

A Free Variation of
Anna Akhmatova's *Bezhetsk* · Stephen Berg

White hollow silent churches, nobody at prayer,
ice flashes everywhere I look,
everywhere yellow and blue cornflowers open—
my son's eyes, eyes of the boy I love!

These pitchblack Russian nights, throbbing with stars,
trouble the ancient town;
the sickle of the moon
is yellower than honey.

Plains fume beyond the river. Dry white snow
blows in from them, hissing against windows and walls,
men drink and dance and sing—emptiness, pity!—
angels celebrating the day God was born.

I know: they have dusted and washed and tidied up
everything in the best room, all the lamps
under the icons have been lit; the Bible,
closed, thick, black, good, hulks on the oak table,

and as I stand here memories begin
like a few coins that shine in an open hand,
looking precise, as always, stern, telling me
to go up, their famous blank gazes judging me.

I climb the stairs, but I will not go in.
I slam the terrifying door, just as
the whole town fills with the ecstatic tinny
hymn of the Christmas bells.