

## LETTER TO LOUISE GLUCK

*Igor Webb*

In the Chatham Bookstore, in the mountains, I found your *Poems 1962-2012*. We lugged the volume (heavy as a Belgian cobblestone) to the pricey cheese store, and then the pub. By the time we drove home, mist had settled on the tops of the hills. The headlights at first lit a path for us, oddly demarcated trees, as in the shadows of an Edward Hopper painting, distant houses with a single light in one window, pulsing yellow roadlines, but then, abruptly, on the hilltops, everything shone a dense, blinding white, as though we had stumbled onto the nuclear threshold of heaven. We fell to earth each time down the familiar black road: I don't know what I want from you, or have ever wanted from you, but I have come back for it now that we have grown old together.

I looked first, to see where you had arrived, at "A Village Life" on page 625, the very last poem in the collection, and from there followed the trail back home like Hansel and Grethel. *Their* story begins with famine: did that give you any pause? Because that isn't the way things are usually paid for in your poems, it's not money that passes hands. The folk tales are humble stories of poverty, there isn't enough food, and the mother—and, as I'm sure you know, it's the *mother* and not the step-mother; the step-mother was forced on Jacob and Wilhelm by their nervous publishers—the nameless mother and father face one of those desperate choices with which we are by now horribly familiar, if only from the images on the evening news, a century of proliferating Sophie's choices...them or us, you or me?

I had dinner with Claude Lanzmann many years ago, after *Shoah* had opened in all the theaters. The conversation somehow turned to killing. "The essence of being human," he said, "is that I am willing to kill you." He didn't mean, if he had to choose; he didn't mean, if he were threatened. No, he meant, *before* he was threatened. He meant that, only in choosing yourself over others, the sign of which is your willingness to kill, only by means of that choice do you become fully individual as a human being, *your-self*.

I didn't buy it, and I don't buy it, but I am suspicious of my recoil at the idea, and it troubles me to think that, to read your work, that is, properly, I ought not to recoil.

By the way, the book I had brought with me to the mountains was Steven Weinberg's *To Explain the World: The Discovery of Modern Science*. Weinberg, a Nobel Prize winner and by all accounts the greatest living physicist, writes with that spare, unequivocal authority of the scientists, and here he

wants to track and uncover how science, as a way of knowing, came about. At the beginning, he says, by which he means in classical Greece, knowledge took the form of poetry. He defines poetry as “language chosen for aesthetic effect, rather than in an attempt to say clearly what one actually believes to be true.”

(Are you laughing?)

For minds like Weinberg’s, which is to say for science, there is only one form of knowledge, and that comes from “using proposed theories to draw more or less precise conclusions that can be tested by observation.” That’s it: that’s the only way to discover what’s actually true.

Whatever you and I may know, or believe we know, by Weinberg’s standard we know nothing.

Weinberg says it never occurred to the early Greeks, or to more or less anyone for many centuries after the death of Aristotle, to test by exact observation whether their assertions about nature and the universe could be verified. It never occurred to them, he says, because “*they had never seen it done*” (Weinberg’s italics). This fact of intellectual history fascinates Weinberg.

And if we read Weinberg’s careful choice of words carefully, we have to say he’s right.

He’s talking about the path the moon takes around the earth, and the “fact” that it goes round the earth, and at what rate of speed it goes round the earth, not about whether, when full, the moon makes you howl, your area of expertise.

But, to be clear: your world, the world of Homer and the Greek myths, of Moses, Ovid, of theology, of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, this is the world before science, before anyone actually knew anything.

In my edition of *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, after Hansel and Grethel have successfully found their way home the first time and the second famine comes, the mother once more argues that “the children must go.” The poor father can’t resist. Why? Because “He who says A must say B, likewise, and as he had yielded the first time, he had to do so a second time also.”

A law of the human heart.

That’s what “A Village Life” is about, is it? As it happens, I was born in a village, a village in the Slovak backwoods, and so, as far as villages go, a pretty good example of the kind, about as drab as the godforsaken spot where poor Emma Bovary finds herself stranded, and not the Thornton Wilder version to which, after much reading, I (and maybe you too) am attracted, you know, the elemental life, birth, childhood, bilberries warm from the sun, skinny dipping in the creek, marriage, work, sweet evenings of love,

then loss, pain, the mountains, death,

The death and uncertainty that await me  
 as they await all men, the shadows evaluating me  
 because it can take time to destroy a human being,  
 the element of suspense  
 needs to be preserved—

After a sidewise glance at “all men”<sup>1</sup> (see “Winter Morning”), I have  
 been stuck at those two short lines—

the element of suspense  
 needs to be preserved—

because there is something about them I can't put my finger on...but finally  
 I think I understand it has to do with what comes next:

On Sundays I walk my neighbor's dog  
 so she can go to church to pray for her sick mother.

The dog waits for me in the doorway.

The dog waits in your neighbor's doorway, I realize, like those caged letters  
 “e” in the preceding lines—element, suspense, needs, and especially, pre-  
 served. Then the door opens. He knows you, he doesn't hesitate to quit his  
 little chamber, he runs free, he breathes freely.

Whereas you don't know what to expect when the door opens (any  
 more than any of us knows), and all you can rely on, for now, is suspense  
 (it's your neighbor, after all, who has gone to church).

(Tension and release—that was Anna Akhmatova's particular metrical  
 preference too, the amphibrach, a principle for her—and for you?—not  
 only of sound but composition. I have been reading Akhmatova alongside  
*Poems 1962-2012* (the book of her *Complete Poems* is even heavier than  
 yours); she makes a good companion for your work, it turns out, a compari-  
 son and a foil, even though, in contrast to Akhmatova, nothing has hap-  
 pened to you, you've been free of famine or fear of the state, free of terror or  
 enemy bombs...(but then, nothing happened to Emily Dickinson, either).

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1. An aside about the occasional appearance of a persona in these poems. Sometimes “the  
 speaker” in these poems is, say, a flower; and sometimes, a character out of mythology.  
 Are these speakers *you*? For the most part—I hope you don't think this is just saucy—I  
 have side-stepped this question. I don't read you as a ventriloquist, and on the occasions  
 when you pose as a ventriloquist, I still don't read you as a ventriloquist.

“The True [or, Real] Twentieth Century,” Akhmatova said, which all the official histories and all the public rhetoric shied clear of, could be found in her work, at once private, inward, closed, and a record (from a certain vantage point, *the* record) of her time. By “The True Twentieth Century” she meant the lived history of totalitarianism and of war in her time, or even more broadly, within the grand sweep of Russian literary tradition, the record of the individual life in the grip of (an unremittingly dark) History.

“I have lived for thirty years/Under the wing of death,” she wrote in the late nineteen-fifties. I don’t know whether she wrote those lines in the Fountain House, where through some perverse but inspired bureaucratic policy the Russian State allowed her to live, in the grandest palace in Petersburg, suitable for the grandest poet, but in the smallest, barest of rooms, because she was unreliable and, even when silenced, eloquent—and anyway it was good to have her close at hand, should there be need to find her and haul her off for execution.

“In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror,” Akhmatova writes to introduce her great sequence “Requiem,” “I spent seventeen months in the prison lines of Leningrad. Once, someone ‘recognized’ me. Then a woman with bluish lips standing behind me, who, of course, had never heard me called by name before, woke up from the stupor to which everyone had succumbed and whispered in my ear (everyone spoke in whispers there):

‘Can you describe this?’  
And I answered: ‘Yes, I can.’  
Then something that looked like a smile passed over what had once been her face.”

The role of the poet, then, the *national* poet, one whose name is known even, or especially, to those queuing outside the prison gates, is *to give voice*. It is a complication that this role must be filled by a living human being, a complication that I take to be the subject of more or less everything Akhmatova wrote.

The death that looms over Akhmatova is death in the form of killing, usually at the hands of the State; in our twentieth century (spent on Long Island, say, or in Cambridge, Mass.) people die on account of having lived.

Can you describe that?  
Yes, you can.)  
Well, at least the neighbor’s dog gets you out of the house and, as you say, to notice some things, the monarda, and to neglect others, “the ratio/ of the body to the void shifting.”

“Ratio” is a cold word of impersonal measurement, the cold mind applied to the living body, as in Blake’s depiction of Newton, and suggests precision of an unsentimental sort, the possibility of exact observation of the disintegrating body as it approaches death, or perhaps of the emotional relationship between that body—being—and nothingness (whereas shifting is what we do with the living body?). Robert Hass, in his essay on Wallace Stevens’ “The Emperor of Ice Cream,” says “void” is a word from the existentialist 1950s, a word of fashionable misery that enthralled the whole of our set, that is, those of us with a taste for words who were rising out of adolescence at that time; and, insofar as he’s right, which he usually is, the word must have enthralled you, too. (“Maybe you have some kind of void syndrome?”)

Ratio.

Ration.

Rational.

Rationale.

Rationalization.

Ratio in its original use, meaning “the faculty of discursive reasoning,” is still current, as perhaps you’ve noticed, in theological discourse, but otherwise, according to the OED, we’re talking about “a proportional relationship between things not precisely measurable,” for which there’s an example cited from Smollett’s *Peregrine Pickle*: “You must allow that passion acts upon the human mind, in a ratio compounded of the acuteness of sense, and constitutional heat.”

Perhaps you wanted “ratio” to block the path—for us and for you—to sentimental indulgence, or any form of rationalization. (Somewhere in Philip Roth’s novels: “Everyone is immortal, until they die.”) But this has to do with the body, the torn rotator cuff, spidery veins, gnarled fingers, sagging breasts and ass, shortness of breath and haste of urination, “things not precisely measurable”...

so much waist as she cannot embrace  
My mountain belly and my rocky face.

Ben Jonson was forty-seven when he wrote those lines: for you and me, years of vigor and youthfulness, when it was still possible to look in the mirror.

After a lifetime of irritated, and inspired, complaint about the plain fact of the matter, that soul and mind are mired in body (would you put it that

way?), now, shifting toward the void, all there is to die for is body.

A woman's body.  
 Even so, you don't seem to want to claim it.  
 Is it *your* body?  
 "The body, the void..."

(Already in the poems of the young Akhmatova, in her first book, *Evening*, a kind of double narrative imposes itself or emerges, at once almost opaquely personal, possessive, interior, and at the same time *national*, by which I mean the personal life made public, resonant of the national life, placed within the discourse of tradition, and so uniquely representative.

No hint of pain oppresses my breast,  
 If you like, look into my eyes.  
 But I don't like the hour before sunset,  
 The wind from the sea and the word: "Leave!"

2.

...And there's my marble double,  
 Lying under the ancient maple,  
 He has given his face to the waters of the lake,  
 And he's listening to the green rustling.

.....

3.

A dark-skinned youth wandered along these allees.  
 By the shores of this lake he yearned,  
 And a hundred years later we cherish  
 The rustle of steps, faintly heard.

The dark-skinned youth is Pushkin, who, like Akhmatova, lived at Tsarskoye Selo (the Tsar's Village, near St. Petersburg) when he was young, and where, in 1911, the just-married Akhmatova wrote these lines while her (first) husband, the poet Nikolay Gumilyov, was off on one of his many journeys, this one to Abyssinia. She is not a happily married young woman (she was never, then or later, happy never mind lucky in love), the language is terse, "edgy": the theme is pain. But the woman suffering is not, as it were, singular; here Akhmatova notices, as if she had stumbled upon him by chance, coming upon him at the end of a path, her "marble double." Her poems from before the First World War often have an uncanny pre-science to them, like this one, where she envisions herself already among the (male) literary statuary of Tsarskoye Selo. In any event, her marble double is only one among many Others in the body of her work, persons in whom she finds herself represented, or in whom she glimpses what might have

been her/self. She could have been like this one or that one; her fate, as a flesh-and-blood woman, always seems played out in parallel universes. The difference, though, between Akhmatova the poet and her doubles is clarified by her awareness of the presence of Pushkin. It is with Pushkin that she belongs, in whose steps she walks: her doubles live her possible lives as a woman, a lover, a person on a queue outside a prison, but her *life* is writing, and *in* the writing.

In the early poems, written before 1913—the date she chooses, in her masterpiece “Poem Without a Hero,” to mark the divide between her youth and innocence in the twilight of the nineteenth century (or, if you prefer, the parturition of the twentieth), and the years after the Fall, in the True Twentieth Century—in the early poems, the Romantic aura of a life among the allees where Pushkin walked veils the full burden of such a life *in the future*. The world has not yet been turned upsidedown.

It’s a nice coincidence (if it is a coincidence) that the one time you bring Pushkin into the picture—in “Omens”—you offer a gloss on what it’s tempting to call the Parable of the Poet, a parable that’s at least in part about the relation between present and future, experience and meaning.

I rode to meet you: dreams  
like living beings swarmed around me  
and the moon on my right side  
followed me, burning.

I rode back: everything changed.  
My soul in love was sad  
and the moon on my left side  
trailed me without hope.

To such endless impressions  
we poets give ourselves absolutely,  
making, in silence, omen of mere event,  
until the world reflects the deepest needs of the soul.

(Incidentally, have you ever sat on a horse? In the winter, in the snow?) Experience, Virginia Woolf said, is a flood of impressions, in and of themselves no more than (to use your word) events, meaning, of little consequence. To combat the meaningless flood, Woolf wanted to “transfix” the moment, to nail it to consciousness, consciousness, which need not rush along but, through art, might be made still. More than that, made to reflect the deepest needs of the soul.

Which it turns out are not so mysterious, merely elusive—in life.  
How should the poet read her life? As an omen.)

But to return to “the thousand natural shocks/that flesh is heir to.” When the teenage Mary Shelley found herself abroad, along with Byron, Shelley, Polidori, and her rapacious half-sister, Claire, trapped indoors on vacation by a stretch of bad summer weather—the bunch of them constituting the human material for an A-grade research library on the topic of desire—in these circumstances, Mary Shelley imagined Frankenstein’s Creature stumbling for the very first time upon an image of himself. He has been hidden away in a little hut or shed adjoining the cabin of the DeLaceys, whose beauty and gentleness dazzle him.

“I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers—their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions: but how was I terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. Alas! I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity.”

We’re all upset, or worse—aren’t we?—, by the dreadful discrepancy between what we feel ourselves to be and what we see in the mirror, so the unpalatable truth is that the Creature’s miserable deformity afflicts us all. But the genius of Shelley’s idea of the Creature, a person “born” as an adult, transforms what for the rest of us is a long, slow process of recognition into a traumatic flash of insight. The Creature discovers to his horror the first time he is able to “see” himself that he is not only rationality, benevolence, sensibility, but also Body, and that while his inner self radiates wonder and feels wonderfully desirable his outer self is monstrous, repulsive. It takes him a while longer to grasp the full “fatal effects” of his discovery: that “he” is not only embodied but that he *is* Body. As an embodied being he can anticipate being loved by someone else who might see beyond Body to “Self,” or to what he knows as “Self.” But he never encounters such a person: others just see his body, and judge him on that basis alone, including the admirable DeLaceys, and his Maker.

And he is no different: he admires the beauty, the complexions of the DeLaceys. He calls the image in the pool “the monster that I am.”

Perceiving himself as monstrous, he is “filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification.” (To how many of your poems might that apply?)



I say “he” because we know he is male, but at this point in his life-experience does *he* know it? The Creature is perhaps the only character in literature who might be said to have a non-gendered consciousness. Virginia Woolf’s Orlando is man and woman; or man-woman. But the Creature is a being whose awareness, for a time, is absent of gender, precedes gender. How does he know what he is? How *can* he know what he is if he does not know he has a body?

You understand what I’m talking about, I’m sure, because to the very end you are bitter about puberty, as, here, in the middle stanza of “A Village Life”:

I’m tense, like a child approaching adolescence.  
 Soon it will be decided for certain what you are,  
 one thing, a boy or a girl. Not both any longer.  
 And the child thinks: I want to have a say in what happens.  
 But the child has no say whatsoever.

When I was a child, I did not foresee this.

When you had crossed that threshold from childhood to adolescence, just far enough to model yourself on the magazines, you were already, as you say in “Summer at the Beach,” vividly displeased with your fate as Body: you could not imagine going back, because babies can’t think; but you hated the idea of going forward even more, becoming an adult:

They all had terrible bodies: lax, oily, completely  
 committed to being male and female.

(That “completely” teeters at the end of the line as a sad, poignant, final, impossible hanging back before the inescapable “commitment” to gender.)

I am trying to picture that girl on the beach. This must have been a Long Island beach, back in the day, immense stretches of amazingly fine sand; the flat, cold, booming sea; the fierce sun; and the heat.

There are no beaches in Slovakia; but after the Second World War my family settled for a time in Ecuador and, in the summers, we flew from Quito in a commercial propeller aircraft over the Andes to a seaside hotel in Manta, on the Pacific coast. There, like you, I studied the bodies. Then, a year after we had arrived in the U.S., my father bought a Chrysler sedan, and the first thing we did, to celebrate, was drive out to Jones Beach. This would be 1953. I was twelve.

Manta was a cozy, placid resort compared to the vastness of Jones

Beach, in the early 1950s a spectacle of public grandeur, with its massive stone restaurants and immaculate parking lots. There was something fierce and daunting, too, about that desert-sized expanse of beach, the sand burning the soles of your feet, the sun grilling your skin. On my first visit, I returned home with my neck, face, back, arms, legs already blistering and unnaturally red.

But you don't even think about going into the water: you sit, "coltish," in the sand, and cover your feet so you can "sustain [the] deception" that you are taller, lankier than in fact you are (more Audrey Hepburn and less Elizabeth Taylor?). You don't move.

That's the key, I guess. You are not racing headlong into the water; you are not playing beach volleyball (though I like that idea); you are not eating a tuna sandwich or a Good Humor bar (are you eating at all?). I imagine that girl, in her fixed pose, as braced against both past and future, the unthinkable infancy and the horrifying post-adolescence. She doesn't move, betting that her composure will not just protect her—because that girl never feels safe—but transport her.

I sat with my legs arranged to resemble  
what I saw in my head, what I believed was my true self.

Because it *was* true: when I didn't move I was perfect.

That girl thinks she can, through discipline and aesthetic deception, master her fate, and be perfect. The only safety is in perfection. But what threatens her? And: whom does she want to impress?

Boys? Maybe we saw each other at the beach. I don't imagine you would have looked at me, but I would have looked at you. I was furiously studying how to be an American boy, the kind of guy the magazines—*Mademoiselle?* *Seventeen?*—were getting you ready for (1953 is the year when Sylvia Plath was guest editor at *Mademoiselle*). But unlike you I wasn't doing such a good job (I was never comfortable on any playing field). I knew from my mother about fashion, though, and from your pose would have spotted you as a connoisseur. My mother's house in Slovakia backed onto the estate wall of the Malacky branch of the Counts Pálffy, the Hungarian family that ruled Slovakia. She dreamt of marrying a prince, and, when that didn't work out, devoted herself to mastering princely tastes (and dressed me, her only child, like a little prince). She was a seamstress: once she arrived in New York, fantasy and reality beautifully merged for her in the pages of *Vogue*. When she saw something in *Vogue* she especially admired, she'd purchase the pattern, which I guess you could do through the magazine, and make herself the

dress or jacket. Barely five feet tall, she was trim, and did not leave the house if she didn't look...perfect (read: as in *Vogue*). So I would have recognized what you were up to, and, because at that time I still suffered from nightmares about the War, might have sensed too what was going on underneath the studied pose.

It's your mother who takes you to the beach, your mother but not exactly, as you render her, a maternal figure (my mother wasn't a maternal figure, either). She has wounded you in many ways. Given what is going to happen (and in fact what has already happened) to that girl on the beach, you conclude it would have been better not to have been born (a very classical thought).

It was better [you tell your mother] when we were  
together in one body [,]  
when you basked in  
the absolute  
knowledge of the unborn—

but your mother takes this from you—her first, most brutal theft—at birth (“For My Mother”). Now you have a body all your own, but it's not perfect. Worse, it can be harmed (and can do harm, as Frankenstein's Creature also learns—that's *his* coming-of-age).

(When Akhmatova writes about herself as a girl at the beach—“By the Seaside”—she remembers a tomboyish vagabond, “bold and bad and gay,” who buries her yellow dress in the sand so the tramp won't find it, and swims out to the rocks to sunbathe and chat with the gulls—“completely unaware that this—was happiness.”)

This is a girl whom it's hard to read. The poem, a pivotal poem in the body of her work, is a longish narrative fable, unlike Akhmatova's usual brief lyrics; it was written in 1913 or 1914, but the judgment, sense of loss and foreboding, are, again, eerily prophetic, as though the poem had been written many grueling decades later. (I'm reminded of Wordsworth complaining, in “Tintern Abbey,” that now that he's twenty-eight he's lost the vivacity of youth, the vigor and vision of the twenty-three-year-old boy, as he remembers him, who first visited the Wye.) The poem's sunny, distinctively happy Russian childhood seems something of a fiction, for elsewhere Akhmatova insists she “had no rosy childhood/With freckles, teddies and toys...And people's voices were not dear to me.” We know that when she was five years old her younger sister Rika died of TB, casting what she says was a dark shadow over the whole of her childhood (her mother suffered from TB, her older sister Iya died of it at twenty-seven, and Akhmatova her-

self was stricken by the disease—but it did not kill her: nothing that killed others, especially those close to her, succeeded in killing her).

And yet, Akhmatova's melancholy realization, already in 1913, that that "bold and bad and gay" girl will never again know happiness in the same full-throated girlish way is completely convincing, and felt in the reading less as regret than as renunciation. Like "Poem Without a Hero," "By the Seaside" layers or ignores the distinction of past and present, recollection and fable. The tenderly rendered vagabond swims as she likes, becomes "fast friends" with the fishermen, and, haughtily convinced she will become the tsaritsa, brushes off the "gray-eyed boy" who brings her white roses and wants to marry her. "What are you," she asks him, "the tsarevich?" Soon, she tells him, "I am going to be the tsaritsa,/What good will a husband be then?" The gypsy woman reads her future:

Soon you'll be merry, rich you will be.  
Expect a distinguished guest before Easter.  
You will bow to this distinguished guest,  
Not with your beauty, not with love,  
But with your singular song you'll attract this guest.

Many men were attracted to Akhmatova by her song. But never the right man. (Maxine Hong Kingston tells of her dead, never-to-be-named aunt who, when she is alone in her half-deserted Chinese village—because most of the men have gone off to the gold mountain (the U.S.)— puzzles over how she can do her hair in just such a way as to attract only one man among those who have remained behind, how to attract only the man she wants to attract and not all the others at the same time. Presumably Akhmatova never mastered this skill.)

As Akhmatova imagines the tsarevich appearing, seduced by her song as forecast, a curious tremor runs through the poem, not unlike what occurs at the ending of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," also a poem, in its own way, about beckoning the tsarevich. Neither Wordsworth nor Akhmatova seems confident about how to bring these poems to a close, both suddenly fearful, to use Akhmatova's language, that once they put the finishing touches on these poems the Muse will never visit them again. In the case of "Tintern Abbey," the poem seems already to have come to an eloquent close when Wordsworth unexpectedly picks up the argument yet again. Over and over he has invoked a kind of perfection of experience—what he once was—and at the same time lamented its loss. Now, over one hundred lines into the poem, he remains nervous or anxious or unsatisfied about whether he can sustain his imaginative vigor. Abruptly, Dorothy appears ("my dearest

Friend/My dear, dear Friend”—maybe an instance of protesting too much?). Not yet thirty-years-old, Wordsworth fears the very source of his imaginative engagement with nature, his “inspiration,” is drying up. Only the idea that Dorothy will carry on reassures him; only once he has passed the baton to her can he finally let the poem end.

In “By the Seaside” a sister also appears out of the blue—Lena.  
 I was almost the same age as my sister,  
 And we so much resembled each other,  
 That when we were small, our mother  
 Had to look at our birthmarks to tell us apart.  
 From childhood my sister couldn’t walk...  
 And she was embroidering a shroud.

Unlike Dorothy Wordsworth, always at the service of her brother, Lena is a skeptical, doubting double, a drag more than a support, representing doubt and banality. Lena wants to know:

“Where did you hear the song,  
 The one that will lure the tsarevich?”  
 .....  
 Bending down close to her ear,  
 I whispered to her: “Lena, you know,  
 I myself made up the song.”

But that’s not quite right. Throughout her career Akhmatova spoke of her poems as unexpected gifts from unexpected visitations of the Muse. Especially before 1913, her ambition chooses her role, or, put differently, the living woman, bold and gay and intoxicated with freedom, in particular the freedom to do and be what she likes—the living woman wilfully selects her vocation. Many decades later, in “Poem Without a Hero,” she is ready to recognize—though even then, not quite resigned to the idea—that her gift, her role, has chosen *her*, or, put differently, that her gift has determined the course of her life. Before 1913, she imagines she can be what she chooses and can live as she likes; after 1913 it is too late, she has to be what she is, and she has to pay the price, too, of being what she is, which is not simply a flesh-and-blood woman but a woman in the role of national poet, fated, no matter what, to give voice.

In imagining herself as the tsaritsa, Akhmatova imagines the woman and the role as beautifully merged in union with the tsarevich, a union that anticipates both an emotional and an aesthetic state of perfect fulfillment, blissful as well as easy to have and to hold. But as I’ve said, the idea of ex-

posing this fulfillment to the light of day sends a tremor through the poem, as Akhmatova tries to put on the breaks so she doesn't have to anticipate or encounter the future. And so, as the vagabond girl roams the beach, singing her siren's song, she grows drowsy, falls asleep, and wakes to find "an enormous old man, groping about/The deep crevasses in the rocks" where a sailboat has foundered.

Dark-skinned and sweet, my tsarevich  
 Quietly lay and gazed at the sky.  
 Those eyes greener than the sea  
 And darker than our cypress trees—  
 I saw how they were extinguished...  
 Would that I had been blind from birth.

The tsarevich is dead: what will Akhmatova's life be like now that the tsarevich is dead?)

Summer at the beach, with its Beach Boys soundtrack, its luxurious colors, its excess of pleasure, its flippancy, is for you a grimly ironic setting: not a place of summer fun but rather of primal conflict among the members of the family, as in Grimm's fairy tales. You are by far the most dangerous of the people on the sand: and at the same time the most unsettled.

Unsettled, for example, by "Terrible/storms off the Atlantic" threatening your supposedly safe family circle, "a closed form," as you call it. You and your sister—that is, your living sister; your dead sister, like Akhmatova's, seems to have cast a shadow not only across your childhood, but across these poems, too—anyhow, you and your sister, huddled indoors, "felt safe/meaning we saw the world as dangerous." Of course: if you see things coldly, see things as they are, you will grasp that no matter where you may be, in truth you are always in the life threatening forest. (This was my mother's line, too, the refrain of the Jewish mother. My father on the other hand overcame every obstacle without bitterness. He was not forbidding, my father, like yours, but charming and incredibly diligent. But no match for my mother.) Your sister is frightened, even within the safe circle, and takes your hand.

Neither of us could see, yet,  
 the cost of any of this.  
 But she was frightened, she trusted me.

Later, in another poem set at the seaside, this sister appears again (now the cost begins to come into view).

When you fall in love, my sister said,  
it's like being struck by lightning.

Which is the sort of thing we expect from this sister, incapable, as you represent her, of deception.

I reminded her that she was repeating exactly  
our mother's formula, which she and I

had discussed in childhood, because we both felt  
that what we were looking at in the adults

were the effects not of lightning  
but of the electric chair.

When I get to this passage on the trail of your poems I dread reading further. I know what I am going to come across down the line. I know I am going to encounter the poems written when you are besotted—yes, besotted—with love, and then the wrenching poems when you are, how to put it?...hurt?...

I close the book and go for a walk.

It's a cloudy day in mid-March, intermittent rain, pale-green leaves, twisted, pushing up through the earth. (When you think of things growing you are especially attentive, I notice, to lettuce, so delicate and tender when the plant first spreads up out of the soil: perhaps the young leaves awake something sentimental in you. But more on this later.) The clouds rush along above me: Each of us knows our little dramas are dwarfed by, and also succored by, our amazing, incomprehensible astrophysical condition. When I return to my desk, I read:

Who can say what the world is? The world  
is in flux, therefore  
unreadable, the winds shifting,  
the great plates invisibly shifting and changing—

Lightning, rain, constellations...Maybe I've read enough? Maybe I'll stop here and take what consolation there is in your black humor, your Anne Sexton-y tone, your gestures of appeasement...

Although Akhmatova kills the tsarevich in "By the Seaside," in truth she can't do without him, or so she imagines. She identifies him with the fulfillment of her fate: how, then, can she do without him? "Poem Without

a Hero” seems, on first reading, to be a highly stylized or ritualized, operatic answer to that question, Akhmatova’s coming-to-terms with her life as it actually came to pass, without any Romantic projection of fulfillment; but I think on reflection it’s better understood as a chastened reconceptualization of it, the tell-tale sign of which is the poem’s labyrinth of reference and allusion.

To take some examples from the opening of the poem:

The single epigraph to the poem as a whole is from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*:  
*Di rider finirai*  
*Pria dell’ aurora*  
*(You will stop laughing*  
*Before dawn)*

Akhmatova begins writing the poem in 1940, at the very lowest point in her life, in the life of her beloved Petersburg, in the life of the Europe-as-artistic-home to which, at such great personal expense, she remained faithful from the very first moment she set pen to paper. The world all around her is in tatters, so many of the people she had loved are dead, she is a writer almost without an audience. Against all that, “Poem Without a Hero” sets *Don Giovanni*.

Then, before the poem proper begins, Akhmatova inserts a brief passage in prose, dated April 8, 1943, Tashkent, where she was sent along with most of Leningrad’s writers to get them out of harm’s way when the city had become too dangerous to live in. The prose passage is titled “In Place of a Foreword,” and is itself preceded by two epigraphs. The first—

*Deus conservat Omnia*

(God takes care of everything, the motto on the coat of arms of the Fountain House)—

reaches back across Russia, literally and figuratively, from Tashkent to Petersburg, from her grim exile to the Fountain House as symbol of Petersburg past and present;

and the second, the last line of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*:

“Some are gone and others are far away,”

a good-bye from the writer to his poem and at the same time a greeting from the writer to his readers, identifies Akhmatova as the heir and living voice of the main line of Russian literary tradition.

So, *Don Giovanni*. The Fountain House, Pushkin.

Akhmatova approaches the poem proper via three formal “dedications,” the first of which is

*In memory of Vs. K.*



that is, Vsevolod Knyazev, a young poet and Officer of the Guard, who killed himself out of love for Akhmatova's friend and rival, the performer Olga Glebova-Sudeikina, whom Akhmatova casts in a leading role in "Poem Without a Hero." It's impossible not to think Akhmatova also had in mind her first husband, Nikolai Gumilyov, who attempted suicide more than once (the first time when Akhmatova was sixteen), because Akhmatova did not return *his* love. In *Hope Abandoned* Nadezhda Mandelstam says the invocation of Knyazev should also be understood to call up Nadezhda Mandelstam's husband, Akhmatova's close friend (and perhaps lover?) Osip Mandelstam, the great poetic figure of the early Bolshevik era, who, like Gumilyov, perished in Stalin's camps.

This dedication—like the second, to Olga Glebova-Sudeikina; and the third, to Isaiah Berlin, who visited Akhmatova in late 1945 and early 1946 (Akhmatova ascribed to their meeting the beginning of the Cold War)—much more than the oblique earlier reference to Tsarskoye Selo, establishes the central trope for the poem, mixing Akhmatova's "private" life (by the time she began "Poem Without a Hero" she cannot have thought there could any longer be anything "private" about her life) and myth, while at the same time anchoring myth (and history and artistic tradition) in the everyday, "private" life.

These dedications set the scene for the poem, at last, to begin. It is New Year's eve and Akhmatova is visited by a bevy of masquers, ghosts of her youth in the years before 1913, who arrive in appropriately allusive costumes:

This one is Faust, that one Don Juan,  
Dapertutto, Jokanaan,  
And the most modest one—the northern Glahn  
Or the murderer Dorian Gray...

And that's how the poem, which Akhmatova calls a "tryptich," proceeds. The first and by far the longest part is devoted to the years before 1913, and the ghosts of the pre-twentieth century past; the second, turning everything that came before upside down, to the appalling years after; and the epilogue to Petersburg, Petersburg under siege during the Second World War, the physical city where individuals starve, suffer, and die, and Petersburg the living symbol of Akhmatova's Russia, which is to say the city of Pushkin and Dostoevsky, of words and songs.

Akhmatova draws a very sharp line between her world up to 1913, and her world after. Up to 1913 young men had their heads so stuffed with vainglory that suicide on account of unrequited love looked to be as noble

as, say, immolation following the loss of a battle, a grand gesture, heroic, immortalizing. They were intoxicated with the Byronic image of themselves standing (dressed to the nines in military splendor) at the edge of a deep, dark ravine—the deeper and darker the better—defying the gods. After 1913 Akhmatova finds all this embarrassing and silly; she doesn't want to look back on the girl she was then.

Before 1913 Akhmatova lived heedlessly, doing as she liked, and writing about what she liked, for the most part her intimate life as a woman. After 1913 Akhmatova found herself increasingly marked out as a historical personage.

Writing of Knyazev at the close of the first part of “Poem Without a Hero,” Akhmatova says her goodbye to the world of her youth:

*Of all the ways for a poet to die,  
Foolish boy: He chose this one—  
He could not bear the first insult,  
He did not know on what threshold  
He stood and what road  
Spread its view before him...*

Akhmatova, too, could not bear the first insult, but she did not die (nor did you); she did not die after the second, the third, the subsequent decades of insults... Instead she says she has been “left alive” (as you have been). Now, fifty years old, ill, after all her bitter losses facing yet more suffering and loss, at this extremely dark moment in her life, she is surprised by remarkable snatches of verse—which, she says, just “came” to her, unexpected visitations, she says, of her Muse. Eventually she arrives at the conviction that, composed into dramatic form, these verses will “describe” the true twentieth century, and “solve the riddle of [her] life” (the same riddle you want to solve).

In the event, of course, Akhmatova's solution isn't quite what anyone might have expected. Instead of a solution or “answer” Akhmatova drives the reader to the place she has made out of reference and allusion, “the place where,” she says in one of her footnotes to “Poem Without a Hero,” “in the readers' imagination, the entire poetic work was born”:

To the darkness under Manfred's fir tree,  
And to the shore where lifeless Shelley,  
    Staring straight up at the heavens, lies—  
And all the world's skylarks  
    Burst the abyss of the ether,  
    And George holds the torch.

Akhmatova evades and overcomes her personal, political, temporal dire circumstances by a kind of imaginary resettlement among the timeless allees of artistic tradition. The poem is not exactly an answer as much as it is, to use one of Wordsworth's favorite phrases, a "dwelling place": instead of rewriting the ending of "By the Seaside" to reunite her with the tsarevich after so much tragic experience, Akhmatova makes a home for herself and the tsarevich out of memory and allusion. This "dwelling place" is, for Akhmatova, the "real" or "true" Petersburg, a place-in-the-mind the presiding genius of which, the representative figure for how artifice renders life, is...Don Juan (the poem alludes to Mozart's opera, Moliere's play as produced by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Pushkin's drama about Don Juan, "The Stone Guest," in which the phrase "the stone steps of the Commander" appears, a phrase that enters Russian writing to indicate the approach of a sinister fate and which Akhmatova employs while also making reference to Alexander Blok's poem "The Commander's Steps"; and, finally, and not least, Byron's *Don Juan*).

The situation as Akhmatova faces it in 1940 is that the real twentieth century has so inverted authority, elevating cruelty and debasing even the simplest truth, that what was once the nourishing root of personal and national identity—the artistic culture—has been systematically eradicated, almost wiped out entirely, and only survives, as in *Fahrenheit 451*, in memorized verses treasured by no more than a handful of readers and writers, somehow not yet dead. Even *she* is dislodged from her place; even *she* doesn't know where she belongs.

And so, over the span of twenty years, she rebuilds—and she is quite thorough: she peoples the place and gives it words, plots, streets, lovers, music, dance, drama, clothes, masks, tribulations, wine, poison, death...it takes her twenty years but in the end she succeeds in making a home for herself and the tsarevich.

The place is wonderfully cosmopolitan, the achievement...the right word really is "heroic."

And yet, as someone born in a small country plagued for centuries by the careless egotism of the "great," I admit I am not altogether enchanted by it.

I don't know about you, but although I love Byron's *Don Juan* and Byron's fabulous letters, I can barely bring myself to read the ridiculous *Manfred*. And yet (!) Akhmatova locates the origin of her poem—and by implication the origin of poetry altogether—in the soil under Manfred's fir tree.

I can just imagine what Svejek or one of Bohumil Hrabal's pub goers would say.

There is an inescapably melodramatic, even histrionic dimension to the city-scape Akhmatova establishes in “Poem Without a Hero.” I don’t think there’s too much of Dostoevsky’s feverish national mysticism in Akhmatova, but she feels what happens to Russia in her person, so that, for example, she tells us the great shock of her youth was the destruction of the Russian fleet by the Japanese at Tsushima. She never seriously entertained the idea of fleeing Stalin’s Russia, and for many years disdained those of her friends who had emigrated. The trouble is that identifying yourself with the soil of your native land can be, like hatred, dangerous for one’s moral well-being, no less for Akhmatova than anyone else. Mother Russia! This Romantic vein of emotion becomes revolutionary in Shelley and maybe *Manfred*, but in every case it’s bombastic and grandiose: and in my part of the Slavic world this grandiosity, men thinking they can keep company with gods, has always spelled trouble.

The Byron of *Don Juan*, thankfully, is a pretty far cry from the suicidal propagandist of *Manfred*. Byron’s world-view in *Don Juan* is aristocratic (hock and soda water) and arrogant but without cant or gall, witty, compassionate not out of principle or ideology but simply genuine fellow-feeling, sybaritic, exhausting every appetite, including of course every sexual appetite (but maybe, like Tom Jones, sexist without being exploitative?), patriarchal in politics, but, like the views of Ford Madox Ford’s hero Christopher Tietjens, so conservative as to be mistaken for socialism. In the war between Classic and Romantic Byron disdainfully identified himself with the Classic—did he ever have a kind word for Wordsworth?—but his themes, affections, and politics place him in the other camp, obviously in *Manfred* but equally in *Don Juan*.

Akhmatova also has a foot in both camps, and belongs in the haughty company she has chosen. On her stage Sudeikina is an actress, a dancer, a vamp, an oracle, symbol of the age...she calls her her double, but only in the form of a double does Akhmatova inhabit the hallucinatory old world she has summoned on New Year’s Eve. Instead she looks on her old life “As if from a tower” or, in a great image, as if she were “the rime pressing against the windowpane.” All of her actors are dead: she has survived them all. They are part of her, but she is not part of them. They died while still playing in the masque: she, on the other hand, has been left alive. The poem opens in the days of her youth, which Akhmatova conveys as a stylized melodrama, each player in costume; the poem ends in Petersburg, where bombs are falling. The artifice that she loves, and that is every writer’s home, is not however life: no one can have learned this simple truth more thoroughly or through more searing experience than Akhmatova. That’s the solution to the

riddle of her life.)

(Just so you know, to make sense of the thicket of your poems, I worked up a kind of spread-sheet of various, ostensibly helpful, thematic categories. Which one do you think got the most entries? That's right: "Things Will Turn Out Badly.")

Which is why I am sick of you.  
 Do you always have to complain?  
 Trauma shmauma.  
 How frail are you, anyway, or have you ever been?  
 Frail, touchy, oh-so-sensitive.  
 "Touch her, and she bleeds" doesn't come close:  
 You bleed no matter what, no touch necessary.  
 Haven't you outlived most of the competition?  
 A frail woman can be a very manipulative.  
 Bitch.)

The tsarevich reigns in Akhmatova's operatic city, the city of artifice, but there is no Tsarskoye Selo, with its allee of statues, in your life. When you look back, you don't find Pierrot or Don Juan.

Amazingly, I can look back  
 fifty years. And there, at the end of the gaze,  
 a human being already entirely recognizable,  
 the hands clutched in the lap, the eyes  
 staring into the future with the combined  
 terror and hopelessness of a soul expecting annihilation.

The poem ("Birthday") looks back to look forward—"As the future ripens in the past," Akhmatova writes, "So the past rots in the future." The "bold and bad and gay" girl at the seaside makes the mistake of thinking her siren's song will master time; the girl at the end of the gaze makes the mistake of thinking she knows the meaning of annihilation. The fate of the girl at the seaside is turned head-over-heels not on account of something she has done or failed to do, but because in every life things happen. Later, when Akhmatova looks back, she nevertheless faults the girl for having blithely forgotten that, yes, you can sail on the waves, but you can also founder on the rocks. The bold girl at the seaside is overcome by history, which Akhmatova both registers as reality and resists by means of her city of reference and allusion. That's the story of the first half of the twentieth century, what used to be called "a European education" meaning an education in what a human being is capable of, and must be capable of, in the face of

extremity. The story of the second half of the century, your story, is the story of an American family, but in your rendering it is a story with classic dimensions, something like an American tragedy or home epic (George Eliot's phrase for the novel). When you write about your mother, your father you write about the gods; when you write about the gods, you write about your mother, your father. I like especially your poems about Persephone.

The myth of Persephone has everything: love, sex, death, rebirth, betrayal, politics, home and exile, plenty and famine, light and darkness, heaven and hell, illusion and reality...all grounded in the relations of mothers and daughters, daughters and lovers, mothers and the lovers of their daughters. You offer two versions of the myth: in the first, Persephone is abducted, and the focus is on Persephone, on being a girl, on being a girl who is "taken," on being a girl who is taken by a demon lover. This Persephone is in a kind of daze, maybe a sex-daze, just awakening to what has happened to her, and to the meaning of her life. You call the poem "Persephone the Wanderer," so the dominant meaning is that she is neither one thing nor another, neither child nor woman, neither at home nor in exile, neither in love (is she afflicted by the Stockholm syndrome?) nor enraged, neither alive nor dead. Demeter is the earth, and in your poems earth is bondage, our inescapable condition. Like Persephone, we could be in heaven, or we could be in hell, but we are on earth:

You must ask yourself  
 where is it snowing?  
 .....  
 It is snowing on earth; the cold wind says.

And what is earth? Persephone does not know that much about earth.

She does know the earth  
 is run by mothers, this much  
 is certain,

mothers, who universally are powerful, dangerous, vindictive.

Regarding  
 incarceration, [Persephone] believes

she has been a prisoner since she has been a daughter.

You save the main question of the poem for last:

What will you do  
when it is your turn in the field with the god?

Well, we know the answer, don't we, because there really isn't any choice, girls are there to be taken, that's what it means to live bound to earth.

The second version, which you also call "Persephone the Wanderer," focuses on Demeter, so, as you say, "the problems of sexuality need not/ trouble us here." Looked at from the mother's point of view, what problems do trouble us? The problems of being, in particular of physical being. "The child's opinion," you say, "is/she has always existed," but the mother knows better. The mother thinks: "*I remember when you didn't exist.*" Of what is that a memory? Does the mother remember a void: existence/nonexistence? Demeter, in your account, grieves over the death of her daughter, but also, much more fundamentally, blames her daughter. Demeter asks: "*what are you doing outside my body?*" The mother's body—earth—is all there is.

the daughter's body  
doesn't exist, except  
as a branch of the mother's body  
that needs to be  
reattached at any cost.

When Persephone is reunited with her mother, the earth, and spring returns,

You must ask yourself:  
are the flowers real? If

Persephone "returns" there will be  
one of two reasons:

either she was not dead or  
she is being used  
to support a fiction—

the fiction of eternal renewal, of eternal life. If Persephone's return is a fiction, then the flowers are not real. But "the idiot yellow flowers" are not only real, they are the only reality. Eternal life is a fiction: there is no heaven, and there is no hell, there is only earth. Earth contains qualities both of heaven and of hell.

Another unpalatable truth?

The girl at the end of the gaze, in "Birthday," is traumatized by *being*

and expects the worst. But she is a child and has no idea what the worst might be.

All the defenses, the spiritual rigidity, the insistent unmasking of the ordinary to reveal the tragic, were actually innocence of the world.

The annihilation we expect is nothing, just foolishness, compared to what actually happens.

death cannot harm me  
more than you have harmed me,  
my beloved life. ("October")

The dwelling place you choose, in contrast to Akhmatova, is a village in the mountains. You are alone there, although there's the neighbor and her dog; alone, no mother, no father, no lover, and the archetypes, the symbols and myths, no longer signify:

the moon is hanging over the earth,  
meaningless but full of messages.  
It's dead, it's always been dead,  
but it pretends to be something else,  
burning like a star, and convincingly, so that you feel sometimes  
it could actually make something grow on earth.

Unlike the two of us, my father was a village boy all his life; he had learned the habits of husbandry early, and ironed his underwear up to the last day before his death. He kept an enormous drawer packed with brilliantly white, meticulously folded Jockey undershirts and underpants. The thousand dollars in hundred dollar bills could always be found in a plain envelope under his socks; and then he made certain there should be two of everything, just in case, in the pantry. He lived, that is, like Conrad's Marlow, though without introspection, by sticking to his routines in what, despite how shallow it sounds, I think is correctly named the present, all of which I attribute to his being a village boy. He of course knew all about growing things, unlike me, a city boy. All the women I have loved, mind you, have had a green thumb, and a vocabulary precise with the names of flowers and soils and angles of the sun. I have managed to grow a few vegetables (though never lettuce), once giant kohlrabi from seeds my cousin gave me in my hometown in Slovakia. That was in a garden in Chalkwell in Essex, on a high ridge overlooking the Thames. In my garden now on the north shore of Long Island



the trees hang over the soil, things don't get enough light, the tomatoes are always late. I can just about manage the basil and rosemary, the sage, dill, and thyme. The main thing about being a village boy, in my father's case, was that he did not, like you, live in suspense, even at the end. He didn't expect the moon would make things grow.

In "A Village Life" you don't let us wait too long, though, for the sun to rise, the sun that does make things grow, and allows you this for a last line:

On market days, I go to the market with my lettuces.

So: the simplest truths are the most telling.

Since I was reading from the very end of your volume back to the beginning, it took me some time after reading that last line—both of your poem and of your book—before I came to "Baskets" in *The Triumph of Achilles*, written quarter century earlier.

"Baskets"

1.

It is a good thing,  
 in the marketplace  
 the old woman trying to decide  
 among the lettuces,  
 impartial, weighing the heads,  
 examining  
 the outer leaves, even  
 sniffing them to catch  
 the scent of the earth  
 of which, on one head,  
 some trace remains—not  
 the substance but  
 the residue—so  
 she prefers it to  
 the other, more  
 estranged heads, it  
 being freshest: nodding  
 briskly at the vendor's wife,  
 she makes this preference known,  
 an old woman, yet  
 vigorous in judgment.

2.

The circle of the world—  
 in its midst, a dog  
 sits at the edge of the fountain.  
 The children playing there,  
 coming and going from the village,

pause to greet him, the impulsive  
 losing interest in play,  
 in the little village of sticks  
 adorned with blue fragments of pottery;  
 they squat beside the dog  
 who stretches in the hot dust:  
 arrows of sunlight  
 dance around him.  
 Now, in the field beyond,  
 some great event is ending.  
 In twos and threes, boldly  
 swinging their shirts,  
 the athletes stroll away, scattering  
 red and blue, blue and dazzling purple  
 over the plain ground,  
 over the trivial surface.

3.  
 Lord, who gave me  
 my solitude, I watch  
 the sun descending:  
 in the marketplace  
 the stalls empty, the remaining children  
 bicker at the fountain—  
 But even at night, when it can't be seen,  
 the flame of the sun  
 still heats the pavements.  
 That's why, on earth,  
 so much life's sprung up,  
 because the sun maintains  
 steady warmth at its periphery.  
 Does this suggest your meaning:  
 that the game resumes  
 in the dust beneath  
 the infant god of the fountain;  
 there is nothing fixed  
 there is no assurance of death—

4.  
 I take my basket to the brazen market,  
 to the gathering place.  
 I ask you, how much beauty  
 can a person bear? It is  
 heavier than ugliness, even the burden  
 of emptiness is nothing beside it.  
 Crates of eggs, papaya, sacks of yellow lemons—  
 I am not a strong woman. It isn't easy

to want so much, to walk  
with such a heavy basket, either  
bent reed, or willow.