

Osip Emilevich Mandelstam

- poems -

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A flame is in my blood

A flame is in my blood
burning dry life, to the bone.
I do not sing of stone,
now, I sing of wood.

It is light and coarse:
made of a single spar,
the oak's deep heart,
and the fisherman's oar.

Drive them deep, the piles:
hammer them in tight,
around wooden Paradise,
where everything is light.

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Brothers, let us glorify freedom's twilight

Brothers, let us glorify freedom's twilight –
the great, darkening year.
Into the seething waters of the night
heavy forests of nets disappear.
O Sun, judge, people, your light
is rising over sombre years

Let us glorify the deadly weight
the people's leader lifts with tears.
Let us glorify the dark burden of fate,
power's unbearable yoke of fears.
How your ship is sinking, straight,
he who has a heart, Time, hears.

We have bound swallows
into battle legions - and we,
we cannot see the sun: nature's boughs
are living, twittering, moving, totally:
through the nets - the thick twilight - now
we cannot see the sun, and Earth floats free.

Let's try: a huge, clumsy, turn then
of the creaking helm, and, see -
Earth floats free. Take heart, O men.
Slicing like a plough through the sea,
Earth, to us, we know, even in Lethe's icy fen,
has been worth a dozen heavens' eternity.

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I don't remember the word I wished to say

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The blind swallow returns to the hall of shadow,
on shorn wings, with the translucent ones to play.
The song of night is sung without memory, though.

No birds. No blossoms on the dried flowers.
The manes of night's horses are translucent.
An empty boat drifts on the naked river.
Lost among grasshoppers the word's quiescent.

It swells slowly like a shrine, or a canvas sheet,
hurling itself down, mad, like Antigone,
or falls, now, a dead swallow at our feet.
with a twig of greenness, and a Stygian sympathy.

O, to bring back the diffidence of the intuitive caress,
and the full delight of recognition.
I am so fearful of the sobs of The Muses,
the mist, the bell-sounds, perdition.

Mortal creatures can love and recognise: sound may
pour out, for them, through their fingers, and overflow:
I don't remember the word I wished to say,
and a fleshless thought returns to the house of shadow.

The translucent one speaks in another guise,
always the swallow, dear one, Antigone....
on the lips the burning of black ice,
and Stygian sounds in the memory.

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Insomnia. Homer. Taut canvas.

Insomnia. Homer. Taut canvas.

Half the catalogue of ships is mine:
that flight of cranes, long stretched-out line,
that once rose, out of Hellas.

To an alien land, like a phalanx of cranes –
Foam of the gods on the heads of kings –
Where do you sail? What would the things
of Troy, be to you, Achaeans, without Helen?

The sea, or Homer – all moves by love's glow.
Which should I hear? Now Homer is silent,
and the Black Sea thundering its oratory, turbulent,
and, surging, roars against my pillow.

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Petropolis

From a fearful height, a wandering light,
but does a star glitter like this, crying?
Transparent star, wandering light
your brother, Petropolis, is dying.

From a fearful height, earthly dreams are alight,
and a green star is crying.
Oh star, if you are the brother of water and light,
your brother, Petropolis, is dying.

A monstrous ship, from a fearful height,
is rushing on, spreading its wings, flying.
Green star, in beautiful poverty,
your brother, Petropolis, is dying.

Transparent spring has broken, above the black Neva's hiss
the wax of immortality is liquefying.
Oh if you are star – your city, Petropolis,
your brother, Petropolis, is dying.

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Rome

Hi There! I see you're enjoying the site, and just wanted to extend an invitation to register for our free site. The members of oldpoetry strive to make this a fun place to learn and share - hope you join us! - Kevin

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Silentium

She has not yet been born:
she is music and word,
and therefore the untorn,
fabric of what is stirred.

Silent the ocean breathes.
Madly day's glitter roams.
Spray of pale lilac foams,
in a bowl of grey-blue leaves.

May my lips rehearse
the primordial silence,
like a note of crystal clearness,
sounding, pure from birth!

Stay as foam Aphrodite – Art –
and return, Word, where music begins:
and, fused with life's origins,
be ashamed heart, of heart!

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Sisters

Sisters - Heaviness and Tenderness- you look the same.
Wasps and bees both suck the heavy rose.
Man dies, and the hot sand cools again.
Carried off on a black stretcher, yesterday's sun goes.

Oh, honeycombs' heaviness, nets' tenderness,
it's easier to lift a stone than to say your name!
I have one purpose left, a golden purpose,
how, from time's weight, to free myself again.

I drink the turbid air like a dark water.
The rose was earth; time, ploughed from underneath.
Woven, the heavy, tender roses, in a slow vortex,
the roses, heaviness and tenderness, in a double-wreath.

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The Age

My beast, my age, who will try
to look you in the eye,
and weld the vertebrae
of century to century,
with blood? Creating blood
pours out of mortal things:
only the parasitic shudder,
when the new world sings.

As long as it still has life,
the creature lifts its bone,
and, along the secret line
of the spine, waves foam.
Once more life's crown,
like a lamb, is sacrificed,
cartilage under the knife -
the age of the new-born.

To free life from jail,
and begin a new absolute,
the mass of knotted days
must be linked by means of a flute.
With human anguish
the age rocks the wave's mass,
and the golden measure's hissed
by a viper in the grass.

And new buds will swell, intact,
the green shoots engage,
but your spine is cracked
my beautiful, pitiful, age.
And grimacing dumbly, you writhe,
look back, feebly, with cruel jaws,
a creature, once supple and lithe,
at the tracks left by your paws.

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This

This is what I most want
unpursued, alone
to reach beyond the light
that I am furthest from.

And for you to shine there-
no other happiness-
and learn, from starlight,
what its fire might suggest.

A star burns as a star,
light becomes light,
because our murmuring
strengthens us, and warms the night.

And I want to say to you
my little one, whispering,
I can only lift you towards the light
by means of this babbling.

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This night is irredeemable

This night is irredeemable.

Where you are, it is still bright.
At the gates of Jerusalem,
a black sun is alight.

The yellow sun is hurting,
sleep, baby, sleep.
The Jews in the Temple's burning
buried my mother deep.

Without rabbi, without blessing,
over her ashes, there,
the Jews in the Temple's burning
chanted the prayer.

Over this mother,
Israel's voice was sung.
I woke in a glittering cradle,
lit by a black sun.

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Tristia

I have studied the Science of departures,
in night's sorrows, when a woman's hair falls down.
The oxen chew, there's the waiting, pure,
in the last hours of vigil in the town,
and I reverence night's ritual cock-crowing,
when reddened eyes lift sorrow's load and choose
to stare at distance, and a woman's crying
is mingled with the singing of the Muse.

Who knows, when the word 'departure' is spoken
what kind of separation is at hand,
or of what that cock-crow is a token,
when a fire on the Acropolis lights the ground,
and why at the dawning of a new life,
when the ox chews lazily in its stall,
the cock, the herald of the new life,
flaps his wings on the city wall?

I like the monotony of spinning,
the shuttle moves to and fro,
the spindle hums. Look, barefoot Delia's running
to meet you, like swansdown on the road!
How threadbare the language of joy's game,
how meagre the foundation of our life!
Everything was, and is repeated again:
it's the flash of recognition brings delight.

So be it: on a dish of clean earthenware,
like a flattened squirrel's pelt, a shape,
forms a small, transparent figure, where
a girl's face bends to gaze at the wax's fate.
Not for us to prophesy, Erebus, Brother of Night:
Wax is for women: Bronze is for men.
Our fate is only given in fight,
to die by divination is given to them.

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What shall I do with this body they gave me

What shall I do with this body they gave me,
so much my own, so intimate with me?

For being alive, for the joy of calm breath,
tell me, who should I bless?

I am the flower, and the gardener as well,
and am not solitary, in earth's cell.

My living warmth, exhaled, you can see,
on the clear glass of eternity.

A pattern set down,
until now, unknown.

Breath evaporates without trace,
but form no one can deface.

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