

1.

*NORTHERN LIGHTS*

for Osip Mandelstam

Though they may burn you as a heretic,  
or throw you in jail till the charges stick,  
or ostracize you like an idiot,

you can never be exiled  
from your mind's own country.

There you forever roam free.

Among those hills, you range absolute,  
over fields, valleys, and woods;

hidden springs, wild fruit,  
birds, badgers, and deer.

No one can hound you here.

Your rivers run white, deep, and cold,  
and above the moon on winter's nights,

long, insouciant emerald scarves  
stream from the backs of your horse-sleds  
a-charging.

2.

*IT MUST BE TRUE SHE LOVED ME ONCE*

It must be true she loved me once:  
she's no fool, and no fool  
would she countenance—  
not to wed and bed and bring forth  
the interlocked and braided generations.

There's a photo of us—I can't bear  
to see it now—in the attic, in a box;  
her face burns through the wood and  
impotent lock, a smile of such pure  
and joyous warmth—a shaft of sunlight  
in the dark—that it must be true  
she loved me once.

But the planet turned, as did her heart,  
leaning, slanting from the sun, and the trees  
lost their green, and the fruit dropped  
to the grass, thumping, wasted,  
and in the browned-over, stubbled fields,  
November frost glittered hard like diamonds.

Winter came, and she was gone.

A year passes, then two—and I do see her,  
but it's just business, transactional:  
dropping off the kids or reconciling  
accounts—and her smile is some crisp,  
automatic thing, flashing on and off,  
indicating fire exits and closing doors.

“You must move on,” she says, when I finally  
ask the question, and she turns her head  
and drives off, her tail lights bright as furnace slits,  
and the leaves chasing her down the street  
like the thronging crowds of my heart.

3.

*IF YOU GO FAR ENOUGH WEST*

If you go far enough west, if you  
best the sun and light out from these  
slumbering electric streets, these cities of sleeping  
millions, of boisterous nights and toiling  
turbulent days; of generations stacked in glass  
and brick and steel; if you hum out from these hives  
of vents and pipes and flickering zeroes and ones; if you leap  
this river of somnolent barges and cables suspended  
and taut—then glide over gulls wheeling white and  
bluffs of Triassic basalt; next west over hills and  
woods and huddled houses of pills and shuttered  
dreams; if you go far enough west  
past malls and billboards and strangled  
lots of kudzu and Japanese cane; then on past  
truck stops, diesel drops, decapitated

mountain tops into antique forests, highlands,  
and clouds; into pine-clear air of wind and  
ungunned birds—of numberless wings in flocking  
trees, and down into valleys of fog and patient  
smoke, of tomahawks and chipped obsidian; then out  
past muddy miles into sky-wide prairies of wildflowers  
and twitching lightning; of horned and bearded  
herds grazing the grassy sea—a gaming veldt as yet  
undreamed, free of fences and twinning ribbons  
of steel—and even farther west, into terrain  
untrod by any heel and foot, unhollowed by kiva,  
capella, or kirk; into birthing breakbacks heaving

up serried sediment of sea—the briny bones  
of giants in layered rust and lime, the open  
pages of calcified time; and farther west, into the  
swamps of steam and giant-leaved fern,  
of ponderous legs and long sweeping necks, browsing  
booms of saurian ships; of fruit and flower  
and enterprising vine; of trilobites and pulsing  
pools of slime; of leaping life and groining  
stirrings of the urge; of seething heat and  
vólcan ash, of flashing sky and pelting streaks;

of proliferating fractal geometries; of cells  
splitting, splicing, interbraiding; ions  
emerging, surging, consummating—  
hipping part for part, and spark  
for spark: blasts of light in  
the endless dark.

And if you go even farther west  
into the interstellar wastes, where exists no  
north, or south, or east—where the longitudes  
have lost all compass and sense; and into the swirling  
whirl of elemental genesis; where all distance collapses  
to a single speck, a singularity of  
immense prospect: all space and time  
in an explosive seed, before which we cannot  
perceive—not from here, not from these 13 billion  
echoing years—but which seed might be  
the collapsed kernel of recurrent  
history, some compressed precedent of our  
own iridescence: some sumptuous saga  
of evanescence; of arising and eliminated  
species, of efflorescent deities, and perhaps  
somewhere too, creatures craving  
constancy, fixity, truth,  
fretting for purchase amidst nullifying  
flux, uncountable quadrillionths of consciousness  
shining, declining, and recombining—and when  
so many minds merge and

polyverge, there arises the one-mind,  
a reverberant pulse, an immanent cotillion  
universe—if we go far enough out there, in here,  
deep within the flowing stream, the fluid images within  
this dream; we find it's all the same place—the same  
place of no place, the endless bringing around to  
the beginning again, to the woof and warp  
of energetic string, the yan and yin of west  
and east—the fabric of *shunya* shimmering—  
which was, and is, and  
can never be anywhere else, but in  
you, and me, and here, and  
now—Eternity here, and now, and  
Now.

4.

*WITNESS TO THE SILENCE*

You feel it coming,  
barely,

a stirring in the lake,  
the slow sway and flick of a tail  
in deep water.

Don't move, don't talk  
(visitors from Porlock),  
let it rise,  
let it come,  
don't chase it off—

It doesn't have to come, you know,  
and it doesn't have to come  
to you.

It can swim down there a thousand  
years and never rise,  
never breaching into overmind—

(it can amuse itself eternally)

—but it does want to surge and leap,  
to shatter a million daggers

into a surprised and tuneless sky.

It wills to flash up—  
brilliant, bejeweled—  
with flaring fins  
and rainbow hide,

to blaze, with silver disc of eye,  
that airy upper world  
of tree and field and dragonfly—

—and then splash back down again,  
discharged, complete,

into its cool and liquid  
dominion.

Yet it will not present  
without corresponding ear and eye—  
without open, primed,  
unhooked mind—

to receive its fleeting, arcing song  
with full reverence and attention:

to catch  
without catching

to feed  
without feeding

to love  
wholly,  
momentously,

without  
annihilation.

5.

*QUARRY US NOW OUR LIVING BLOOD*

Though in time entropy  
will claim us all, evaporating minds  
and hearts and scattering our bones

to the stony lime,  
and though our ancient tiger  
teeth will gleam

anew in the badger's spine;  
and though we've traced  
these spinning steps a billion fold

since starburst prime—

Because we've forgot  
the braided pattern, the weaving

waltz of this *pas de vie*,  
forgetting with each  
Lethe step the intermix  
and recombine—

—the shifting shuffling of the  
mineral deck, the deliquescent  
fecund slime—

Quarry us now our living blood,  
our vivid and quickened seeing,  
our lupine loping through the moist  
and loamy dark;

Prize open the prisons  
of our ears, the caverns of our lungs,  
unstop the brilliant rivers  
of our dreaming.

Recall us now the brightness  
of those mornings,  
the delirium of that crocus  
song; dazzle us again  
    in midday's prime

before laying us down in the  
sostenuto long

    of those ripe  
September moons.

Then sow us in a chorus in a southern  
hill and feed us to the million  
mothers of earth

so we can rise again in the rhizome's root  
and sap-green vigor of the vine;

Gather us  
in the fullness of the grape  
and the summer's gift  
    of new wine.