Classic Poetry Series

Anna Akhmatova

- poems -

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Anna Akhmatova (June 23 1889 – March 5, 1966)

Anna Andreyevna Gorenko, better known by the pen name Anna Akhmatova, was a Russian and Soviet modernist poet, one of the most acclaimed writers in the Russian canon.

Akhmatova's work ranges from short lyric poems to intricately structured cycles, such as Requiem (1935–40), her tragic masterpiece about the Stalinist terror. Her style, characterised by its economy and emotional restraint, was strikingly original and distinctive to her contemporaries. The strong and clear leading female voice struck a new chord in Russian poetry. Her writing can be said to fall into two periods - the early work (1912–25) and her later work (from around 1936 until her death), divided by a decade of reduced literary output. Her work was condemned and censored by Stalinist authorities and she is notable for choosing not to emigrate, and remaining in Russia, acting as witness to the atrocities around her. Her perennial themes include meditations on time and memory, and the difficulties of living and writing in the shadow of Stalinism.

Primary sources of information about Akhmatova's life are relatively scant, as war, revolution and the totalitarian regime caused much of the written record to be destroyed. For long periods she was in official disfavour and many of those who were close to her died in the aftermath of the revolution.

Early life and family

Akhmatova was born at Bolshoy Fontan, near the Black Sea port of Odessa. Her father, Andrey Antonovich Gorenko, a civil servant, and her mother, Inna Erazmovna Stogova, were both descended from the Russian nobility. Akhmatova wrote,

"No one in my large family wrote poetry. But the first Russian woman poet, Anna Bunina, was the aunt of my grandfather Erasm Ivanovich Stogov. The Stogovs were modest landowners in the Mozhaisk region of the Moscow Province. They were moved here after the insurrection during the time of Posadnitsa Marfa. In Novgorod they had been a wealthier and more distinguished family. Khan Akhmat, my ancestor, was killed one night in his tent by a Russian killer-for-hire. Karamzin tells us that this marked the end of the Mongol yoke on Russia. [...] It was well known that this Akhmat was a descendant of Genghiz Khan. In the eighteenth century, one of the Akhmatov Princesses - Praskovia Yegorvna - married the rich and famous Simbirsk landowner Motovilov. Yegor Motovilov was my great-grandfather; his daughter, Anna Yegorovna, was my grandmother. She died when my mother was nine years old, and I was named in her honour. Several diamond rings and one emerald were made from her brooch. Though my fingers are

thin, still her thimble didn't fit me."

Her family moved north to Tsarskoye Selo, near St. Petersburg when she was eleven months old. The family lived in a house on the corner of Shirokaya Street and Bezymyanny Lane; (the building is no longer there today), spending summers from age 7 to 13 in a dacha near Sevastopol. She studied at the Mariinskaya High School, moving to Kiev (1906–10) and finished her schooling there, after her parents separated in 1905. She went on to study law at Kiev University, leaving a year later to study literature in St Petersburg.

Akhmatova started writing poetry at the age of 11, and published in her late teens, inspired by the poets Nikolay Nekrasov, Racine, Pushkin, Baratynsky and the Symbolists however none of her juvenilia survives. Her sister Inna also wrote poetry though she did not pursue the practice and married shortly after high school. Akhmatova's father did not want to see any verses printed under his "respectable" name, so she chose to adopt her grandmother's distinctly Tatar surname 'Akhmatova' as a pen name.

She met the young poet, Nilolai Gumilev on Christmas Eve 1903, who encouraged her to write and pursued her intensely, making numerous marriage proposals from 1905. At 17 years old, in his journal Sirius, she published her first poem which could be translated as On his hand are many shiny rings, (1907) signing it ‘Anna G.’ She soon became known in St Petersburg's artistic circles, regularly giving public readings. That year, she wrote unenthusiastically to a friend, “He has loved me for three years now, and I believe that it is my fate to be his wife. Whether or not I love him, I do not know, but it seems to me that I do.” She married Gumilev in Kiev in April 1910, however none of Akhmatova’s family attended the wedding. The couple honeymooned in Paris, and there she met and befriended the Italian artist Modigliani.

In late 1910, she came together with poets such Osip Mandelstam and Sergey Gorodetsky to form the Guild of Poets. It promoted the idea of craft as the key to poetry rather than inspiration or mystery, taking themes of the concrete rather than the more ephemeral world of the Symbolists. Over time, they developed the influential Acmeist anti-symbolist school, concurrent with the growth of Imagism in Europe and America. From the first year of their marriage, Gumilyov began to chafe against its constraints. She wrote that he had "lost his passion" for her and by the end of that year he left on a six month trip to Africa. Akhmatova had "her first taste of fame", becoming renowned, not so much for her beauty, as her intense magnetism and allure, attracting the fascinated attention of a great many men, including the great and the good. She returned to visit Modigliani in Paris, where he created at least 20 paintings of her, including several nudes. She later began an affair with the celebrated Acmeist poet Osip Mandelstam, whose wife, Nadezhda, declared later, in her autobiography that she came to forgive Akhmatova for it in time. Akhmatova's son, Lev, was born in 1912, and would go on to become a renowned Neo-Eurasianist historian.

Silver Age

In 1912, the Guild of Poets published her book of verse Evening (Vecher) - the first of five in nine years. The small edition of 500 copies quickly sold out and she received around a dozen positive notices in the literary press. She exercised a strong selectivity for the pieces - including only 35 of the 200 poems she had written by the end of 1911. (She noted that Song of the Last Meeting, dated 29 September 1911, was her 200th poem). The book secured her reputation as a new and striking young writer, the poems Grey-eyed king, In the Forest, Over the Water and I don’t need my legs anymore making her famous. She later wrote "These naïve poems by a frivolous girl for some reason were reprinted thirteen times [...] And they came out in several translations. The girl herself (as far as I recall) did not foresee such a fate for them and used to hide the issues of the journals in which they were

first published under the sofa cushions".

Her second collection, The Rosary (or Beads - Chetki) appeared in March 1914 and firmly established her as one of the most popular and sought after poets of the day.Thousands of women composed poems "in honour of Akhmatova", mimicking her style and prompting Akhmatova to exclaim: "I taught our women how to speak, but don't know how to make them silent". Her aristocratic manners and artistic integrity won her the titles "Queen of the Neva" and "Soul of the Silver Age," as the period came to be known in the history of Russian poetry. In Poem Without a Hero, the longest and one of the best known of her works, written many decades later, she would recall this as a blessed time of her life. She became close friends with Boris Pasternak (who, though married, proposed to her many times) and rumours began to circulate that she was having an affair with influential lyrical poet Aleksandr Blok. In July 1914, Akhmatova wrote “Frightening times are approaching/ Soon fresh graves will cover the land"; on August 1, Germany declared war on Russia, marking the start of "the dark storm" of world war, civil war, revolution and totalitarian repression for Russia. The Silver Age came to a close.

Akhmatova had a relationship with the mosaic artist and poet Boris Anrep; many of her poems in the period are about him and he in turn created mosaics in which she features. She selected poems for her third collection Belaya Staya (White Flock) in 1917, a volume which poet and critic Joseph Brodsky later described as writing of personal lyricism tinged with the “note of controlled terror”.She later came to be memorialised by his description of her as "the keening muse". Essayist John Bayley describes her writing at this time as "grim, spare and laconic". In February 1917, the revolution started in Petersburg (then named Petrograd); soldiers fired on marching protestors, and others mutinied. They looked to a past in which the future was "rotting". In a city without electricity or sewage service, with little water or food, they faced starvation and sickness. Her friends died around her and others left in droves for safer havens in Europe and America, including Anrep, who escaped to England. She had the option to leave, and considered it for a time, but chose to stay and was proud of her decision to remain.That summer she wrote:

<I>You are a traitor, and for a green island,

Have betrayed, yes, betrayed your native

Land,

Abandoned all our songs and sacred

Icons,

And the pine tree over a quiet lake. </I>

She wrote of her own temptation to leave:

A voice came to me. It called out comfortingly.

It said, "Come here,

Leave your deaf and sinful land,

Leave Russia forever,

I will wash the blood from your hands,

Root out the black shame from your heart,

[...] calmly and indifferently,

I covered my ears with my hands,

So that my sorrowing spint

Would not be stained by those shameful words.

At the height of Akhmatova's fame, in 1918, she divorced her husband and that same year, though many of her friends considered it a mistake, Akhmatova married prominent Assyriologist and poet Vladimir Shilejko.She later said “I felt so filthy. I thought it would be like a cleansing, like going to a convent, knowing you are going to lose your freedom.” She began affairs with theatre director Mikhail Zimmerman and composer Arthur Lourié, who set many of her poems to music.

The accursed years

In 1921, Akhmatova's former husband Nikolay Gumilyov was prosecuted for his alleged role in a monarchist anti-Bolshevik conspiracy and on 25 August was shot along with 61 others. According to the historian Rayfield, the murder of Gumilev was part of the state response to the Kronstadt Rebellion. The Cheka (secret police) blamed the rebellion on Petrograd's intellectuals, prompting the senior Cheka officer Agranov to forcibly extract the names of 'conspirators', from an imprisoned professor, guaranteeing them amnesty from execution. Agranov then pronounced death sentences on a large number of them, including Gumilev. Gorky and others appealed, but by the time Lenin agreed to several pardons, the condemned had been shot. Within a few days of his death, Akhmatova wrote:

Terror fingers all things in the dark,

Leads moonlight to the axe.

There's an ominous knock behind the

wall:

A ghost, a thief or a rat...

The murders had a powerful effect on the Russian intelligentsia, destroying the Acmeist poetry group, and placing a stigma on Akhmatova and her son Lev (by Gumilev). Lev's later arrest in the purges and terrors of the 1930s were based on being his father's son. From a new Marxist perspective, Akhmatova's poetry was deemed to represent an introspective "bourgeois aesthetic", reflecting only trivial "female" preoccupations, not in keeping with these new revolutionary politics of the time. She was roundly attacked by the state, by former supporters and friends, and seen to be an anachronism. During what she termed "The Vegetarian Years", Akhmatova's work was unofficially banned by a party resolution of 1925 and she found it hard to publish, though she didn't stop writing poetry. She made acclaimed translations of works by Victor Hugo, Rabindranath Tagore, Giacomo Leopardi and pursued academic work on Pushkin and Dostoyevsky. She worked as a critic and essayist, though many critics and readers both within and outside USSR concluded she had died. She had little food and almost no money; her son was denied access to study at academic institutions by dint of his parents' alleged anti-state activities. The impact of the nation-wide repression and purges had a decimating effect on her St Petersburg circle of friends, artists and intellectuals. Her close friend and fellow poet Mandelstam was deported and then sentenced to a Gulag labour camp, where he would die. Akhmatova narrowly escaped arrest, though her son Lev was imprisoned on numerous occasions by the Stalinist regime, accused of counter-revolutionary activity. She would often queue for hours to deliver him food packages and plead on his behalf. She describes standing outside a stone prison:

"One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman, with lips blue from cold, who had, of course, never heard me called

by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper (everyone whispered there):

" 'Can you describe this?'

"And I said: 'I can.'

"Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face."

Akhmatova wrote that by 1935 every time she went to see someone off at the train station as they went into exile, she'd find herself greeting friends at every step as so many of St Petersburg's intellectual and cultural figures would be leaving on the same train. In her poetry circles Mayakovsky and Esenin committed suicide and Akhmatova's sister poet Marina Tsvetaeva would follow them in 1941, after returning from exile.

Akhmatova married an art scholar and lifelong friend, Nikolai Punin, whom she stayed with until 1935. He too was repeatedly taken into custody and died in the Gulag in 1953. Her tragic cycle Requiem documents her personal experience of this time; as she writes, "one hundred million voices shout" through her "tortured mouth".

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?

From 1939: The thaw

In 1939, Stalin approved the publication of one volume of poetry, From Six Books, however the collection was withdrawn and pulped after only a few months. In 1993, it was revealed that the authorities had bugged her flat and kept her under constant surveillance, keeping detailed files on her from this time, accruing some 900 pages of "denunciations, reports of phone taps, quotations from writings, confessions of those close to her". Although officially stifled, Akhmatova's work continued to circulate in secret (samizdat), her work hidden, passed and read in the gulags.Akhmatova's close friend and chronicler Lydia Chukovskaya described how writers working to keep poetic messages alive used various strategies. A small trusted circle would, for example, memorise each others' works and circulate them only by oral means. She tells how Akhmatova would write out her poem for a visitor on a scrap of paper to be read in a moment, then burnt in her stove. The poems were carefully disseminated in this way, however it is likely that many complied in this manner were lost. "It was like a ritual," Chukovskaya wrote. "Hands, matches, an ashtray. A ritual beautiful and bitter."

During World War II, Akhmatova witnessed the 900 day Siege of Leningrad (now St Petersburg). In 1940, Akhmatova started her Poem without a Hero, finishing a first draft in Tashkent, but working on "The Poem" for twenty years and considering it to be the major work of her life, dedicating it to "the memory of its first audience - my friends and fellow citizens who perished in Leningrad during the siege". She was evacuated to Chistopol in spring of 1942 and then to greener, safer Tashkent in Uzbekistan, along with other

artists, such as Shostakovitch. During her time away she became seriously ill with typhus (she had suffered from severe bronchitis and tuberculosis as a young woman). On returning to Leningrad in May 1944, she writes of how disturbed she was to find "a terrible ghost that pretended to be my city".

If a gag should blind my tortured mouth,

through which a hundred million people shout,

then let them pray for me, as I do pray

for them

She regularly read to soldiers in the military hospitals and on the front line; indeed, her later pieces seem to be the voice of those who had struggled and the many she has outlived. She moved away from romantic themes towards a more diverse, complex and philosophical body of work and some of her more patriotic poems found their way to the front pages of Pravda.She was condemned for a visit by the liberal, western, Jewish philosopher Isaiah Berlin in 1946, and Official Andrei Zhdanov publicly labelled her "half harlot, half nun", her work "the poetry of an overwrought, upper-class lady", her work the product of "eroticism, mysticism, and political indifference". He banned her poems from publication in the journals Zvezda and Leningrad, accusing her of poisoning the minds of Soviet youth. Her surveillance was increased and she was expelled from the Union of Soviet Writers. Berlin described his visit to her flat: It was very barely furnished—virtually everything in it had, I gathered, been taken away—looted or sold—during the siege . . . . A stately, grey-haired lady, a white shawl draped about her shoulders, slowly rose to greet us. Anna Akhmatova was immensely dignified, with unhurried gestures, a noble head, beautiful, somewhat severe features, and an expression of immense sadness.

Akhmatova's son Lev was arrested again at the end of 1949 and sentenced to 10 years in a Siberian prison camp. She spent much of the next years trying to ensure his release, to this end, and for the first time, she published overtly propagandist poetry, “In Praise of Peace,” in the magazine Ogoniok, openly supporting Stalin and his regime. Lev remained in the camps until 1956, well after Stalin's death, his final release potentially aided by his mother's concerted efforts. Bayley suggests that her period of pro-Stalinist work may also have saved her own life; notably however, Akhmatova never acknowledged these pieces in her official corpus. Akhmatova's stature among Soviet poets was slowly conceded by party officials, her name no longer cited in only scathing contexts and she was readmitted to Union of Writers in 1951, being fully recognised again following Stalin's death in 1953. With the press still heavily controlled and censored under Nikita Khrushchev, a translation by Akhmatova was praised in a public review in 1955, and her own poems began to re-appear in 1956. In this year Lev was released from the camps, embittered, believing that his mother cared more about her poetry than her son and that she had not worked hard for his release.[41] Akhmatova's status was confirmed by 1958, with the publication of Stikhotvoreniya (Poems) and then Stikhotvoreniya 1909-1960 (Poems: 1909-1960) in 1961. Beg vremeni (The flight of time), collected works 1909-1965, published in 1965, was the most complete volume of her works in her lifetime, though the long damning poem Requiem, condemning the Stalinist purges, was conspicuously absent. Isaiah Berlin predicted at the time that it could never be published in the Soviet Union.

Last years

A land not mine, still

forever memorable,

the waters of its ocean

chill and fresh.

Sand on the bottom whiter than chalk,

and the air drunk, like wine,

late sun lays bare

the rosy limbs of the pinetrees.

Sunset in the ethereal waves:

I cannot tell if the day

is ending, or the world, or if

the secret of secrets is inside me again.

“”

During the last years of her life she continued to live with the Punin family in Leningrad, still translating, researching Pushkin and writing her own poetry. Though still censored, she was concerned to re-construct work that had been destroyed or suppressed during the purges or which had posed a threat to the life of her son in the camps, such as the lost, semi-autobiographical play Enûma Elish. She worked on her official memoirs, planned novels and worked on her epic Poem without a hero, 20 years in the writing.

Akhmatova was widely honoured in USSR and the West. In 1962 she was visited by Robert Frost; Isaiah Berlin tried to visit her again, but she refused him, worried that her son might be re-arrested due to family association with the ideologically suspect western philosopher. She inspired and advised a large circle of key young Soviet writers. Her dacha in Komarovo was frequented by such poets as Yevgeny Rein and Joseph Brodsky, whom she mentored. Brodsky, arrested in 1963 and interned for social parasitism, would go on to win the Nobel Prize in Literature (1987) and become Poet Laureate (1991) as an exile in the US. As one of the last remaining major poets of the Silver Age, she was newly acclaimed by the Soviet authorities as a fine and loyal representative of their country and permitted to travel. At the same time, by virtue of works such as Requiem, Akhmatova was being hailed at home and abroad as an unofficial leader of the dissident movement, and reinforcing this image herself. She was becoming representative of both Russias, more popular in the 1960s than she had ever been before the revolution, this reputation only continuing to grow after her death. For her 75th birthday in 1964, new collections of her verse were published.

Akhmatova was able to meet some of her pre-revolutionary acquaintances in 1965, when she was allowed to travel to Sicily and England, in order to receive the Taormina prize and an honorary doctoral degree from Oxford University, accompanied by her life-long friend and secretary Lydia Chukovskaya. Akhmatova's Requiem in Russian finally appeared in book form in Munich in 1963, the whole work not published within USSR until 1987. Her long poem The Way of All the Earth or Woman of Kitezh (Kitezhanka) was published in complete form in 1965.

In November 1965, soon after her Oxford visit, Akhmatova suffered a heart attack and was hospitalised. She was moved to a sanatorium in Moscow in the spring of 1966 and died of heart failure on March 5, at the age of 76. Thousands attended the two memorial ceremonies which were held in Moscow and in Leningrad. After being displayed in an open coffin, she was interred at Komarovo Cemetery in St Petersburg.

Isaiah Berlin described the impact of her life, as he saw it:

The widespread worship of her memory in Soviet Union today, both as an artist and as an unsurrendering human being, has, so far as I know, no parallel. The legend of her life and unyielding passive resistance to what she regarded as unworthy of her country and herself, transformed her into a figure [...] not merely in Russian literature, but in Russian history in [the

Twentieth] century.

In 1988, to celebrate what would have been Akhmatova's 100th birthday, the University of Harvard held an international conference on her life and work. Today her work may be explored at the Anna Akhmatova Literary and Memorial Museum in St Petersburg.

Work and themes

Akhmatova joined the Acmeist group of poets in 1910 with poets such as Osip Mandelstam and Sergey Gorodetsky, working in response to the Symbolist school, concurrent with the growth of Imagism in Europe and America. It promoted the use craft and rigorous poetic form over mysticism or spiritual in-roads to composition, favouring the concrete over the ephemeral. Akhmatova modelled its principles of writing with clarity, simplicity, and disciplined form.Her first collections Evening (1912) and Rosary (1914) received wide critical acclaim and made her famous from the start of her career. They contained brief, psychologically taut pieces, acclaimed for their classical diction, telling details, and the skilful use of colour. Evening and her next four books were mostly lyric miniatures on the theme of love, shot through with sadness. Her early poems usually picture a man and a woman involved in the most poignant, ambiguous moment of their relationship, much imitated and later parodied by Nabokov and others. Critic Roberta Reeder notes that the early poems always attracted large numbers of admirers: "For Akhmatova was able to capture and convey the vast range of evolving emotions experienced in a love affair, from the first thrill of meeting, to a deepening love contending with hatred, and eventually to violent destructive passion or total indifference. But [...] her poetry marks a radical break with the erudite, ornate style and the mystical representation of love so typical of poets like Alexander Blok and Andrey Bely. Her lyrics are composed of short fragments of simple speech that do not form a logical coherent pattern. Instead, they reflect the way we actually think, the links between the images are emotional, and simple everyday objects are charged with psychological associations. Like Alexander Pushkin, who was her model in many ways, Akhmatova was intent on conveying worlds of meaning through precise details."

But the point is

That we are all condemned to know

What it means not to sleep for three years,

What it means to find out in the morning

About those who have perished in the night.

“”

She often complained that the critics "walled her in" to their perception of her work in the early years of romantic passion, despite major changes of theme in the later years of The Terror. This was mainly due to the secret nature of her work after the public and critical effusion over her first volumes. The risks during the purges were very great. Many of her close friends and family were exiled, imprisoned or shot; her son was under constant thread of arrest, she was often under close surveillance. Following artistic repression and public condemnation by the state in the 1920s, many within literary and public circles, at home and abroad, thought she had died.[25][29] Her readership generally didn't know her later opus, the railing passion of Requiem or Poem without a Hero and her other scathing works, which were shared only with a very trusted few or circulated in secret by word of mouth (samizdat).

Between 1935 and 1940 Akhmatova composed, worked and reworked the long poem Requiem in secret, a lyrical cycle of lamentation and witness, depicting the suffering of the common people under Soviet terror. She

carried it with her as she worked and lived in towns and cities across the Soviet Union. It was conspicuously absent from her collected works, given its explicit condemnation of the purges. The work in Russian finally appeared in book form in Munich in 1963, the whole work not published within USSR until 1987. It consists of ten numbered poems that examine a series of emotional states, exploring suffering, despair, devotion, rather than a clear narrative. Biblical themes such as Christ's crucifixion and the devastation of Mary, Mother of Jesus and Mary Magdelene, reflect the ravaging of Russia, particularly witnessing the harrowing of women in the 1930s. It represented, to some degree, a rejection of her own earlier romantic work as she took on the public role as chronicler of the Terror. This is a role she holds to this day.

Her essays on Pushkin and Poem Without a Hero, her longest work, were only published after her death. This long poem, composed between 1940 and 1965, is often critically regarded as her best work and also one of the finest poems of the twentieth century. It offers a complex analysis of the times she lived though and her relationship with them, including her significant meeting with Isaiah Berlin (1909–97) in 1945. Her talent in composition and translation is evidenced in her fine translations of the works of poets writing in French, English, Italian, Armenian, and Korean

Eserleri:

Published by Akhmatova
1912 Vecher/????? (Evening) .
1914 Chetki (Rosary or literally Beads)
1917 Belaya Staya (White flock)
1921 Podorozhnik (Wayside grass / Plantain). 60 pages, 1000 copies published.
1921 Anno Domini MCMXXI
Reed - 2 Volume Selected Poems (1924–1926) was compiled but never published.
Uneven - compiled but never published.
1940 From Six Books (Publication suspended shortly after release, copies pulped).
1943 Izbrannoe Stikhi (Selections of poetry) Tashkent, government edited.
Sed’maya kniga (Seventh book) - not separately published;
1958 Stikhotvoreniya (Poems) (25,000 copies)
1961 Stikhotvoreniya 1909-1960 (Poems: 1909-1960)
1965 Beg vremeni (The flight of time Collected works 1909-1965)
Later editions
1967 Poems of Akhmatova. Ed. and Trans. Stanley Kunitz, Boston
1976 Anna Akhmatova Selected Poems. D.M. Thomas Penguin Books
1985 Twenty Poems of Anna Akhmatova - Trans. Jane Kenyon; Eighties Press and Ally Press ISBN 0915408309
1988 Selected Poems Trans. Richard McKane; Bloodaxe Books Ltd; ISBN 1852240636
2000 The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova Trans. Judith Hemschemeyer .Ed. Roberta Reeder; Zephyr Press; ISBN 0939010275
2004 The Word That Causes Death's Defeat: Poems of Memory (Annals of Communism). Trans. Nancy Anderson. Yale University Press. ISBN 0300103778
2006 Selected Poems Trans D. M. Thomas; Penguin Classics; ISBN 0140424644
2009 Selected Poems Trans. Walter Arndt; Overlook TP; ISBN 0882331809

A widow in black

A widow in black -- the crying fall
Covers all hearts with a depressing cloud...
While her man's words are clearly recalled,
She will not stop her lamentations loud.
It will be so, until the snow puff
Will give a mercy to the pined and tired.
Forgetfulness of suffering and love --
Though paid by life -- what more could be desired?

Anna Akhmatova

Alexander By Thebes

I think, the king was fierce, though young,
When he proclaimed, 'You'll level Thebes with ground.'
And the old chief perceived this city proud,
He'd seen in times that are in sagas sung.
Set all to fire! The king listed else
The towers, the gates, the temples – rich and thriving…
But sank in thoughts, and said with lighted face,
'You just provide the Bard Home's surviving.'

Anna Akhmatova

Along the hard crust of deep snows

Along the hard crust of deep snows,
To the secret, white house of yours,
So gentle and quiet – we both
Are walking, in silence half-lost.
And sweeter than all songs, sung ever,
Are this dream, becoming the truth,
Entwined twigs' a-nodding with favor,
The light ring of your silver spurs...

Anna Akhmatova

And as it's Going

And as it's going often at love's breaking,
The ghost of first days came again to us,
The silver willow through window then stretched in,
The silver beauty of her gentle branches.
The bird began to sing the song of light and pleasure
To us, who fears to lift looks from the earth,
Who are so lofty, bitter and intense,
About days when we were saved together.

Anna Akhmatova

And you, my friends who have been called away

And you, my friends who have been called away,
I have been spared to mourn for you and weep,
Not as a frozen willow over your memory,
But to cry to the world the names of those who sleep.
What names are those!
I slam shut the calendar,
Down on your knees, all!
Blood of my heart,
The people of Leningrad march out in even rows,
The living, the dead : fame can't tell them apart.

Anna Akhmatova

As a white stone in the well's cool deepness

As a white stone in the well's cool deepness,
There lays in me one wonderful remembrance.
I am not able and don't want to miss this:
It is my torture and my utter gladness.

I think, that he whose look will be directed
Into my eyes, at once will see it whole.
He will become more thoughtful and dejected
Than someone, hearing a story of a dole.

I knew: the gods turned once, in their madness,
Men into things, not killing humane senses.
You've been turned in to my reminiscences
To make eternal the unearthly sadness.

Anna Akhmatova

But Listen, I Am Warning You

But listen, I am warning you
I'm living for the very last time.
Not as a swallow, nor a maple,
Not as a reed, nor as a star,
Not as spring water,
Nor as the toll of bells…
Will I return to trouble men
Nor will I vex their dreams again
With my insatiable moans.

Anna Akhmatova

Celebrate

Celebrate our anniversary – can’t you see
tonight the snowy night of our first winter
comes back again in every road and tree -
that winter night of diamantine splendour.

Steam is pouring out of yellow stables,
the Moika river’s sinking under snow,
the moonlight’s misted as it is in fables,
and where we are heading – I don’t know.

There are icebergs on the Marsovo Pole.
The Lebyazh’ya’s crazed with crystal art.....
Whose soul can compare with my soul,
if joy and fear are in my heart? -

And if your voice, a marvellous bird’s,
quivers at my shoulder, in the night,
and the snow shines with a silver light,
warmed by a sudden ray, by your words?

Anna Akhmatova

Crucifix

Do not cry for me, Mother, seeing me in the grave.

I
This greatest hour was hallowed and thandered
By angel's choirs; fire melted sky.
He asked his Father:"Why am I abandoned...?"
And told his Mother: "Mother, do not cry..."

II
Magdalena struggled, cried and moaned.
Peter sank into the stone trance...
Only there, where Mother stood alone,
None has dared cast a single glance.

Anna Akhmatova

Departure

Although this land is not my own,
I will remember its inland sea
and the waters that are so cold
the sand as white
as old bones, the pine trees
strangely red where the sun comes down.

I cannot say if it is our love,
or the day, that is ending.

Anna Akhmatova

Everything

Everything’s looted, betrayed and traded,
black death’s wing’s overhead.
Everything’s eaten by hunger, unsated,
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.

Anna Akhmatova

For Osip Mandelstam

And the town is frozen solid in a vice,
Trees, walls, snow, beneath a glass.
Over crystal, on slippery tracks of ice,
the painted sleighs and I, together, pass.
And over St Peter's there are poplars, crows
there's a pale green dome there that glows,
dim in the sun-shrouded dust.
The field of heroes lingers in my thought,
Kulikovo's barbarian battleground.
The frozen poplars, like glasses for a toast,
clash now, more noisily, overhead.
As though it was our wedding, and the crowd
were drinking to 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 the coming dawn, has no knowledge.

Anna Akhmatova

Gray-Eyed King

Glory to you, inescapable pain!
The gray-eyed king died yesterday.

The autumn evening was sultry and red,
My husband returned and quietly said:

'You know, they brought him back from the hunt,
They found his corpse by the old oak tree.

I pity the queen. He was so young!..
In just one night her hair turned white.'

He found his pipe on the mantelpiece
And went out to his nighttime shift.

I'll go and wake my daughter now,
I'll look into her little gray eyes.

While outside the rustling poplars say:
'Your king is no longer upon this earth…'

Another translation.
By Yevgeny Bonver:

The Grey-Eyed King

Hail! Hail to thee, o, immovable pain!
The young grey-eyed king had been yesterday slain.

This autumnal evening was stuffy and red.
My husband, returning, had quietly said,

'He'd left for his hunting; they carried him home;
They'd found him under the old oak's dome.

I pity the queen. He, so young, past away!...
During one night her black hair turned to grey.'

He found his pipe on a warm fire-place,
And quietly left for his usual race.

Now my daughter will wake up and rise --
Mother will look in her dear grey eyes...

And poplars by windows rustle as sing,
'Never again will you see your young king...'

Anna Akhmatova

Greetings!

Do you hear the soft rustle
beside your table?
Don't bother to write
for I'll come to you.

Is it possible you are angry
with me like the last time?
You say that you don't want to see my hands,
my hands or my eyes.

I am with you in your bright, simple room.
Don't chase me away
to where the cold, murky water
flows under the bridge.

Anna Akhmatova

He Did Love

He did love three things in this world:
Choir chants at vespers, albino peacocks,
And worn, weathered maps of America.
And he did not love children crying,
Or tea served with raspberries,
Or woman's hysteria.
...And I was his wife.

Anna Akhmatova

Here is my gift

Here is my gift, not roses on your grave,
not sticks of burning incense.
You lived aloof, maintaining to the end
your magnificent disdain.
You drank wine, and told the wittiest jokes,
and suffocated inside stifling walls.
Alone you let the terrible stranger in,
and stayed with her alone.

Now you're gone, and nobody says a word
about your troubled and exalted life.
Only my voice, like a flute, will mourn
at your dumb funeral feast.
Oh, who would have dared believe that half-crazed I,
I, sick with grief for the buried past,
I, smoldering on a slow fire,
having lost everything and forgotten all,
would be fated to commemorate a man
so full of strength and will and bright inventions,
who only yesterday it seems, chatted with me,
hiding the tremor of his mortal pain.

Anna Akhmatova

Here Pushkin’s Endless Exile Has Begun

Here Pushkin's endless exile has begun,
And Lermontov's exile turned out fatal,
The mountain grass has a smell so sweet and gentle,
And only once I managed to discern,
By the lake under the dense shade of a chinara,
In the early evening and ferocious trice
The glare of insatiable dark eyes
Of the immortal lover of Tamara.

Anna Akhmatova

How can you bear to look at the Neva?

How can you bear to look at the Neva?
How can you bear to cross the bridges?.
Not in vain am I known as the grieving one
Since the time you appeared to me.
The black angels' wings are sharp,
Judgment Day is coming soon,
And raspberry-colored bonfires bloom,
Like roses, in the snow.

Anna Akhmatova

How Many Demands...

How many demands the beloved can make!
The woman discarded, none.
How glad I am that today the water
Under the colorless ice is motionless.

And I stand - Christ help me! -
On this shroud that is brittle and bright,
But save my letters
So that our descendants can decide,

So that you, courageous and wise,
Will be seen by them with greater clarity.
Perhaps we may leave some gaps
In your glorious biography?

Too sweet is earthly drink,
Too tight the nets of love.
Sometime let the children read
My name in their lesson book,
And on learning the sad story,
Let them smile shyly. . .
Since you've given me neither love nor peace
Grant me bitter glory.

Anna Akhmatova

I Don't Know If You're Alive Or Dead

I don't know if you're alive or dead.
Can you on earth be sought,
Or only when the sunsets fade
Be mourned serenely in my thought?

All is for you: the daily prayer,
The sleepless heat at night,
And of my verses, the white
Flock, and of my eyes, the blue fire.

No-one was more cherished, no-one tortured
Me more, not
Even the one who betrayed me to torture,
Not even the one who caressed me and forgot.

Anna Akhmatova

I Don't Like Flowers

I don't like flowers - they do remind me often
Of funerals, of weddings and of balls;
Their presence on tables for a dinner calls.

But sub-eternal roses' ever simple charm
Which was my solace when I was a child,
Has stayed - my heritage - a set of years behind,
Like Mozart's ever-living music's hum.

Anna Akhmatova

I Have No Use For Odic Legions

I have no use for odic legions,
Or for the charm of elegiac play
For me, all verse should be off kilter
Not the usual way.

If only you knew what trash gives rise
To verse, without a tinge of shame,
Like bright dandelions by a fence,
Like burdock and like cocklebur.

An angry shout, the bracing smell of tar,
Mysterious mildew on the wall…
And out comes a poem, light-hearted, tender,
To your delight and mine.

Anna Akhmatova

I Hear the Oriole's Always-Grieving Voice

I hear the oriole's always-grieving voice,
And the rich summer's welcome loss I hear
In the sickle's serpentine hiss
Cutting the corn's ear tightly pressed to ear.
And the short skirts of the slim reapers
Fly in the wind like holiday pennants,
The clash of joyful cymbals, and creeping
From under dusty lashes, the long glance.

I don't expect love's tender flatteries,
In premonition of some dark event,
But come, come and see this paradise
Where together we were blessed and innocent.

Anna Akhmatova

I Saw My Friend At The Front Door

I saw my friend to the front door
I stood in the golden dust.
Momentous sounds issued
From the little belfry close by.
Tossed! Such a made-up word-
What am I, a flower or a letter?
But my eyes already gaze grimly
Into the darkened looking glass.

Anna Akhmatova

I Taught Myself to Live Simply

I taught myself to live simply and wisely,
to look at the sky and pray to God,
and to wander long before evening
to tire my superfluous worries.
When the burdocks rustle in the ravine
and the yellow-red rowanberry cluster droops
I compose happy verses
about life's decay, decay and beauty.
I come back. The fluffy cat
licks my palm, purrs so sweetly
and the fire flares bright
on the saw-mill turret by the lake.
Only the cry of a stork landing on the roof
occasionally breaks the silence.
If you knock on my door
I may not even hear.

Anna Akhmatova

I Was Born in the Right Time, in Whole

I was born in the right time, in whole,
Only this time is one that is blessed,
But great God did not let my poor soul
Live without deceit on this earth.

And therefore, it's dark in my house,
And therefore, all of my friends,
Like sad birds, in the evening aroused,
Sing of love, that was never on land.

Anna Akhmatova

I Wrung My Hands

I wrung my hands under my dark veil. . .
"Why are you pale, what makes you reckless?"
-- Because I have made my loved one drunk
with an astringent sadness.

I'll never forget. He went out, reeling;
his mouth was twisted, desolate. . .
I ran downstairs, not touching the banisters,
and followed him as far as the gate.

And shouted, choking: "I meant it all
in fun. Don't leave me, or I'll die of pain."
He smiled at me -- oh so calmly, terribly --
and said: "Why don't you get out of the rain?"

Anna Akhmatova

If the Moon on the skies Does not Roam

If the moon on the skies does not roam,
But cools, like a seal above,
My dead husband enters the home
To read the letters of love.

He remembers the box, made of oak,
With the lock, very secret and odd,
And spreads through a floor the stroke
Of his feet in the iron bond.

He watches the times of the meetings
And the signatures' blurry set.
Hasn't had he sufficiently grievings
And pains in this word until that?

Anna Akhmatova

In Dream

Black and enduring separation
I share equally with you.
Why weep? Give me your hand,
Promise me you will come again.
You and I are like high
Mountains and we can't move closer.
Just send me word
At midnight sometime through the stars.

Anna Akhmatova

In Human Closeness there is a Secret Edge

In human closeness there is a secret edge,
Nor love nor passion can pass it above,
Let lips with lips be joined in silent rage,
And hearts be burst asunder with the love.

And friendship, too, is powerless plot,
And so years of bliss with noble tends,
When your heart is free and known not,
The slow languor of the earthy sense.

And they who strive to reach this edge are mad,
But they who reached are shocked with anguish hard -
Now you know why beneath your hand
You do not feel the beating of my heart.

Anna Akhmatova

In Memory of M.B.

Here is my gift, not roses on your grave,
not sticks of burning incense.
You lived aloof, maintaining to the end
your magnificent disdain.
You drank wine, and told the wittiest jokes,
and suffocated inside stifling walls.
Alone you let the terrible stranger in,
and stayed with her alone.

Now you're gone, and nobody says a word
about your troubled and exalted life.
Only my voice, like a flute, will mourn
at your dumb funeral feast.
Oh, who would have dared believe that half-crazed I
, I, sick with grief for the buried past,
I, smoldering on a slow fire,
having lost everything and forgotten all,
would be fated to commemorate a man
so full of strength and will and bright inventions,
who only yesterday it seems, chatted with me,
hiding the tremor of his mortal pain.

Anna Akhmatova

In The Evening

The garden rang with music
Of inexpressible despair.
A dish of oysters spread on ice
Smelled like the ocean, fresh and sharp.

He told me: 'I'm a faithful friend!'-
And lightly touched my dress.
How different from embraces
The touch of those two hands.

That's how one strokes a cat or bird
Or looks at slender lady riders…
Just laughter in his quiet eyes,
Beneath his light gold lashes.

And the despondent voices of the violins
Sing out beyond the hanging smoke:
'Give blessings to heaven above
At last you're alone with your beloved.'

Anna Akhmatova

Let Somebody Else Rest by Southern Sea

Let somebody else rest by southern sea,
Enjoying the paradise land,
It's northerly here, and fall of this year,
I chose to be my girl-friend.

I've carried here the memory sure
Of my last rejecting a date -
The flame, so cold, so easy and pure,
Of my overcoming the fate.

Anna Akhmatova

Lot's Wife

And the just man trailed God's shining agent,
over a black mountain, in his giant track,
while a restless voice kept harrying his woman:
"It's not too late, you can still look back

at the red towers of your native Sodom,
the square where once you sang, the spinning-shed,
at the empty windows set in the tall house
where sons and daughters blessed your marriage-bed."
A single glance: a sudden dart of pain
stitching her eyes before she made a sound . . .
Her body flaked into transparent salt,
and her swift legs rooted to the ground.

Who will grieve for this woman? Does she not seem
too insignificant for our concern?
Yet in my heart I never will deny her,
who suffered death because she chose to turn.

Anna Akhmatova

Lying in me

Lying in me, as though it were a white
Stone in the depths of a well, is one
Memory that I cannot, will not, fight:
It is happiness, and it is pain.
Anyone looking straight into my eyes
Could not help seeing it, and could not fail
To become thoughtful, more sad and quiet
Than if he were listening to some tragic tale.

I know the gods changed people into things,
Leaving their consciousness alive and free.
To keep alive the wonder of suffering,
You have been metamorphosed into me.

Anna Akhmatova

March Elegy

I have enough treasures from the past
to last me longer than I need, or want.
You know as well as I . . . malevolent memory
won't let go of half of them:
a modest church, with its gold cupola
slightly askew; a harsh chorus
of crows; the whistle of a train;
a birch tree haggard in a field
as if it had just been sprung from jail;
a secret midnight conclave
of monumental Bible-oaks;
and a tiny rowboat that comes drifting out
of somebody's dreams, slowly foundering.
Winter has already loitered here,
lightly powdering these fields,
casting an impenetrable haze
that fills the world as far as the horizon.
I used to think that after we are gone
there's nothing, simply nothing at all.
Then who's that wandering by the porch
again and calling us by name?
Whose face is pressed against the frosted pane?
What hand out there is waving like a branch?
By way of reply, in that cobwebbed corner
a sunstruck tatter dances in the mirror.

Anna Akhmatova

Memory of Sun

Memory of sun seeps from the heart.
Grass grows yellower.
Faintly if at all the early snowflakes
Hover, hover.

Water becoming ice is slowing in
The narrow channels.
Nothing at all will happen here again,
Will ever happen.

Against the sky the willow spreads a fan
The silk's torn off.
Maybe it's better I did not become
Your wife.

Memory of sun seeps from the heart.
What is it? -- Dark?
Perhaps! Winter will have occupied us
In the night.

Anna Akhmatova

Muse

When, in the night, I wait for her, impatient,
Life seems to me, as hanging by a thread.
What just means liberty, or youth, or approbation,
When compared with the gentle piper's tread?

And she came in, threw out the mantle's edges,
Declined to me with a sincere heed.
I say to her, 'Did you dictate the Pages
Of Hell to Dante?' She answers, 'Yes, I did.'

Anna Akhmatova

Music

Something of heavens ever burns in it,
I like to watch its wondrous facets' growth.
It speaks with me in fate's non-seldom fits,
When others fear to approach close.

When the last of friends had looked away
From me in grave, it lay to me in silence,
And sang as sing a thunderstorm in May,
As if all flowers began to talk in gardens.

Anna Akhmatova

My hands clasped under a veil

My hands clasped under a veil, dim and hazy…
'Why are you so pale and upset?'
That’s because I today made him crazy
With the sour wine of regret.

Can't forget! He got out, astound,
With his mouth distorted by pain...
I, not touching the railing, ran down,
I was running to him till the lane.

Fully choked, I cried, 'That's a joke --
All that was. You get out, I'll die.'
And he smiled very calmly, like stroke:
'It is windy right here -- pass by.'

Anna Akhmatova

My Way

One goes in straightforward ways,
One in a circle roams:
Waits for a girl of his gone days,
Or for returning home.

But I do go -- and woe is there --
By a way nor straight, nor broad,
But into never and nowhere,
Like trains -- off the railroad.

Anna Akhmatova

Now no-one will be listening to songs

Now no-one will be listening to songs.
The days long prophesied have come to pass.
The world has no more miracles. Don't break
My heart, song, but be still: you are the last.

Not long ago you took your morning flight
With all a swallow's free accomplishment.
Now that you are a hungry beggar-woman,
Don't go knocking at the stranger's gate.

Anna Akhmatova

One goes in straightforward ways

One goes in straightforward ways,
One in a circle roams:
Waits for a girl of his gone days,
Or for returning home.

But I do go -- and woe is there --
By a way nor straight, nor broad,
But into never and nowhere,
Like trains -- off the railroad.

Anna Akhmatova

Our Native Earth

We do not carry it in lockets on the breast,
And do not cry about it in poems,
It does not wake us from the bitter rest,
And does not seem to us like Eden promised.
In our hearts, we never try to treat
This as a subject for the bargain row,
While being ill, unhappy, spent on it,
We even fail to see it or to know.
Yes, this dirt on the feet suits us fairly,
Yes, this crunch on the teeth suits us just,
And we trample it nightly and daily --
This unmixed and non-structural dust.
But we lay into it and become it alone,
And therefore call this earth so freely -- my own.

Anna Akhmatova

Rachel

When Jacob and Rachel met for the first time,
He bowed to her like a humble wayfarer.
The herds were raising hot dust to the skies,
The little well's mouth was covered by a boulder.
He rolled the old boulder away from the well
And watered the flock with clean water himself.

Yet sweet little sadness crept into his heart
With each passing day growing stronger.
To wed her he bargained to toil seven years
As shepherd for her artful father.
Oh, Rachel! To the captive of love in his eyes
The seven years seemed as a few dazzling days.

Yet Laban was thirsty for silver, and wise,
And mercy he didn’t espouse,
Assuming forgiveness for all kind of lies…
As long as they serve his own house.
He took homely Leah with his sure hand
And led her to Jacob in his wedding tent.

A sultry night reigns over high desert sky
And spreads misty dews in the morning,
While pulling her braids in despair all that night
The younger of sisters is moaning,
Sends curses to Leah and God for her doom
Imploring the angel of death to come soon.

As Jacob is dreaming the sweetest of dreams:
The clear well spring in the valley
And Rachel's eyes happily looking at him
Her beautiful voice singing softly:
O, weren't you kissing me, Jacob, with love
And calling me always your black turtledove?

Anna Akhmatova

Reading 'Hamlet'

1

The lot by the graves was a dusty hot land;
The river behind -- blue and cool.
You told me, 'Well, go to a convent,
Or go marry a fool...'
Princes always say that, being placid or fierce,
But I cherish this speech, short and poor --
Let it flow and shine through a thousand years,
Like from shoulders do mantles of fur.

2

And, as if in wrong occasion,
I said, 'Thou,' else...
And an easy smile of pleasure
Lit up dear face.

From such lapses, told or mental,
Every cheek would blaze.
I love you as forty gentle
Sisters love and bless.

Anna Akhmatova

Requiem

Not under foreign skies
Nor under foreign wings protected -
I shared all this with my own people
There, where misfortune had abandoned us.
[1961]

INSTEAD OF A PREFACE

During the frightening years of the Yezhov terror, I
spent seventeen months waiting in prison queues in
Leningrad. One day, somehow, someone 'picked me out'.
On that occasion there was a woman standing behind me,
her lips blue with cold, who, of course, had never in
her life heard my name. Jolted out of the torpor
characteristic of all of us, she said into my ear
(everyone whispered there) - 'Could one ever describe
this?' And I answered - 'I can.' It was then that
something like a smile slid across what had previously
been just a face.
[The 1st of April in the year 1957. Leningrad]

DEDICATION

Mountains fall before this grief,
A mighty river stops its flow,
But prison doors stay firmly bolted
Shutting off the convict burrows
And an anguish close to death.
Fresh winds softly blow for someone,
Gentle sunsets warm them through; we don't know this,
We are everywhere the same, listening
To the scrape and turn of hateful keys
And the heavy tread of marching soldiers.
Waking early, as if for early mass,
Walking through the capital run wild, gone to seed,
We'd meet - the dead, lifeless; the sun,
Lower every day; the Neva, mistier:
But hope still sings forever in the distance.
The verdict. Immediately a flood of tears,
Followed by a total isolation,
As if a beating heart is painfully ripped out, or,
Thumped, she lies there brutally laid out,
But she still manages to walk, hesitantly, alone.
Where are you, my unwilling friends,
Captives of my two satanic years?
What miracle do you see in a Siberian blizzard?
What shimmering mirage around the circle of the moon?
I send each one of you my salutation, and farewell.
[March 1940]

INTRODUCTION
[PRELUDE]

It happened like this when only the dead
Were smiling, glad of their release,
That Leningrad hung around its prisons
Like a worthless emblem, flapping its piece.
Shrill and sharp, the steam-whistles sang
Short songs of farewell
To the ranks of convicted, demented by suffering,
As they, in regiments, walked along -
Stars of death stood over us
As innocent Russia squirmed
Under the blood-spattered boots and tyres
Of the black marias.

I

You were taken away at dawn. I followed you
As one does when a corpse is being removed.
Children were crying in the darkened house.
A candle flared, illuminating the Mother of God. . .
The cold of an icon was on your lips, a death-cold
sweat
On your brow - I will never forget this; I will gather

To wail with the wives of the murdered streltsy (1)
Inconsolably, beneath the Kremlin towers.
[1935. Autumn. Moscow]

II

Silent flows the river Don
A yellow moon looks quietly on
Swanking about, with cap askew
It sees through the window a shadow of you
Gravely ill, all alone
The moon sees a woman lying at home
Her son is in jail, her husband is dead
Say a prayer for her instead.

III

It isn't me, someone else is suffering. I couldn't.
Not like this. Everything that has happened,
Cover it with a black cloth,
Then let the torches be removed. . .
Night.

IV

Giggling, poking fun, everyone's darling,
The carefree sinner of Tsarskoye Selo (2)
If only you could have foreseen

What life would do with you -
That you would stand, parcel in hand,
Beneath the Crosses (3), three hundredth in
line,
Burning the new year's ice
With your hot tears.
Back and forth the prison poplar sways
With not a sound - how many innocent
Blameless lives are being taken away. . .
[1938]

V

For seventeen months I have been screaming,
Calling you home.
I've thrown myself at the feet of butchers
For you, my son and my horror.
Everything has become muddled forever -
I can no longer distinguish
Who is an animal, who a person, and how long
The wait can be for an execution.
There are now only dusty flowers,
The chinking of the thurible,
Tracks from somewhere into nowhere
And, staring me in the face
And threatening me with swift annihilation,
An enormous star.
[1939]

VI

Weeks fly lightly by. Even so,
I cannot understand what has arisen,
How, my son, into your prison
White nights stare so brilliantly.
Now once more they burn,
Eyes that focus like a hawk,
And, upon your cross, the talk
Is again of death.
[1939. Spring]

VII
THE VERDICT

The word landed with a stony thud
Onto my still-beating breast.
Nevermind, I was prepared,
I will manage with the rest.

I have a lot of work to do today;
I need to slaughter memory,
Turn my living soul to stone

Then teach myself to live again. . .

But how. The hot summer rustles
Like a carnival outside my window;
I have long had this premonition
Of a bright day and a deserted house.
[22 June 1939. Summer. Fontannyi Dom (4)]

VIII
TO DEATH

You will come anyway - so why not now?
I wait for you; things have become too hard.
I have turned out the lights and opened the door
For you, so simple and so wonderful.
Assume whatever shape you wish. Burst in
Like a shell of noxious gas. Creep up on me
Like a practised bandit with a heavy weapon.
Poison me, if you want, with a typhoid exhalation,
Or, with a simple tale prepared by you
(And known by all to the point of nausea), take me
Before the commander of the blue caps and let me
glimpse
The house administrator's terrified white face.
I don't care anymore. The river Yenisey
Swirls on. The Pole star blazes.
The blue sparks of those much-loved eyes
Close over and cover the final horror.
[19 August 1939. Fontannyi Dom]

IX

Madness with its wings
Has covered half my soul
It feeds me fiery wine
And lures me into the abyss.

That's when I understood
While listening to my alien delirium
That I must hand the victory
To it.

However much I nag
However much I beg
It will not let me take
One single thing away:

Not my son's frightening eyes -
A suffering set in stone,
Or prison visiting hours
Or days that end in storms

Nor the sweet coolness of a hand
The anxious shade of lime trees
Nor the light distant sound
Of final comforting words.
[14 May 1940. Fontannyi Dom]

X
CRUCIFIXION

Weep not for me, mother.
I am alive in my grave.

1.
A choir of angels glorified the greatest hour,
The heavens melted into flames.
To his father he said, 'Why hast thou forsaken me!'
But to his mother, 'Weep not for me. . .'
[1940. Fontannyi Dom]

2.
Magdalena smote herself and wept,
The favourite disciple turned to stone,
But there, where the mother stood silent,
Not one person dared to look.
[1943. Tashkent]

EPILOGUE

1.
I have learned how faces fall,
How terror can escape from lowered eyes,
How suffering can etch cruel pages
Of cuneiform-like marks upon the cheeks.
I know how dark or ash-blond strands of hair
Can suddenly turn white. I've learned to recognise
The fading smiles upon submissive lips,
The trembling fear inside a hollow laugh.
That's why I pray not for myself
But all of you who stood there with me
Through fiercest cold and scorching July heat
Under a towering, completely blind red wall.

2.
The hour has come to remember the dead.
I see you, I hear you, I feel you:
The one who resisted the long drag to the open window;
The one who could no longer feel the kick of familiar
soil beneath her feet;
The one who, with a sudden flick of her head, replied,

'I arrive here as if I've come home!'
I'd like to name you all by name, but the list

Has been removed and there is nowhere else to look.
So,
I have woven you this wide shroud out of the humble
words
I overheard you use. Everywhere, forever and always,
I will never forget one single thing. Even in new
grief.
Even if they clamp shut my tormented mouth
Through which one hundred million people scream;
That's how I wish them to remember me when I am dead
On the eve of my remembrance day.
If someone someday in this country
Decides to raise a memorial to me,
I give my consent to this festivity
But only on this condition - do not build it
By the sea where I was born,
I have severed my last ties with the sea;
Nor in the Tsar's Park by the hallowed stump
Where an inconsolable shadow looks for me;
Build it here where I stood for three hundred hours
And no-one slid open the bolt.
Listen, even in blissful death I fear
That I will forget the Black Marias,
Forget how hatefully the door slammed and an old woman
Howled like a wounded beast.
Let the thawing ice flow like tears
From my immovable bronze eyelids
And let the prison dove coo in the distance
While ships sail quietly along the river.
[March 1940. Fontannyi Dom]

FOOTNOTES

1 An elite guard which rose up in rebellion
against Peter the Great in 1698. Most were either
executed or exiled.
2 The imperial summer residence outside St
Petersburg where Ahmatova spent her early years.
3 A prison complex in central Leningrad near the
Finland Station, called The Crosses because of the
shape of two of the buildings.
4 The Leningrad house in which Ahmatova lived.

Anna Akhmatova

Shade

‘What does a certain woman know of the hour of her death?’ - Mandelstam

Tallest, suavest 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 like translucent straw.
Through dark lashes, your eyes, Georgian,
looking, 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!

Anna Akhmatova

So again we triumph!

So again we triumph!
Again we do not come!
Our speeches silent,
Our words, dumb.
Our eyes that have not met
Again, are lost;
And only tears forget
The grip of frost.
A wild-rose bush near Moscow
Knows something of
This pain that will be called
Immortal love.

Anna Akhmatova

Solitude

So many stones have been thrown at me,
That I'm not frightened of them anymore,
And the pit has become a solid tower,
Tall among tall towers.
I thank the builders,
May care and sadness pass them by.
From here I'll see the sunrise earlier,
Here the sun's last ray rejoices.
And into the windows of my room
The northern breezes often fly.
And from my hand a dove eats grains of wheat...
As for my unfinished page,
The Muse's tawny hand, divinely calm
And delicate, will finish it.

Anna Akhmatova

Somewhere there is a simple life

Somewhere there is a simple life and a world,
Transparent, warm and joyful. . .
There at evening a neighbor talks with a girl
Across the fence, and only the bees can hear
This most tender murmuring of all.

But we live ceremoniously and with difficulty
And we observe the rites of our bitter meetings,
When suddenly the reckless wind
Breaks off a sentence just begun -

But not for anything would we exchange this splendid
Granite city of fame and calamity,
The wide rivers of glistening ice,
The sunless, gloomy gardens,
And, barely audible, the Muse's voice.

Anna Akhmatova

Song Of The Final Meeting

My breast grew helplessly cold,
But my steps were light.
I pulled the glove from my left hand
Mistakenly onto my right.

It seemed there were so many steps,
But I knew there were only three!
Amidst the maples an autumn whisper
Pleaded: 'Die with me!

I'm led astray by evil
Fate, so black and so untrue.'
I answered: 'I, too, dear one!
I, too, will die with you…'

This is a song of the final meeting.
I glanced at the house's dark frame.
Only bedroom candles burning
With an indifferent yellow flame.

Anna Akhmatova

Sunbeam

I pray to the sunbeam from the window -
It is pale, thin, straight.
Since morning I have been silent,
And my heart - is split.
The copper on my washstand
Has turned green,
But the sunbeam plays on it
So charmingly.
How innocent it is, and simple,
In the evening calm,
But to me in this deserted temple
It's like a golden celebration,
And a consolation.

Anna Akhmatova

Sunshine Has Filled The Room

Sunshine has filled the room
with clear golden specks of dust.
I woke up and remembered,
dear, it was your birthday.

But far beyond my windows
snow has covered the ground,
And made me forget, so now to atone,
I sleep without dreams.

Anna Akhmatova

The Last Toast

I drink to home, that is lost,
To evil life of mine,
To loneness in which we're both,
And to your future, fine, --

To lips by which I was betrayed,
To eyes that deathly cold,
To that that the world is bad and that
We were not saved by God.

Anna Akhmatova

The Pillow Hot

The pillow hot
On both sides,
The second candle
Dying, the ravens
Crying. Haven't
Slept all night, too late
To dream of sleep...
How unbearably white
The blind on the white window.
Good morning, morning!

Anna Akhmatova

The Sentence

And the stone word fell
On my still-living breast.
Never mind, I was ready.
I will manage somehow.

Today I have so much to do:
I must kill memory once and for all,
I must turn my soul to stone,
I must learn to live again—

Unless . . . Summer's ardent rustling
Is like a festival outside my window.
For a long time I've foreseen this
Brilliant day, deserted house.

Anna Akhmatova

The Two Of Us Won’t Share A Glass Together

The two of us won’t share a glass together
Be it of water or of sweet red wine;
We won’t be kissing, in the morning either
Nor, late at night, enjoy an evening shine…
You breathe the sun, I breathe the moon; however
We are united by one love forever.

I always have with me my true soul mate,
You have with you your ever-merry girlfriend;
Yet I’m acquainted with your eye’s dismay
As you’re the reason of my lifelong ailment.
The length of our dates won’t be increased,
That’s how, it’s doomed, to honor our peace.

Yet, it’s my breath that flows in your rhymes
While in my rhymes your voice is singing clear;
Oh’ neither oblivion, nor fear
Will ever dare to touch this kind of flame.
I wish you knew how I am longing now
To feel your dry and rosy lips somehow.

Anna Akhmatova

The Victory

2

Over a pier, the first beacon inflamed --
The vanguard of other sea-rangers;
The mariner cried and bared his head;
He sailed with death beside and ahead
In seas, packed with furious dangers.

3

By our doors Great Victory stays ...
But how we'll glory her advent?
Let women lift higher the children! They blessed
With life mid a thousand thousands deaths --
Thus will be the dearest answered.

Anna Akhmatova

There are the words that couldn’t be twice said

There are the words that couldn’t be twice said,
He, who said once, spent out all his senses.
Only two things have never their end –
The heavens’ blue and the Creator’s mercy.

Anna Akhmatova

They Didn’t Meet

They didn't meet me, roamed,
On steps with lanterns bright.
I entered quiet home
In murky, pail moonlight.

Under a lamp's green halo,
With smile of kept in rage,
My friend said, 'Cinderella,
Your voice is very strange…'

A cricket plays its fiddle;
A fire-place grew black.
Oh, someone took my little
White shoe as a keep-sake,

And gave me three carnations,
While casting dawn eyes -.
My sins for accusations,
You couldn't be disguised.

And heart hates to believe in
The time, that's close too,
When he will ask for women
To try on my white shoe.

Anna Akhmatova

This Evening’s Light Is Golden Bright

This evening's light is golden bright,
The April’s coolness is so tender,
Though you are many years too late,
I still do welcome you to enter.

Right next to me why don't you sit
And look with happy eyes around.
This little notebook has in it
The poems written in my childhood.

Forgive me that I've lived and mourned,
And was not grateful for the sun rays…
Forgive me please, forgive me for
I have mistaken you for others…

Anna Akhmatova

Thoughts Of The Sunlight

Thoughts of the sunlight fainter and dimmer,
And parched the grass.
Breezes, freh breezes at dawn's early shimmer,
Flit by repass.

Look at the willows against a clear heaven,
Cloudless and wide.
Better, Far better not to be given
Thee for thy bride!

Thoughts of the daylight dimmer and fainter.
Oh, darkness! Gloom!
Once again . . . Morning,
Tell me if winter is come.

Anna Akhmatova

Thunder

There will be thunder then. Remember me.
Say ‘ She asked for storms.’ The entire
world will turn 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 that I longed to see,
leaving my shadow here in the sky.

Anna Akhmatova

To Boris Pasternak

It ceased – the voice, inimitable here,
The peer of groves left forever us,
He changed himself into eternal ear...
Into the rain, of that sang more than once.

And all the flowers, that grow under heavens,
Began to flourish – to meet the going death…
But suddenly it got the silent one and saddened –
The planet, bearing the humble name, the Earth.

Anna Akhmatova

To Fall Ill as One Should, Deliriously

To fall ill as one should, deliriously
Hot, meet everyone again,
To stroll broad avenues in the seashore garden
Full of the wind and the sun.

Even the dead, today, have agreed to come,
And the exiles, into my house.
Lead the child to me by the hand.
Long I have missed him.

I shall eat blue grapes with those who are dead,
Drink the iced
Wine, and watch the gray waterfall pour
On to the damp flint bed.

Behind the lake the moon's not stirred
And seems to be a window through
Into a silent, well-lit house,
Where something unpleasant has occured.

Has the master been brought home dead,
The mistress run off with a lover,
Or has a little girl gone missing,
And her shoes found by the creek-bed...

We can't see. But feel some awful thing,
And we don't want to talk.
Doleful, the cry of eagle-owls, and hot
In the garden the wind is blustering.

Anna Akhmatova

To the Many

I -- am your voice, the warmth of your breath,
I -- am the reflection of your face,
The futile trembling of futile wings,
I am with you to he end, in any case.

That's why you so fervently love
Me in my weakness and in my sin;
That's why you impulsively gave
Me the best of your sons;
That's why you never even asked
Me for any word of him
And blackened my forever-deserted home
With fumes of praise.
And they say -- it's impossible to fuse more closely,
Impossible to love more abandonedly. . .

As the shadow from the body wants to part,
As the flesh from the soul wants to separate,
So I want now -- to be forgotten..

Anna Akhmatova

To The Muse

The Muse my sister looked in my face,
her gaze was bright and clear,
and she took away my golden ring,
the gift of the virginal year.

Muse! everyone else is happy –
girls, wives, widows – all around!
I swear I'd rather die on the rack
than live fettered and bound.

In time I'll join the guessing-game,
pluck petals from the daisy's wheel.
Each creature on this earth, I know,
must suffer love's ordeal.

Tonight I pine for no one,
alone in my candlelit room;
but I don't-don't-don't want to know
who's kissing whom.

At dawn the mirrors, mocking, will say:
"Your gaze is not bright or clear."
I'll sigh: "The Muse my sister came
and took the gift of gifts away."

1912
from Vercher (Evening), Poets Guild
(Translated by Stanley Kunitz and Max Hayward)

Anna Akhmatova

True Tenderness

True tenderness is silent
and can't be mistaken for anything else.
In vain with earnest desire
you cover my shoulders with fur;
In vain you try to persuade me
of the merits of first love.
But I know too well the meaning
of your persistent burning glances.

Anna Akhmatova

Twenty-First. Night. Monday

Twenty-first. Night. Monday.
Silhouette of the capitol in darkness.
Some good-for-nothing -- who knows why--
made up the tale that love exists on earth.

People believe it, maybe from laziness
or boredom, and live accordingly:
they wait eagerly for meetings, fear parting,
and when they sing, they sing about love.

But the secret reveals itself to some,
and on them silence settles down...
I found this out by accident
and now it seems I'm sick all the time.

Anna Akhmatova

Under Her Dark Veil

Under her dark veil she wrung her hands.
"Why are you so pale today?"
"Because I made him drink of stinging grief
Until he got drunk on it.
How can I forget? He staggered out,
His mouth twisted in agony.
I ran down not touching the bannister

And caught up with him at the gate.
I cried: 'A joke!
That's all it was. If you leave, I'll die.'
He smiled calmly and grimly
And told me: 'Don't stand here in the wind.' "

Anna Akhmatova

White Night

I haven't locked the door,
Nor lit the candles,
You don't know, don't care,
That tired I haven't the strength
To decide to go to bed.
Seeing the fields fade in
The sunset murk of pine-needles,
And to know all is lost,

That life is a cursed hell:
I've got drunk
On your voice in the doorway.
I was sure you'd come back.

Anna Akhmatova

Why Is This Age Worse...?

Why is this age worse than earlier ages?
In a stupor of grief and dread
have we not fingered the foulest wounds
and left them unhealed by our hands?

In the west the falling light still glows,
and the clustered housetops glitter in the sun,
but here Death is already chalking the doors with crosses,
and calling the ravens, and the ravens are flying in.

Anna Akhmatova

Willow

And I grew up in patterned tranquillity,
In the cool nursery of the young century.
And the voice of man was not dear to me,
But the voice of the wind I could understand.
But best of all the silver willow.
And obligingly, it lived
With me all my life; it's weeping branches
Fanned my insomnia with dreams.
And strange!--I outlived it.
There the stump stands; with strange voices
Other willows are conversing
Under our, under those skies.
And I am silent...As if a brother had died.

Anna Akhmatova

You Thought I Was That Type

You thought I was that type:
That you could forget me,
And that I'd plead and weep
And throw myself under the hooves of a bay mare,

Or that I'd ask the sorcerers
For some magic potion made from roots and send you a terrible gift:
My precious perfumed handkerchief.

Damn you! I will not grant your cursed soul
Vicarious tears or a single glance.

And I swear to you by the garden of the angels,
I swear by the miracle-working icon,
And by the fire and smoke of our nights:
I will never come back to you.

Anna Akhmatova

You Will Hear Thunder

You will hear thunder and remember me,
And think: she wanted storms. The rim
Of the sky will be the colour of hard crimson,
And your heart, as it was then, will be on fire.

That day in Moscow, it will all come true,
when, for the last time, I take my leave,
And hasten to the heights that I have longed for,
Leaving my shadow still to be with you.

Anna Akhmatova

You, Who was Born for Poetry's Creation

You, who was born for poetry's creation,
Do not repeat the sayings of the ancients.
Though, maybe, our Poetry, itself,
Is just a single beautiful citation.

Anna Akhmatova

You'll live, but I'll not; perhaps

You'll live, but I'll not; perhaps,
The final turn is that.
Oh, how strongly grabs us
The secret plot of fate.

They differently shot us:
Each creature has its lot,
Each has its order, robust, --
A wolf is always shot.

In freedom, wolves are grown,
But deal with them is short:
In grass, in ice, in snow, --
A wolf is always shot.

Don't cry, oh, friend my dear,
If, in the hot or cold,
From tracks of wolves, you'll hear
My desperate recall.

Anna Akhmatova