

Anna

“Only in Russia is poetry respected—it gets people killed. Is there
anywhere else where poetry is so common a motive for murder?”
—Osip Mandelstam

Akhmatova had a method—each day the poet
was to pretend she was condemned to death
so as to make every impression more vivid
and each insight and inscape more searing.

And, as promised by the ancient Alexandrian
who contrived it, the rule worked for Anna
as roses burned red in her mind and music
played only by the breeze proved polyphonic.

The muse arrived now and then, more or less
on schedule, bringing greetings from Dante.
For a few years Anna followed this rule
and it led her to fame and great honors.

She was regarded as a national heroine
as thousands flocked to hear her readings.
Stalin himself seemed to adore her. But then
catastrophe struck and she was declared

an enemy of the State. Former friends
crossed the street to avoid her. Her previous
husband had been executed, her son imprisoned,
and she was exiled to a provincial town,

shared an apartment with the widow of Osip
Mandelstam, whom Stalin had sent to the Gulag
for alleged rudeness in a poem. Poetry,
long second only to Anna’s love for her son,

now seemed a curse, and the sentence
of death no longer a fiction. Each day
she was more eager to have it carried out,
be it by nature or by Stalin's assassins.

As if she were becoming a statue destined
to stand in the snow, Anna began to worship
silence with the same intensity that had fired,
word by word, the heroic carnage of her poems.