'Oh, and the day was cold,'

Oh, and the day was cold,  
In Peter's wondrous city!  
The sunset a crimson bonfire,  
And slow shadows thickened.

Let him not long for my eyes,  
Prophetic and unchanging,  
He will have a lifetime of verse,  
The prayers of my proud lips.

'There's a secret border in human closeness,'

*For Nikolai Nedobrovo*

There's a secret border in human closeness,  
That love's being, love's passion, cannot pass –  
Though lips are sealed together in dreadful silence,  
Though hearts break in two with love's distress.

And friendship too is powerless, and years  
Of sublime flame-filled happiness,  
When the soul itself is free, a stranger,  
To the slow languor of sensuality.

Those who try to reach that boundary are mad,  
And those who have – are filled with anguish.  
Now you know, now you understand,  
Why my heart won't beat at your caress.

‘To lose the freshness of speech, the simplicity of feeling,’

To lose the freshness of speech, the simplicity of feeling,  
Isn't that, for us, like a painter losing the power of sight,  
Or an actor, their voice and movement,  
Or a lovely woman, her beauty?

But don't try to keep to yourself  
This gift the heavens have granted:  
We're condemned – you know it yourself –  
To squander, not hoard, its wealth.

Go alone, and heal the blind,  
To know, in the heavy hours of doubt,  
The mockery of gloating followers,  
The indifference of the crowd.

Reply

*For Vasily Komarovsky*

Such strange words  
That quiet April day brought me.  
You knew it was still alive in me,  
That dreadful week of passion.

I heard no pealing of bells,  
Floating in clear azure,  
For seven days copper laughter chimed,  
Silvery sorrow streamed.

And I, veiling my face,  
As if for eternal parting,  
Lay, awaiting there  
The still-nameless torment.

'How can you bear to view the Neva,'

How can you bear to view the Neva,  
How can you bear to cross its bridges? ...  
No surprise I'm marked for sadness,  
Since that vision of you appeared.  
Sharp, the black angels' wings,  
Soon, the judgement day;  
And raspberry-coloured bonfires blossom  
Like roses, in the snow.

The road by the seaside garden darkens,

The road by the seaside garden darkens,  
The lights are a fresh yellow.  
I'm at peace; but please, don't talk  
To me about him.  
You're kind and loyal, we'll be friends...  
Walk, kiss, and be old...  
Coming days will fly over us,  
Lightly, like snowy stars.



'Like one betrothed I receive'

Like one betrothed I receive  
A letter at each day's end,  
And late at night conceive  
An answer for my friend.

'On my journey to the dark,  
I'm staying with white death.  
Do no harm, my gentle one,  
To anyone on earth.'

Brighter, a star is shining  
Between that pair of trees,  
Calmly promising  
That what I dream will be.

'Because somewhere there's simplicity and light,'

Because somewhere there's simplicity and light,  
Transparent, warm and joyous...  
There a neighbour talks with a girl at twilight,  
Over the fence, and only the bees hear,  
The most tender of murmurings.

While we live with ceremony, difficulty,  
Honouring the rites of our bitter meetings,  
Where a sudden reckless gust  
Breaks off the sentence begun –

But we'd not exchange for anything  
This granite city of fame and misfortune,  
The wide rivers of shining ice,  
The sunless, gloomy gardens,  
The barely audible voice of the Muse.

## Flight

*For O. A. Kuzmin-Karavaev*

'If we can only reach the shore,  
My dear!' – 'Silently...'  
And so we slipped down the stair,  
Not breathing, searching for keys.

Past the place where we once  
Danced, and drank the wine,  
Past the Senate's white columns,  
To where it was dark as a mine.

'What are you doing, you're crazy!' –  
'No, just in love with you!  
This breeze – wide and windy,  
Will delight a boat or two!'

Throat constrained with horror,  
The skiff carried us in darkness...  
A sea-cable's strong odour  
Scorched my quivering nostrils.

'Tell me, you surely must know:  
Am I sleeping? So like a dream...'  
Only the oars measured blows,  
On the Neva's heavy stream.

But the black sky lightened,  
Someone called from a bridge,  
With both hands I grasped  
The cross's chain at my breast.

Powerless, I was lifted, like  
A young girl, in your arms,  
Onto the white yacht's deck,  
To meet day's incorruptible charms.

'I rarely think of you now'

I rarely think of you now,  
Not captured by your fate,  
But our insignificant meeting's trace  
Has not vanished from my soul.

I purposely avoid your red house,  
That red house on its muddy river,  
But I know I bitterly disturb  
Your sunlit heart at rest.

Though you never bent to my lips,  
Imploring love,  
Never immortalised my longing  
In verse of gold –

I secretly conjure the future,  
When evening shines clear and blue,  
And foresee the inevitable meeting,  
A second meeting, with you.

'Already the maple leaves'

Already the maple leaves  
Cover the swans' pool,  
And the blood-stained arms  
Of late-ripening rowan.

And, dazzlingly slender,  
Crossed legs impervious to cold,  
She sits on a northern stone,  
And gazes at the road.

I felt a vague fear,  
In front of this famous girl.  
Rays of thinning light  
Playing over her shoulders.

And how could I forgive her  
Your delight, your enamoured praise...  
Look there, elegantly naked,  
It's a joy to her to be sad.

'Drowsiness returns me'

Drowsiness returns me  
To our last starry paradise –  
That city of pure fountains,  
Golden Bakhchisarai.

There behind the striped fence,  
By pensive waters,  
We remembered with joy  
The gardens of Tsarskoye Selo.

And suddenly we saw  
Catherine's eagle – there!  
Swooping into the valley  
From the wondrous gate of bronze.

To keep the song of the pain of parting  
Alive in the memory,  
Autumn in her dark skirt  
Brought the red leaves.

Scattered them on the steps,  
Where I said farewell,  
Whence into the realm of shadows  
You my consolation, fled.

‘All I see is hilly Pavlovsk,’

All I see is hilly Pavlovsk,  
Meadow around, motionless water,  
The most languid, the most shaded,  
Most unforgettable spot.

When you drive through the gates,  
A blessed tremor takes you,  
Not just living, you’re mad, exultant,  
Or alive in a different way.

In late autumn it’s fresh and biting,  
Wandering breezes, joyful solitude.  
Frosted white, the black fir-trees  
Standing in melting snow.

And filled with fiery delirium,  
The dear voice rings out in song,  
On the lyre-player’s bronze shoulder,  
Sits a bird with a scarlet breast.

'Why pretend to be'

Why pretend to be  
Now breeze, now stone, now a bird?  
Why smile at me,  
In sudden lightning from summer's sky?

Don't torture me further, and don't touch me!  
Leave me to my prophetic dreams...  
A drunken flame reels  
Over the dry grey marshes.

And the Muse in a ragged shawl,  
Sings a long despondent song,  
With a harsh youthful yearning,  
With her miraculous strength.



'I'll be there and weariness will vanish.'

I'll be there and weariness will vanish.  
The cold of early morning will please.  
There are villages, mysterious and dark –  
Storehouses of immortal labour.

My calm and trusting love  
Of that place will never be vanquished.  
There's a drop of Novgorod blood  
In me – a sliver of ice in foaming wine.

And that can never be altered,  
It's un-melted by great heat,  
And no matter what I may praise –  
You shine quietly before me.

'The evening light is broad and yellow.'

The evening light is broad and yellow,  
Tender, the April chill.  
You are many years late,  
Yet I'm glad you are here.

Sit down now, close to me,  
And look with joyful eyes:  
Here it is, the blue notebook –  
Filled with my childhood poems.

Forgive me that I lived in sorrow,  
Rejoiced too little in the sun.  
Forgive, forgive, that I mistook  
Too many others for you.

'I don't know if you're alive or dead –'

I don't know if you're alive or dead –  
Can you be found on earth so?  
Or only in twilit thoughts instead,  
Be mourned, in that peaceful glow?

All for you: the prayer by day,  
The hot sleeplessness at night,  
The white flock of poetry,  
And the blue fire of my eyes.

No one was cherished more,  
Or made me suffer: no, not  
He who betrayed me to torment,  
Nor he who caressed and forgot.

'I'll erase this day from your memory.'

I'll erase this day from your memory,  
So your vague helpless gaze will ask  
Where you saw Persian lilac,  
Swallows, and this wooden house.

Oh, how often you'll remember  
The sudden pain of unnamed longing,  
And in townships seek in dream  
For a street that isn't on the map!

At the sight of every chance letter,  
When a voice sounds from an open door,  
You'll think: 'It's she, who's here  
Bringing help to the non-believer.'

'Is my destiny so changed,'

*For Yunia Anrep*

Is my destiny so changed,  
Or the game really over?  
Where are those winters I'd go to bed  
At six in the morning?

Newly tranquil and severe,  
I'm living on a wild coastline,  
No longer able to utter  
A single kind or idle word.

Can Christmas soon be here?  
The steppe is touchingly green.  
The sun glows. Lapping the shore  
There's a warm-looking wave.

When tired, languid from happiness,  
I used to dream of such quiet,  
With unutterable wonder,  
And thus I imagined myself,  
A posthumous, wandering soul.

'Like a white stone in a well's depths,'

Like a white stone in a well's depths,  
A single memory remains to me,  
That I can't, won't fight against:  
It's happiness – and misery.

I think someone who gazed full  
In my eyes, would see it straight.  
They'd be sad, be thoughtful,  
As if hearing a mournful tale.

I know the gods changed people  
To things, yet left consciousness free.  
To keep suffering's wonder alive,  
In memory, you changed into me.

'I was not born too early or too late.'

I was not born too early or too late,  
The time was uniquely blessed,  
Only the Lord did not permit  
My heart to live without illusion.

That's why it's dark in the living-room,  
That's why my friends,  
Like sorrowful twilight birds,  
Sing of past non-existent love.

'It was not mystery or grief,'

It was not mystery or grief,  
Nor the wise will of fate –  
It was the impression of strife,  
Our meetings always left behind.

From dawn I'd anticipate  
The moment when you'd appear,  
Feeling faint stabbing pains  
All along my folded arms.

And with dry fingers I'd crumple  
The table's chequered cloth...  
I knew then, already,  
How small this earth truly is.



'How I loved, and love, to look'

How I loved, and love, to look  
At your chained shores,  
At the balconies on which centuries  
Never set foot.  
And you are truly the capital,  
For we who are mad and luminous;  
But when those pure and special hours  
Linger above the Neva,  
And the wind in May sweeps round  
The columns that edge the water,  
You are like a sinner seeing, before death,  
A sweetest dream of paradise.

From: *Plantain*, 1921

*Hear, at least, the sounds  
That once were dear.*

*Pushkin*

'I asked the cuckoo'

I asked the cuckoo:  
How many years will I live? ...  
The tips of the pine-trees quivered,  
A yellow ray shone on the grass.  
Yet no sound in the cool grove...  
Now I am going home,  
And a refreshing breeze  
Kisses my burning brow.

'Earthly fame is smoke,'

Earthly fame is smoke,  
It's not what I asked for.  
I bring good fortune  
To all my lovers.  
One of them is alive,  
In love with his darling.  
The other turned to bronze  
In the snowy square.

'I hear the oriole's ever-mournful voice,'

I hear the oriole's ever-mournful voice,  
And welcome the rich summer's losses.  
Through the grain, packed tightly ear on ear,  
The sickle slices, with its snake's hiss.

And the short skirts of the slim reapers,  
Fly like festive flags in the breeze,  
Now, the sound of bells would be joyful,  
And a long gaze from under dusty lashes.

It's not caresses I want, nor flattery,  
In premonition of some pressing darkness,  
But come with me and gaze at paradise,  
Where we were innocent and blessed.

'Is this century worse than those before?'

Is this century really worse than those before?  
Perhaps, in that dazed by fear and grief,  
It touched a blackest sore  
It could not heal.

In the west the earthly sun shines yet,  
And city roofs gleam in its light,  
But here the white one marks doors with crosses,  
Summons the crows, and the crows are in flight.

'You should appear less often in my dreams'

You should appear less often in my dreams,  
Since we meet so frequently;  
Yet only in night's sanctuary  
Are you sad, troubled, and tender.  
And sweeter than seraphic praise  
Is your lips' dear flattery...  
Ah, in dreams you won't mistake my name,  
Or gently sigh, as you do here.

'No one sung about that meeting.'

No one sung about that meeting,  
Sadness faded with never a song.  
A cool summer it was,  
Like a new life begun.

The sky seems a vault of stone,  
Wounded by yellow fire,  
And more than my daily bread  
I need some word of him.

Dew-wet grass  
Refresh my soul with news –  
Not for passion, or for pleasure,  
But for deep love of this earth.



'Now no one will listen to my songs.'

Now no one will listen to my songs.  
The prophesied days have come to pass.  
Last poem of mine, earth has lost its magic.  
Don't break my heart, don't resound.

Not long ago, free as a swallow,  
You accomplished your morning flight.  
Now you've become a starving beggar,  
Don't go knocking at the stranger's door.

‘A string of little beads at my neck,’

A string of little beads at my neck,  
In a broad muff I hide my hands,  
The eyes stare vacantly,  
They never shed a tear.

And the face appears pale,  
Against the lavender silk,  
My straight bangs  
Almost reach my eyebrows.

And how dissimilar to flight  
Is my halting step,  
As if it were a raft beneath my feet,  
Not these wooden parquet squares.

And the pale lips are slightly parted,  
The breathing laboured and uneven,  
And over my heart tremble  
The flowers of a non-existent meeting.

'Now farewell, capital,'

Now farewell, capital,  
Farewell, my spring.  
Karelia's earth,  
Already, yearns for me.

Fields and gardens,  
Tranquil and green,  
The waters there still deep,  
The heavens pale.

The marsh water-nymph,  
Mistress of those spaces  
Gazes, sadly sighing,  
At the bell-tower's cross.

And the oriole, my friend  
Of innocent days,  
Flew north yesterday,  
And cries, among the branches,

That it's shameful to stay  
Till May in the city,  
Stifle in the theatres,  
Be bored on the islands.

Though the oriole can't know,  
The nymph can't understand,  
How sweet it is for me,  
Kissing him!

And yet, this evening,  
In the day's quiet decline,  
I shall leave. God's country,  
Take me in!

From: Anno Domini MCMXXI, 1922

*In those legendary years.*

*Tyutchev*

Petrograd, 1919

Caged in this savage capital,  
We have forgotten forever  
The townships, the lakes, the steppes,  
The dawns, of our great motherland.  
In the circuit of blood-stained days and nights,  
A bitter languor overcomes us...  
No one wishes to come to our aid,  
Because we choose to remain here,  
Because, in love with our city,  
More than the wings of liberty,  
We preserved to ourselves,  
Its palaces, flames, and waters.

Now another time draws near,  
The wind of death chills the heart,  
And Peter's sacred city,  
Will be our unsought monument.

'Everything's looted, betrayed and traded,'

Everything's looted, betrayed and traded,  
Black death's wing's overhead.  
Everything's eaten by hunger, un-sated,  
So why does a light shine ahead?

By day, a mysterious wood, near the town,  
Breathes out cherry, a cherry perfume.  
By night, on July's sky, deep, and transparent,  
New constellations are thrown.

And something miraculous will come  
Close to the darkness and ruin,  
Something no-one, no-one, has known,  
Though we've longed for it since we were children.

## Bezhetsk

White churches there, and bright crackling ice,  
There my son's cornflower-blue eyes blossom.  
Above the old town, nights are diamond-bright, Russian:  
More yellow than lime-flower honey, the moon's slice.  
Dry snow-storms blow from the plains beyond the river,  
And, like angels, men are glad on God's Holy Day.  
They've cleared the best room, icon lamps play,  
On the oak table you'll see the Good Book's cover.  
There, ungenerous to me now, Memory so severe,  
Bowed low, opened her tower rooms as well;  
But I slammed the fearful door, did not enter:  
While the town rang with cheerful Christmas bells.

Note: Bezhetsk is about 140 miles north of Moscow in the Tverskaya Oblast Region. The poem is dated 26th December 1921.

'Don't taunt your heart with earthly joys.'

Don't taunt your heart with earthly joys,  
Don't cleave to your wife and home,  
Take the bread from your child's mouth,  
So you can give it to a stranger.

Be the humblest servant of the man  
Who was your bitterest enemy,  
Call the woodland creatures kin,  
And don't ask God for anything.



'I'm not one of those who left their land'

I'm not one of those who left their land  
To the mercy of the enemy.  
I was deaf to their gross flattery.  
I won't grant them my songs.

But to me the exile's always wretched,  
Like a convict, or a patient.  
Wanderer your road is dark,  
And the bread of strangers tastes bitter.

But in the blinding smoke, the flames,  
Destroying the remains of youth,  
We have refused to evade  
A single blow against ourselves.

And we know that in the final reckoning,  
Each hour will stand justified...  
No people on earth shed fewer tears,  
Are simpler, or more filled with pride.

## Dark Dream: 2

You are always new and mysterious,  
I am obedient to you each day.  
But your love, my severe one,  
Is a trial by steel and flame.

I'm forbidden to sing or smile,  
Forbidden long ago to pray.  
But nothing matters now to me  
Except not to part from you!

So, exiled from heaven and earth,  
I no longer sing, yet am still alive,  
As if you barred my errant soul,  
From both hell and paradise.

'Ice, resonant, floats by,'

Ice, resonant, floats by,  
The sky is hopelessly pale,  
Oh, why do you punish me?  
What crime am I guilty of?

If you wish – then murder me,  
But don't be so harsh with me.  
With me you don't want children,  
And you don't like my poetry.

As you would have it, let it be!  
True to my vow, I give my life  
To you. But my sadness  
I'll take to the grave with me.

‘Why do you wander, restless?’

Why do you wander, restless?  
Why stare, unable to breathe?  
Surely you understand, our two  
Souls have been welded as one.

You, you’ll be solaced by me  
In a way no one could dream,  
And when wild words wound –  
It’s you who’ll feel it the most.

'To feel thoroughly ill, to sweat in delirium,'

To feel thoroughly ill, to sweat in delirium,  
To meet everyone known again,  
To roam the broad paths of a sea-side garden,  
Filled with the wind and sun.

Today, even the dead, the exiled,  
Choose to enter my home.  
You are leading a child by the hand,  
I have longed for him so.

I'll eat blue grapes with my dear ones,  
I'll drink the ice cold wine,  
And watch how the grey waterfall drops  
Into moist, flinty depths.

## Lot's Wife

The just man followed God's messenger,  
Vast and bright against the black hill,  
But care spoke in the woman's ear:  
'There's time, you can look back still,

At Sodom's red towers where you were born,  
The square where you sang, where you'd spin,  
The high windows of your dark home,  
Where your children's lives entered in.'

She looked, and was transfixed by pain,  
Unsure whether she could still see,  
Her body had turned to translucent salt,  
Her quick feet rooted there, like a tree.

A loss, but who still mourns the breath  
Of one woman, or laments one wife?  
Though my heart can never forget,  
How, for one look, she gave up her life.

(The reference is to Lot's wife in Genesis 19:26)

'It's fine here: the rustle and crackle;'

It's fine here: the rustle and crackle;  
A hard frost every day,  
On the bush bowed with white fire,  
Icy, dazzling roses.  
And on the formal magnificent snow  
Tracks of skis, like memories,  
Of how, in some far-off century,  
You and I were here, together.

'Ah! You thought I'm the kind too,'

Ah! You thought I'm the kind too,  
To cry 'how could you forget me',  
And praying and sobbing, throw myself  
Under the horses' hooves.

Or that I'd ask the sorceress  
For some enchanted root in water,  
And send you a fatal gift –  
My secretly-scented handkerchief.

I'd rather be damned. Not a look or sigh  
Will reach your accursed soul,  
But I swear by the angelic garden,  
I swear by the miraculous icon,  
And by our nights of fiery passion –  
I'll never return to you.



'Let the organ peal out once more,'

Let the organ peal out once more,  
Like a first spring thunderstorm;  
From behind your bride's shoulder,  
My half-closed eyes will gaze.

Farewell, goodbye, be happy my friend,  
I return you your sweet vow,  
But don't let your passionate one  
See my inimitable ravings –

That would inject a burning venom  
Into your blessed, joyful union...  
And I go to claim a marvellous garden  
Where grass rustles, the Muse declaims.

'A cast-iron fence,'

A cast-iron fence,  
A bed of pine,  
How sweet that I no longer  
Need to be jealous.

A bed's made for me  
With sobbing and prayer;  
Now go wherever on earth  
You wish, God bless you!

Now your ears won't burn  
With frenzied speech,  
Now a candle won't flicker  
Till the dawn.

We've achieved a peace,  
And immaculate days...  
You weep – I'm not worth  
A single one of your tears.

'The bridge of logs is black and twisted,'

The bridge of logs is black and twisted,  
The burdocks stand shoulder high,  
And a thick forest of nettles sings  
Of how the bright sickle will never reap here.  
At evening over the lake there's a sighing,  
And rough moss creeps along the walls.

'There I saw out'

There I saw out  
My twenty-first year,  
Sweet in the mouth  
The dark, sultry honey.

On the twigs I tore  
My white silk dress,  
In the bowed pine,  
The nightingale never rested.

At the cry of convention,  
It flies from its perch,  
Like a woodland spirit,  
Like a tender sister.

Swiftly climbing the hill,  
Swimming over the river,  
Yes, and later,  
Don't tell: leave me be.

‘Yes, I loved those nocturnal gatherings – ’

Yes, I loved those nocturnal gatherings –  
The iced glasses on the little table,  
A fine steam from the black, fragrant coffee,  
The red fire roaring, the winter heat,  
The laughter at caustic literary jokes,  
And a stranger’s gaze, helpless and dreadful.

From: Reed, 1924-1940

*In all five acts, I take the stage.*

*Pasternak*

Inscription On A Book

*For Mikhail Lozinsky*

From an almost after-world shade  
In this hour when worlds collapse,  
Accept this gift of the spring  
In return for the best of gifts,  
So the one beyond the seasons,  
The one enduring, and true,  
The soul's high freedom,  
They call friendship –  
Might smile on me as gently  
As thirty years ago...  
And the grilles of the Summer Garden  
And snowy Leningrad  
Might rise, as in this text,  
From the mist of magic mirrors,  
And over the pensive Lethe  
The reed revived might sing.

## Muse

When I wait, at night, for her to come,  
Life, it seems, hangs by a strand.  
What are honour, youth, freedom,  
Next to the dear guest, flute in hand?

And now she enters, throws aside  
Her veil, gazes deep in my eyes.  
I ask her: 'Was that you, Dante's guide,  
Dictating, in Hell?' She answers: 'I'.



### To An Artist

In every work of yours I find,  
Fruit of your twice-blessed labours,  
Gold of ever-autumnal limes,  
Blue of fresh-created waters.

Think of them, and the lightest slumber  
Leads me into your park already,  
Where each turning seems fearful,  
Seeking your tracks, unconsciously.

Shall I walk beneath this arch, transmuted by  
The movement of your hand, into clear sky,  
In order to cool my shameful heat?...

There I'll be forever blessed  
And my burning eyes find rest,  
There I'll regain the gift, I'll weep.

'Here Puskin's exile began.'

Here Puskin's exile began,  
And Lermontov's ended.  
Here a light fragrance of mountain herbs,  
And once I caught a glimpse  
By the lake, in dense plane-trees' shade,  
In the cruel, evening hour,  
Of shining dissatisfied eyes,  
Of Tamara's immortal lover.

'This city, beloved from childhood,'

This city, beloved from childhood,  
In its December silence,  
Seemed to me today,  
Like my squandered inheritance,

All that came easily to hand,  
All that was easy to give away:  
Burning emotion, the sound of prayer,  
And the blessing of those first songs –

All flew off like transparent smoke,  
Decayed in the mirrors' depths...  
And a faceless fiddler played  
The tune of the dispossessed.

Yet with a stranger's curiosity,  
Enchanted by every novelty,  
I watched the sleds as they raced,  
I listened to my native tongue.

And happiness breathed in my face,  
With a wild and powerful freshness,  
As if some dear friend of old  
Stood here, on the porch, with me.

## Incantation

Through the tall gates,  
From beyond the Okhta marshes,  
On the un-travelled track,  
Through the un-mown meadow,  
Past the cordon of night,  
At the chime of Easter bells,  
Uninvited,  
Un-promised:  
Come; sit to the table with me.

Note: Dated 15th April 1936, the anniversary of Gumilyov's birth.

'Has he sent no boat for me,'

Has he sent no boat for me,  
Not even a black raft, or a swan?  
In the spring of 1916  
He promised he'd soon be here.  
In the spring of 1916  
He said I'd fly like a bird  
Through darkness and death to his bed,  
And brush his shoulder gently with my wings.  
And his eyes still laugh into mine,  
And now it's the sixteenth spring.  
What will I do? The angel of night  
Speaks with me till the dawn.

Note: Dated February 1936. Gumilyov was executed in the spring of 1921.

‘Some gaze into tender faces,’

Some gaze into tender faces,  
Others drink till the dawn sun,  
But I speak all night  
With my indomitable conscience.

I say: ‘I’ve carried your heavy burden  
For you know how many years.’  
But conscience exists beyond time,  
In a world that’s beyond space.

Once again, the black, Carnival night.  
The sinister park, the horse’s slow pace,  
And a wind filled with joy and happiness  
Swooping on me from heaven’s height.

And over me peacefully, a twin-horned  
Witness stands... There, oh, there,  
On the ancient road below the Caprice,  
Where there’s dead water, swans.

Pasternak

Oh, he who compared himself to the eye of a horse,  
Peers, looks, sees, recognises,  
And suddenly ice pines away,  
Puddles shine like melted diamonds.

The backyards drowse in a lilac haze,  
With platforms, logs, leaves, clouds.  
The engine's whistle, the crunch of melon rind,  
In a perfumed glove, a timid hand...

It rings, thunders, grates, breaks like surf,  
And suddenly there's silence. This means  
He's stepping softly on pine-needles,  
So as not to trouble the light sleep of space.

It means he's counting the grains  
From bare stalks, it means,  
He's reached dark accursed Darya's Gorge,  
Back to the tomb, from some other funeral.

And once more Moscow tedium burns,  
Far off a fatal sleigh-bell chimes...  
Someone is lost two steps from the house,  
Up to their waist in snow, all ways blocked.

For seeing smoke as like to the Laocoön,  
For making a song of graveyard thistles,  
For filling the world with the fresh sound  
Of his poetry echoing in unknown space –

He was granted a kind of eternal childhood,  
His generosity, his keen sight shone.  
The whole earth was his inheritance,  
And so he shared it with everyone.

Voronezh

For Osip Mandelshtam

And the town is frozen solid in a vice,  
Trees, walls, snow, beneath the glass.  
Over crystal, on slippery tracks of ice,  
Painted sleighs and I, together, pass.  
And over St Peter's poplars, crows  
A pale green dome there that glows,  
Dim in sun-shrouded dust.  
The field of heroes lingers in my thought,  
Kulikovo's barbarian battleground caught.  
Frozen poplars, like glasses for a toast,  
Clash now, more noisily, overhead.  
As though at our wedding, and the crowd  
Drinking our health and happiness.  
But Fear and the Muse take turns to guard  
The room where the exiled poet is banished,  
And the night, marching at full pace,  
Of approaching dawn, has no knowledge.

Note: The field of Kulikovo was the scene of a famous battle against the Tartar Horde in 1378. Mandelshtam was exiled for a time to Voronezh, south of Moscow on the River Don.



Dante

*...del mio bel San Giovanni.*

*Dante Alighieri: Inferno XIX:17*

Even after his death, he did not return  
To his ancient Florence.  
To he who leaving never looked back,  
I sing this song.  
Torches, night, a last embrace,  
Beyond the threshold the wild howl of fate.  
From hell he sent his curses to her,  
In paradise could not forget her –  
But he never walked in a hair-shirt  
Barefoot, with a lighted candle,  
Through that city –beloved,  
Perfidious, base, and longed for...

Cleopatra

*Alexandria's palaces  
Covered with sweet shadows.*

*Pushkin*

She has already kissed Antony's dead lips,  
Already wept on her knees before Augustus...  
And her servants have betrayed her. Trumpets  
Cry below Roman eagles, the gloom of dusk.

Noble and stately, stammering with confusion  
Now enters the last prisoner of her beauty,  
'You – like a slave...will be led in triumph before him...'  
But her swanlike neck still bends peacefully.

Tomorrow, her children. O, what littleness  
Is left to do on earth – only toy with this fool,  
And, indifferently, like a parting kindness,  
Lay the black snake to her dark breast too.

Willow

*And a worn-out cluster of trees.*

*Pushkin*

In the cool nursery of the young century,  
I was born to a patterned tranquility,  
The voice of man was not sweet to me,  
But the wind's voice I could understand.  
I loved burdocks and nettles,  
But the silver willow best of all.  
And, obligingly, all my life it lived  
With me, and its weeping branches  
Fanned my insomnia, with dreams.  
But – strangely – I've outlived it.  
There's a stump, with strange voices,  
Other willows are conversing,  
Under these, under our skies.  
I'm silent...as if a brother had died.

'When someone dies'

When someone dies  
Their portraits change.  
The eyes gaze at you otherwise.  
The lips smile a different smile.  
I noticed this returning  
From a certain poet's funeral.  
Since then I've seen it frequently,  
And my theory's proved true.

## Parting

I

Not weeks, not months we spent – but years  
Parting. And now at last  
The chill of real freedom,  
And the grey wreath over the brow.  
No more treason or betrayal,  
And you'll not listen till the dawn  
To my flow of evidence,  
To my tale of perfect innocence.

II

And as ever in the days of final separation,  
The ghost of our first days knocked at the door,  
And in burst the silver willow  
In a grey magnificence of branches.

To us, the frenzied, scornful, bitter,  
Not daring to lift our eyes from the ground,  
A bird sang in a blissful voice,  
Of how we cherished one another.

III The Last Toast

I drink to our ruined house,  
To all of life's evils too,  
To our mutual loneliness,  
And I, I drink to you –  
To eyes, dead and cold,  
To lips, lying and treacherous,  
To the age, coarse, and cruel,  
To the fact no god has saved us.

From: *The Seventh Book*, 1936-64

*The seventh misty veil fell –  
The one followed by spring.*

*Tatyana Kazanskaya*

From – Secrets of the Trade: I Creation

It is like this, a kind of languor,  
The endless chiming of a clock,  
The distant dying peal of thunder.  
Somehow I sense the sorrow, the groans  
Of unknown, captive voices,  
A kind of hidden circle tightens;  
Yet in the depths of whispers, chimes,  
One victorious song rises,  
Surrounded by such perfect silence,  
You can hear grass grow in the forest,  
Hear how misery tramps the earth...  
But now words come to the ear,  
The tinkling signal of light rhymes –  
Then I begin to understand:  
And the simple dictated lines  
Take their place on the snowy page.

From – Secrets of the Trade: VII Epigram

Could Beatrice have written like Dante;  
Or Laura have glorified love's flame?  
I taught women how to utter....  
But Lord, how to silence them again!



Shade

*'What does a certain woman know  
Of the hour of her death?'*

*Mandelstam*

Tallest, most suave of us, why Memory,  
Forcing you to appear from the past, pass  
Down a train, swaying, to find me  
Clear profiled through the window-glass?  
Angel or bird? How we debated!  
The poet thought you translucent straw.  
Through dark lashes, your eyes, Georgian,  
Looked out, with gentleness, on it all.  
Shade, forgive. Blue skies, Flaubert,  
Insomnia, late-blooming lilac flower,  
Bring you, and the magnificence of the year,  
Nineteen-thirteen, to mind, and your  
Unclouded temperate afternoon, memory  
Difficult for me now – Oh, shade!

Nox (Night)

Little 'Nox'  
With your sleepless owl,  
Wreathed in stars,  
And funereal poppies! ...  
Little daughter, whom we hid  
Beneath the garden soil!  
Empty are the Dionysian beakers,  
The love-gaze dim with tears...  
While above our city now,  
Your dreaded sisters pass.

Note: The statue of Night in the Summer Garden was preserved during hostilities by burying it in the soil near its base.

'The souls of those I love are on high stars.'

The souls of those I love are on high stars.  
How good that there's no-one left to lose  
And one can weep. All created in order  
To sing songs, this air of Tsarskoye Selo's.

The river bank's silver willow  
Touches the bright September stream.  
Rising from the past, my shadow  
Is running in silence to meet me.

So many lyres hung on branches here,  
But it seems there's room for mine too.  
And this shower, sun-drenched, rare,  
Brings me consolation, good news.

## Two Poems

### I

Desolate the victories  
Of mysterious non-meeting,  
Phrases unspoken,  
Voiceless words.  
Un-meaning glances  
Not knowing where to rest:  
And tears alone are glad  
To go on flowing.  
Wild roses, ah, near Moscow  
Are in it! Who knows why...  
And all this will be called  
Immortal passion.

II

*'You are with me again, Autumn, my friend!'*

*Annensky*

Others in the south may still linger,  
Basking in the paradise garden.  
Here it's northerly, and this year  
For my friend I've chosen autumn.  
I've brought here the blessed memory  
Of my last non-meeting with you –  
The pure flame of my victory  
Over fate, so cold, so pure.

## Fragment

And it seemed to me those fires  
Were about me till dawn.  
And I never learnt –  
The colour of those eyes.

Everything was trembling, singing;  
Were you my friend or enemy,  
And winter was it, or summer?

Portrait On A Book of Poetry

It's not sombre or funereal,  
It's nearly as transparent as smoke,  
This newlywed's obsolete  
Filmy, black and white hat.  
And the aquiline profile beneath,  
The satin of Parisian bangs,  
And an eye, oblong and green,  
And an eye, sharp and intense.

'Fumbling in black memory you'll find'

Fumbling in black memory you'll find  
Those same long gloves,  
A Petersburg night. And the air,  
Close and sweet, of some dark box.

And a wind from the gulf. And there,  
Between the lines, the cries on-stage,  
Blok smiling scornfully at you,  
He, the tragic tenor of his age.



In Memory Of The Poet

*Echo answers like a bird.*

*Pasternak*

The inimitable voice ceased yesterday,  
He's abandoned us, the talker with groves.  
He's become the life-giving ear of grain,  
Or the softest rain of which he sang.  
And all the flowers of this world,  
Blossomed to signify his death.  
And suddenly it's quiet on this planet  
That bears the humble name of...Earth.

Sketch

*O Muse of Tears...*

*Tsvetaeva*

...I turned away from everything,  
From earth's every blessing.  
The stump in the water became  
The guardian spirit of this place.

We are akin to guests on this planet,  
To live – is simply a habit.  
In the air I seem to hear  
Two voices exchanging thought.

Two? ...But by the eastern wall,  
Among its tangle of raspberries,  
There's a branch of elder, fresh and dark.  
Ah! It's a message from Marina.

‘This remorseless black separation’

‘This remorseless black separation’  
I bear equally with you.  
Why cry? Rather, give me your hand,  
Promise to visit me in dream.  
You and I – are like two mountains.  
You and I – not meeting in this world.  
If only sometimes, at midnight,  
You’d send me a greeting through the stars.

In Memory of Valeriya Sreznevskaya

Almost, it cannot be: you were always there:  
In the shade of blessed lime-trees, the hospital, the siege,  
The prison-cell, and where there were evil birds,  
Copious grasses, dreadful tides.  
How all has changed, yet you were always there,  
And it seems they have taken half my soul,  
The half that was you –by which I knew  
Why both existed. And now, I have forgotten...  
Yet your clear voice calls out to me, and tells me  
Not to grieve, but wait for death as for a miracle.  
What can I do! I'll try.

In Memory of Mikhail Bulgakov

This I give you, instead of graveyard roses,  
Instead of burning sticks of incense:  
You died as staunchly as you lived,  
With that magnificent disdain.  
You drank wine and joked, the wittiest,  
Though suffocating behind stifling walls,  
You yourself let in the dreaded guest,  
And stayed with her all alone.  
Now you're gone. There's no more talk  
Of your noble and sorrowful life.  
Only, at your silent funeral,  
My voice, like a flute, sounds out.  
Oh, who would have believed that I,  
Thrown to smoulder on a slow fire,  
I, the half-mad mourner of buried days,  
Who have lost and forgotten everything –  
Would commemorate one so full of strength,  
And purpose, and splendid schemes,  
Who spoke to me, but yesterday it seems,  
Hiding the tremor of your mortal illness.

Teacher – In Memory of Innokenty Annensky

And the one whom I think of as the teacher  
Passed like a shade and left no shadow.  
He drank all the torpor, all the poison,  
And waited himself in vain for fame.  
He who was the omen, and the portent,  
Had compassion for all, breathed their torment,  
He himself, endlessly suffocated.....

For Osip Mandelstam

I bow to them as if over a cup,  
Those innumerable precious lines –  
This is the black, tender news  
Of our youth stained with blood.

The air is the air I breathed  
That night above the abyss,  
That night of iron emptiness,  
When all calls and cries were vain.

How rich the scent of carnations,  
That came to me once in dream –  
There where Eurydice circles,  
The bull bears Europa through the foam.

Here the shades go flowing by,  
Over the Neva, the Neva, the Neva,  
The Neva that splashes on the stairs –  
And here's your pass to immortality.

Here are the keys to that place,  
About which there's never a word...  
Here's the sound of the mysterious lyre,  
Guest in the meadow beyond this world.

A Belated Reply

*My white-fingered one, my dark princess.*

*Marina Tsvetaeva*

My double and my jester, unseen,  
You who hide at the heart of bushes,  
Who nestle in the house of the stare,  
Who flit among cemetery crosses.  
Who call from the Marinkina Tower:  
'Here I am, I'm home today.  
Cherish me, my own fields,  
Because of everything I suffered.  
My loved ones lost in the abyss,  
My native country despoiled.'  
Today we are together, Marina,  
Crossing the midnight capital,  
With all those millions behind us,  
And never a more voiceless crew,  
Walking to the sound of funeral bells,  
And to the savage, Moscow moaning  
Of wind and snow, erasing our steps.



## Thunder

There will be thunder then. Remember me.  
Say: 'She asked for storms.' This entire  
World will be the colour of crimson stone,  
And your heart, as then, will turn to fire.

That day, in Moscow, a true prophecy,  
When for the last time I say goodbye,  
Soaring to the heavens I longed to see,  
Leaving my shadow here in the sky.

## Requiem

*No, not under a foreign sky,  
No not cradled by foreign wings –  
Then I was with my people, I,  
With my people, there, sorrowing.*

*1961*

## Instead of a Preface

In the dreadful years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen Months in prison queues in Leningrad. One day someone 'Identified' me. Then a woman standing behind me, blue with Cold, who of course had never heard my name, woke from That trance characteristic of us all and asked in my ear (there, Everyone spoke in whispers):

– Ah, can you describe this?

And I said:

I can.

Then something like a tormented smile passed over what had Once been her face.

*1st April 1957*

Note: Nikolai Yezhov as head of the NKVD from 1936 instituted a savage purge, akin to the Cultural Revolution in China, involving denunciations and show trials. He was in turn denounced in 1938 by Molotov, executed, and replaced by Beria. People in the Soviet Union came to call the Great Terror: *Yezhovshchina* (the time of Yezhov).

## Dedication

Before this sorrow mountains bow,  
The vast river's ceased to flow,  
The ever-strong prison bolts  
Hold the 'convict crews' now,  
Abandoned to deathly longing.  
For someone the sun glows red,  
For someone the wind blows fresh –  
But we know none of that, instead  
We only hear the soldier's tread,  
Keys scraping against our flesh.  
Rising as though for early mass,  
Through the city of beasts we sped,  
There met, breathless as the dead,  
Sun low, a mistier Neva. Far ahead,  
Hope singing still, as we passed.  
Sentence given...tears pour out,  
She thought she knew all separation,  
In pain, blood driven from the heart,  
As if she's hurled to earth, apart,  
Yet walks...staggers...is in motion...  
Where now my chance-met friends  
Of those two years satanic flight?  
What Siberian storms do they resist,  
And in what frosted lunar orb exist?  
To them it is I send my farewell cry.

*March 1940*

## Prologue

Those days, when only the dead  
Smiled, glad to be at peace,  
And Leningrad, unneeded, swayed,  
Throwing wide its penitentiary.  
When legions of the condemned,  
Maddened by torment, passed,  
Brief the songs of parting then,  
The locomotives' farewell blast,  
Dead stars hung above us,  
And blameless Russia writhed  
Under boots stained with blood,  
And the Black Marias' tyres.

1.

They took you away at dawn,  
As though at a wake, I followed,  
In the dark room weeping children,  
Among icons, the candle guttered.  
On your lips, the chill of a cross,  
On your brow a deathly pall.  
I'll be, like a woman to be shot,  
Dragged to the Kremlin wall.

*1935.*

2.

Quiet flows the silent Don,  
Yellow moonlight fills the home.

Fills it, and falls askance,  
Yellow moon-ghost in its glance.

A woman there it is, makes moan,  
A woman there, she lies alone,

Son in chains, husband clay,  
Pray for her, O pray.

3.

No it is not I, someone else is suffering.  
I could not have borne it otherwise, all that's happening,  
Let them grant to it a dark covering,  
And let them take away the glittering...  
Night.

4.

They should have shown you, little teaser,  
Little favourite, friend of all,  
Sylvan princess, happy charmer,  
What situation would be yours –  
As three-hundredth in the line  
You'd stand, beneath the cross,  
And let your tears' hot brine  
Burn through New Year's ice.  
See the prison poplars sway,  
Without a sound – oh what a crowd  
Of innocent lives all end today...



Seventeen months I've pleaded  
For you to come home.  
Flung myself at the hangman's feet,  
My terror, oh my son.  
And I can't understand,  
Now all's eternal confusion,  
Who's beast, and who's man,  
How long till execution.  
And only flowers of dust,  
Ringing of censers, tracks just  
Running somewhere, nowhere, far.  
And deep in my eyes gazing,  
Swift, fatal, threatening,  
One enormous star.

6.

Lightly the weeks fly, too,  
What's happened I can't understand.  
Just as, my darling child, in prison,  
White nights gazed at you,  
So now again they gaze,  
Hawk-eyed, passionate-eyed,  
And of your cross on high,  
Of death, they speak today.

*1939.*

## 7. The Sentencing

It has fallen, the word of stone  
On my living breast, now.  
No matter, I was prepared, you know,  
I'll get by, somehow.

I've things to do today:  
I must crush memory down,  
I must turn my heart to stone,  
I must try living, again.

And then...Hot summer whispers,  
As if for a Black Sea holiday.  
Long, long ago, I foresaw this  
This empty house, this shining day.

*Summer, 1939.*

## 8. To Death

You'll come regardless – why not today?  
I await you – life is very hard.  
I've killed the lights, cleared the way  
For you, so simple, such a marvel.  
Take on any shape you wish,  
Burst in like a poisoned shell,  
Sidle in like a slick bandit,  
Or a typhus germ from hell.  
Or a fairy-tale you've invented,  
Always sickeningly familiar –  
Where I see policemen's heads,  
And a concierge white with fear.  
It's all one now. The Yenisey swirling,  
While the Pole star's alight.  
And in final terror closing  
Blessed eyes, blue and bright.

*19th August 1939  
The House on the Fontanka,  
Leningrad.*

9.

Already madness hovers  
Obscuring half my mind,  
I drink its wine: its fires  
Bring on darkness, blind.

I realise, I must yield,  
The victory to it now,  
Must listen to it speak,  
Strange fever on my brow.

And I must take nothing  
With me that's my own  
(How I am begging,  
How I am disowned!):

Not my son's fearful eyes –  
Suffering, turned to stone,  
Not the day that storms rise,  
Nor the prison meeting-room,

Nor the blessed cool of his hands,  
The lime-trees' shady agitation,  
Nor the slender distant sounds  
Of his final consolation.

*4th May 1940*  
*The House on the Fontanka.*

10. Crucifixion.

*‘Mother, do not weep for me,  
Who am in the grave.’*

I

Angelic choirs, the mighty hour of glory,  
And heaven confused in the fiery deep.  
To the Father: ‘Why hast thou forsaken me!’  
But to the Mother: ‘O, do not weep...’

II

Magdalene beat her breast and wept,  
The beloved disciple turned to stone,  
But there, no one dared, no one looked  
Where the Mother stood, still, and alone.

*1940-1943*

## Epilogue

### I

I learned to know how faces fall apart,  
How fear, beneath the eye-lids, seeks,  
How strict the cutting blade, the art  
That suffering etches in the cheeks.  
How the black, the ash-blond hair,  
In an instant turned to silver,  
Learned how submissive lips fared,  
Learned terror's dry racking laughter.  
Not only for myself I pray,  
But for all who stood there, all,  
In bitter cold, or burning July day,  
Beneath that red, blind prison wall.

### II

Once more, the remembered hour draws near.  
I see you, I feel you, and I hear:

You, they could barely carry into line,  
And you, whom earth claimed before your time,

And you, who shook your lovely head of hair,  
Saying: 'As if this were home, I'm here'.

I'd like to summon you all by name,  
But the lists are lost, un-found again.

I've woven a great shroud for them here,  
Out of poor words I chanced to overhear.

Remembering them always, everywhere,  
Unforgotten in every new terror's care,

And if they shut my tormented lips, shut my  
Mouth, where a hundred million people cry,

Let them still remember me, today,  
On the eve of my remembrance day.

And if ever in this my native country  
They choose to erect a statue for me,

I agree to that ceremonial honour,  
But on one condition – don't set it there

Beside the sea-shore, where I was born:  
My last ties with it so long outworn,

Nor in the Imperial Garden, by that dead tree  
Where an inconsolable shade looks for me,

But here, where I stood three hundred hours,  
Where no one ever opened the doors,

Lest I forget in death's blessed oblivion  
The Black Maria's screaming hum,

Forget the terrible clang, the gates that hail  
Like a wounded beast, the old woman's wail.

And from my eyelids, bronze, unmoving,  
May snowflakes fall, like tears melting,

And the prison pigeons coo far from me,  
And, on the Neva, ships sail, silently.

*March, 1940*



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So many stones are thrown at me.....	48
My voice is weak but not my will,.....	49
The sky's blue lacquer grows dim, .....	50
Oh, and the day was cold, .....	51
There's a secret border in human closeness,.....	52
To lose the freshness of speech, the simplicity of feeling, .....	53
Such strange words .....	54
How can you bear to view the Neva, .....	55
The road by the seaside garden darkens,.....	56
Like one betrothed I receive.....	57
Because somewhere there's simplicity and light,.....	58
'If we can only reach the shore, .....	59
I rarely think of you now,.....	60
Already the maple leaves .....	61
Drowsiness returns me .....	62
All I see is hilly Pavlovsk,.....	63
Why pretend to be .....	64
I'll be there and weariness will vanish.....	65
The evening light is broad and yellow, .....	66
I don't know if you're alive or dead – .....	67
I'll erase this day from your memory,.....	68
Is my destiny so changed, .....	69
Like a white stone in a well's depths, .....	70
I was not born too early or too late, .....	71
It was not mystery or grief, .....	72
How I loved, and love, to look.....	73
I asked the cuckoo: .....	75
Earthly fame is smoke,.....	76
I hear the oriole's ever-mournful voice,.....	77
Is this century really worse than those before? .....	78
You should appear less often in my dreams, .....	79
No one sung about that meeting,.....	80
Now no one will listen to my songs.....	81
A string of little beads at my neck, .....	82
Now farewell, capital, .....	83

Caged in this savage capital, .....	85
Everything's looted, betrayed and traded, .....	86
White churches there, and bright crackling ice,.....	87
Don't taunt your heart with earthly joys, .....	88
I'm not one of those who left their land.....	89
You are always new and mysterious,.....	90
Ice, resonant, floats by, .....	91
Why do you wander, restless?.....	92
To feel thoroughly ill, to sweat in delirium, .....	93
The just man followed God's messenger,.....	94
It's fine here: the rustle and crackle;.....	95
Ah! You thought I'm the kind too, .....	96
Let the organ peal out once more,.....	97
A cast-iron fence, .....	98
The bridge of logs is black and twisted,.....	99
There I saw out.....	100
Yes, I loved those nocturnal gatherings – .....	101
From an almost after-world shade .....	103
When I wait, at night, for her to come, .....	104
In every work of yours I find, .....	105
Here Puskin's exile began, .....	106
This city, beloved from childhood, .....	107
Through the tall gates,.....	108
Has he sent no boat for me, .....	109
Some gaze into tender faces,.....	110
Oh, he who compared himself to the eye of a horse,.....	111
And the town is frozen solid in a vice,.....	112
Even after his death, he did not return .....	113
She has already kissed Antony's dead lips, .....	114
In the cool nursery of the young century, .....	115
Not weeks, not months we spent – but years .....	117
It is like this, a kind of languor, .....	119
Tallest, most suave of us, why Memory, .....	121
Little 'Nox' .....	122
The souls of those I love are on high stars.....	123
Desolate the victories .....	124
Others in the south may still linger, .....	125

And it seemed to me those fires .....	126
It's not sombre or funereal, .....	127
Fumbling in black memory you'll find .....	128
The inimitable voice ceased yesterday,.....	129
...I turned away from everything,.....	130
'This remorseless black separation' .....	131
This I give you, instead of graveyard roses, .....	133
And the one whom I think of as the teacher .....	134
I bow to them as if over a cup,.....	135
My double and my jester, unseen,.....	136
There will be thunder then. Remember me.....	137
Before this sorrow mountains bow, .....	139
Those days, when only the dead .....	140
They took you away at dawn, .....	141
Quiet flows the silent Don,.....	142
No it is not I, someone else is suffering.....	143
They should have shown you, little teaser,.....	144
Seventeen months I've pleaded.....	145
Lightly the weeks fly, too,.....	146
It has fallen, the word of stone .....	147
You'll come regardless – why not today?.....	148
Already madness hovers .....	149
Angelic choirs, the mighty hour of glory,.....	150
I learned to know how faces fall apart, .....	151
Once more, the remembered hour draws near. ....	151

