

Mandelstam

Forty-Four More Poems

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'The sound, muffled, cautious'

The sound, muffled, cautious:
of tree's fruit, falling,
among endless singing
silent forest depths...

‘From the pool of light, suddenly,’

From the pool of light, suddenly,
you slipped out in a thin shawl –
we disturbed no one at all,
roused not a servant from sleep...

'The freshly cut ears'

The freshly cut ears
of wheat lie in level rows:
slim, trembling fingers press close
to slender quivering fingers.

'More sluggish the snowy hive,'

More sluggish the snowy hive,
clearer the window's crystal,
on a chair, a turquoise veil,
thrown there, carelessly, lies.

A tissue, self-intoxicated,
as if it never felt winter's
touch, experiencing summer's,
by its own delicacy, caressed:

and, if in icy diamonds
frost is eternally streaming,
here – it's dragonflies flickering,
blue-eyed, living, and gone.

'Ears stretch sensitive sails,'

Ears stretch sensitive sails,
dilated eyes lose fire,
over the silence swims
the night-birds' soundless choir.

I'm poor as things natural,
as simple as the sky,
my freedom spectral
as the night-birds' cry.

I see the moon, un-breathing,
a sky dead as canvas:
your world, strange and sickening,
I welcome, Emptiness!

'Like a sudden cloud's shadow,'

Like a sudden cloud's shadow,
a sea-visitor swoops by
rippling past with a sigh,
along the embarrassed coast.

An enormous sail lifts austerely,
deathly-white, and the wave
shrinks back – not yet brave
enough to hug the shore so nearly:

and the boat, rustling the waves,
like leaves...

'From a swamp, evil, viscous,'

From a swamp, evil, viscous,
a rustling reed, I rose to light,
passionate, tender, languorous,
breathing forbidden life.

And no one ever notices
my cold, marshy shelter,
where short autumnal minutes,
greet me with their whisper.

I delight in cruel injury
and in a life, like a dream,
I envy everyone secretly,
I secretly love everything.

'How slow the horses go,'

How slow the horses go,
how dim the lantern's gleam!
These strangers surely know
where they're taking me.

I'm confident in their care,
I'm cold: sleep, my desire:
Catapulted at the corner
Towards the starry fire.

A head nodding feverishly
a strange hand, tender, icy,
and outlines of dark fir trees,
there – unseen by me.

'Light sheds its meagre ray'

Light sheds its meagre ray,
coldly in the damp forest.
I carry Sorrow, a grey
bird, sluggish, in my chest.

What to do with the wounded bird?
Solid, restrained, the silence:
the bells, out of the misted
bell-tower, have been stolen.

And the heights stand,
like a white empty turret,
mute and orphaned,
of mistiness and quiet.

Morning, endless tenderness,
part real, part dreaming –
unrelieved drowsiness –
misted thoughts shifting.

'A troubled sigh of leaves'

A troubled sigh of leaves
a black wind rustling by,
a flickering swallow draws
a circle on the darkened sky.

There's quiet contention
in my tender dying heart
between deepening twilight
and daylight burning out.

Over night-filled woods,
a copper moon's presence.
Why so little music,
and so much silence?

'I hate the starlight,'

I hate the starlight's
monotonous spectrum.
Hail, ancient delirium –
tower's arrowed heights!

Be lace, be stone,
be a cobweb spell:
pierce the empty zone
with the finest needle.

My turn will arrive –
I sense the wing's sweep.
Yes – but where will my live
arrows of mind leap?

Or I'll return, my move
and time worked through:
there – I couldn't love,
and here – I'm afraid to...

The Casino

I don't worship premeditated joys,
sometimes Nature's a grey blemish,
when, slightly tipsy, I'm destined
to the colours poverty employs.

The anchor scrapes sea-depths,
wind toys with a ruffled cloud,
my spirit, lifeless as a shroud,
hangs above the infernal abyss.

But I love the casino on the dunes,
its misted window's endless views,
crumpled cloth, the light's thin cover:

and, surrounded by greenish water,
with the wine in its glass, like a rose,
I love to trace the gulls' winged tremor.

‘Poisoned grain: exhausted air.’

Poisoned grain: exhausted air.
Such difficult ills to cure!
Joseph, sold into Egypt,
couldn’t be saddened more!

Bedouin, on horseback, shut
their eyes: their star-lit faces,
extract past images, plucked
from the day’s vague traces,

that hardly need discovering:
he lost his quiver in the sand,
he traded a horse – happenings
on happenings hazily disband:

and if it’s sung, truly,
wholeheartedly – what lingers
fades out at last: leaves only
the space, stars, the singer!

Note: Osip is the Russian equivalent of Joseph.

Akhmatova

She turned right round, O sorrow,
towards indifferent onlookers.
Turned stone, from her shoulders
a shawl, quasi-classical, flowed.

Ominous voice – drunk with pain –
rising from heart's depths there:
like this – as indignant Phaedra –
Rachel once held the stage.

Note: A memory of a poetry recital in January 1914. Rachel (1820-1858), the French classical actress, caused a European sensation with her interpretation of Racine's *Phèdre*.

'Horses' hooves clattering there,'

Horses' hooves clattering there,
in a crude, and simple century:
the yardmen in heavy furs,
on wooden benches, sleepy.

A knocking at the iron gate
stirs the royally-lazy doorman:
whose wolfish yawns rate
with those of the Scythians!

When, Ovid, with senescent love
mixed snow and Rome, and sang
of ox-wagons on the move
in the march of barbarians.

Note: Ovid was exiled to Tomis (modern Constantza), in the Black Sea region, by Augustus.

'By candlelight it's sweet to dream'

By candlelight it's sweet to dream
of unprecedented Liberty.
In the night, weeping, Loyalty:
cries: 'Once more, stay with me.'

I'll merely place a crown
on your head, that's all,
so, loving, you may bow
to Liberty, as to Law...'

'I'm wedded to Liberty,
as to Law, that's why
I never shall remove
this crown, so light.'

Though we're lost, in space,
doomed to die, should we
regret our act of faith,
our lovely constancy?

‘Not crediting the miracle of re-birth,’

For Marina Tsvetayeva

Not crediting the miracle of re-birth,
we strolled through the cemetery.

– You know, everywhere the earth
still recalls those hills to me,

.....

.....
where Russia halts abruptly
above a black, and empty sea.

The wide fields sloping down
from monastic hillsides, sheer.
I’d no wish to travel south
from spacious Vladimir,
but to stay in that shadowy
village, filled with god’s fools,
with a veiled and misty
nun – spelt disaster, too.

I kiss your sunburnt elbow
and then a wax-like show
of brow, still pale below
a strand of shadowy gold.
I kiss the bracelet’s circle
of white left on your wrist:
ardent summers’ miracles

are worked thus in Tauris.

How soon you ran, darkening,
to the Saviour's meagre icon,
and couldn't be torn from kissing:
yet in Moscow, ever the proud one!
And for us, just a name remains –
miraculous sound for years to come.
Take from me, these grains,
of sand, I pour from my palm.

Note: Tauris: the Crimea. Sand: poetry, memories, time.

‘The stream of golden honey pouring viscous,’

The stream of golden honey poured, so viscous,
slow from the bottle, our hostess had time to murmur:
‘Here, in sad Tauris, where fate has brought us,
we shan’t be too bored’ – glancing over her shoulder.

Everywhere the Bacchic rite, as if all were merely
dogs and watchmen – go, and you’ll see nothing –
the days like heavy barrels rolling by quietly:
far off, hut-bound voices – no response or meaning.

After tea we entered the huge brown garden,
dark blinds lowered like eyelids over windows,
past white columns to inspect the grapes then
glassy air sluicing the sleepy mountain slopes.

I said: ‘The vines live on here in ancient wars,
and curly-haired horsemen fight in leafy rows,
the science of Hellas in stony Tauris – these are
the noble golden acres, the rusty furrows.’

Well, like a spinning wheel, silence in the white room,
smelling of vinegar, paint, new wine in the cellar.
Remember the wife loved by all, in the Greek home,
how long she spent weaving? – Not Helen – that other.

Golden Fleece, where are you Golden Fleece?
The journey: a roar of ocean's heavy waves.
Leaving his ship, its canvas worn by the seas,
Odysseus returned, filled with time and space.

Note: The Argonauts sailed into the Black Sea to seek the Golden Fleece. Mandelstam weaves in the wandering Odysseus returning to Penelope, and the Crimean worship of Bacchus/Dionysus (as witnessed by the Maenads' murder of Orpheus).

‘Still far away are Spring’s’

Still far away are Spring’s
transparent-grey asphodels.
For a while waves seething,
sand rustling to itself.
But like Persephone my spirit
enters insubstantial circles:
sweet sunburnt arms don’t fit
in the kingdom of lost mortals.

Why do we trust the weight
of a funeral urn to some vessel,
on amethyst water celebrate
a black rose festival?
My spirit aspires there
beyond Meganom’s misty cape:
and after the burial, from there
will come – a sail’s dark shape!

How swift the storm clouds flow
in their shadowy column,
where black rose-flakes blow
beneath a wind-tossed moon.
Bird of death and mourning,
Memory, trails its huge
funereal flag, veiling
the stern of cypress-wood.

And rustlings unfold
the bygone years' sad fan,
where an amulet was darkly closed,
with a shudder, in the sand.
My spirit aspires there
beyond Meganom's misty cape:
and after the burial, from there
will come – a sail's dark shape!

Note: Cape Meganom, in the Crimea, juts into the Black Sea. Mandelstam weaves in an element from the myth of Theseus, who displayed a black sail in error as he returned to Athens, causing his father to leap to his death. Persephone is the goddess of the underworld. The amulet is buried love, poetry, memory, as are the rose-flakes of his mother's funeral. There may also be a reference here to an amulet with a Hebrew inscription given to Pushkin, who was exiled to the Crimea like Ovid. See Pushkin's poem 'The Talisman'.

‘When Psyche-Life goes down to the darkness,’

When Psyche-Life goes down to the darkness,
through translucent leaves, chasing Persephone,
a blind swallow, with Stygian tenderness
and a green twig, hurls itself at her feet.

A crowd of ghosts rush to meet this shade,
greeting their new companion with sadness,
wringing their weak hands before her face,
bewildered, but with a shy trustfulness.

One holds out a mirror, another a phial of scent –
the soul’s feminine you see – truly loves trinkets,
and transparent voices, with their dry plaintiveness,
like a fine rain, sprinkle the leafless forest.

Unsure how to begin, among all these tender
cries, she doesn’t recognise the transparent trees,
and breathes on the mirror, slow to hand over,
her lozenge of copper, the misted crossing’s fee.

'Because I could not keep hold of your arms,'

Because I could not keep hold of your arms,
because I relinquished your lips, briny, tender,
I must wait in the dense acropolis for dawn.
How I loathe these ancient, weeping timbers!

The Achaeans ready the Horse in the dark,
their toothed saws cut deep, into the walls,
nothing can quiet the blood's dry talk,
for you there's no name, image, sound at all.

How could I think you'd return, how could I dare!
Why, before it was time, did I break from you?
The cock's not crowed, the gloom's still there,
the hot axe, within, has still not cut through.

Resin oozes from the walls, a transparent tear,
and the town can sense its own wooden ribs,
but blood, storming, has rushed the ladders,
thrice the men have been called from faithless lips.

Where's dear Troy, the royal, the maidenly house?
Priam's tall nest for starlings will be shattered.
And the arrows fall in dry wooden showers,
springing, hazel shoots, out of bare earth.

The last pinpricked stars painlessly fading,

the grey swallow, morning, taps at the window,
and sluggish day, an ox on straw, waking
stirs from long sleep, shaggy from its pillow.

Note: For the meeting of Helen and Odysseus in Troy, and her calls to the Greek warriors hidden in the Horse, see *Odyssey IV*: 235-289.

‘Stamping on the tender meadow, I leapt’

Stamping on the tender meadow, I leapt
into the choir of shadows, with a melody
of a name: the thin mist of sound still left
melting, at that moment, into memory.

At first I thought the name was – Seraph,
and I fought shy of such a weightless body:
Yet merged with it, when a few days had passed,
dissolving into that dear shadow, readily.

Again wild fruit falls from the apple tree,
and before me a secret image glows,
and curses itself, and blasphemes,
and swallows jealousy’s hot coals.

But happiness rolls by, a golden hoop,
performing someone else’s bidding,
and you chase the Spring’s mildness, too,
air the palm of your hand goes cutting.

And we don’t leave, it’s so arranged,
these spell-bound circles.
They lie there, tightly swaddled,
Earth’s vibrant virginal hills.

'We shall meet again in Petersburg.'

We shall meet again in Petersburg,
as though there we'd buried the sun,
and for the first time, speak the word
the sacred, the meaningless one.
In black velvet of the Soviet night,
in the velvet of earth's emptiness,
flowers still flower everlasting, bright,
women sing, beloved eyes are blessed.

The city is arched there like a lynx,
the bridge-patrol stands its ground,
an angry motor dissects the mist
crying out with a cuckoo's sound.
I don't need a pass for tonight,
I have no fear of the guard:
I'll pray in the Soviet night.
for the sacred meaningless word.

Amid the theatre's soft rustling
I hear a girl's startled: 'Ah!' –
and Cypris holds everlasting
roses, clasped in her soft arms.
Bored, by a fire we warm ourselves,
perhaps the centuries will pass,
and beloved hands, women's, blessed,
will gather up the weightless ash.

Somewhere sweet Orphean choirs sound,
dark the beloved pupils of their eyes,
and programmes, fluttering to the ground,
fall towards the stalls, like doves in flight.
You might as well blow out our candles then:
in the black velvet of earth's emptiness
women's shoulders, rounded, blessed, still sing,
but the night sun will not shine here, a guest.

Note: Cypris is probably a reference to Venus the goddess of Love, named Cypris after her island of Cyprus, who appears in Massenet's 1906 opera, *Ariane (Ariadne)*, which involves the story of Theseus, Phaedra, and Ariadne who goes to Persephone's realm to beg for Phaedra's life. All these are potent motifs for Mandelstam. The black sun also refers to Pushkin's burial by night, he representing the buried, suppressed and silent word of the exile, representing pure Russia. Orpheus was the legendary poet, Orphean implies both melodious like his singing, and secret, arcane, like the Orphic rites.

‘In the yard, I was washing, at night – ’

In the yard, I was washing, at night –
Harsh stars were fiercely shining.
Like salt on an axe, rays of starlight,
the rain-barrel freezing, brimming.

The gates are shut with a padlock,
and earth’s bleak, in all conscience –
you’d scarce find anything more basic,
more pure, than truth’s clean canvas.

the cold water grows blacker,
like salt, a star melts in the barrel,
death grows purer, trouble saltier,
earth more truthful, more terrible.

‘Exhaustion’s rosy foam on his fleshy lips,’

Exhaustion’s rosy foam on his fleshy lips,
the bull paws furiously at the green breakers:
he snorts: no oarsman – a sensualist,
his spine unused to burdens, hard labour.

Now and then, a dolphin leaps in an arc,
and a prickly sea-urchin comes into view,
tender Europa, hold him, forever, in your arms –
what yoke could be more desirable, too?

Bitterly she witnesses that mighty splashing,
the swollen sea around seethes in the deep,
terrified by the water’s oily gleaming,
she’d like to slip down from that hairy steep.

Oh, it’s the creak of rowlocks she’d prefer,
the lap of a wide deck, a flock of sheep,
and flickering fish beyond a tall stern –
but the oar-less oarsman swims further out to sea!

Self-Portrait

A hint of wing in the lifted
head. But the coat's flapping.
In the closed eyes, arms' quiet,
there's nervous energy hiding.

Here's one who flies and sings,
and the word, in flames, hammered,
until congenital awkwardness,
by inborn rhythm's conquered.

‘I was only bound childishly to the world of power,’

I was only bound childishly to the world of power,
I dreaded oysters, viewed guardsmen with suspicion –
and don’t owe a particle of my spirit to it, either,
however much I hurt myself trying to be someone.

I never stood under a bank’s Egyptian portico,
frowning with dumb importance, in a beaver mitre,
never, for me, to the crackle of hundred rouble notes,
did a gipsy girl dance, by the lemon-coloured Neva.

Sensing future executions, I fled from the roar
of revolutionary events, to the Black Sea nymphs,
ah, with the beauties of those times – those tender
European ladies – the confusion, stress, grief I glimpsed!

But why does the city, to this day, still retain
its ancient rights over my thoughts and feelings?
Its insolence, with fire and frost, has grown again:
self-satisfied, condemned, frivolous, un-ageing!

Perhaps I saw in some picture book, in the nursery,
Lady Godiva, with a mane of straggling ginger,
so I still go on repeating to myself, secretly,
Lady Godiva, farewell...I don’t remember, Godiva...

‘For the future ages’ resounding glory,’

For the future ages’ resounding glory,
for their noble race of human beings,
I was deprived of my cup at the feast,
my own honour, and joyous things.

Our wolfish era runs at my shoulder,
but there’s no wolf’s blood in me,
better to crush me like a hat deeper
into a Siberian fur’s hot sleeve –

so I’ll see no cowardice, no filthy mire,
no blood-drenched bones on the wheel,
so that blue polar foxes may shine
all night, in primal beauty, for me.

Take me into the night, where the Yenisey
flows, where pines reach the starlight,
because there’s no wolf’s blood in me,
and only an equal shall take my life.

Note: The world's sixth largest river in terms of discharge, the Yenisey runs from south to north across the great expanse of central Siberia.

‘We live, not sensing our own country beneath us,’

We live, not sensing our own country beneath us,
ten steps away they evaporate, our speeches,

but where enough meet for half-conversation,
the Kremlin mountain man’s our occupation.

They’re like slimy worms, his fat fingers,
his words, as solid as weights of measure.

In his cockroach moustaches there’s a beam
of laughter, while below his top boots gleam.

Round him a mob of thin-necked henchmen,
he toys there with the slavery of half-men.

Whoever whimpers, whoever warbles a note,
Whoever miaows, he alone prods and probes.

He forges decree after decree, like horseshoes –
in groins, foreheads, in eyes, and eyebrows.

Wherever an execution’s happening though –
there’s raspberry, and the Georgian’s giant torso.

Note: This anti-Stalin poem led to the poet’s arrest in 1934.

Black Earth (Chernozem)

Too weighty, too black, all that's piled up,
all that's heaped, shrinks, what's well-aired,
all of it crumbles, all shaping a chorus –
moist clods for my oxen, my earth!

In days of spring ploughing – black, near blue,
and for peaceful work the solid ground –
a thousand heaps of furrowed speech –
something unbounded within its bound!

Yet the earth's – a blunder, the butt of a tool:
you can't move it by falling down at its feet:
it sharpens the hearing, a mildewed flute,
your ears with that cool dawn clarinet meet.

How pleasing the rich layers to the blade,
how silent the steppe, in April's ploughing...
Well: live long, black earth: be firm, clear-eyed –
here there's a black-voiced silence working.

'Today makes no sense to me,'

Today makes no sense to me,
yellow-mouthed it exists –
dockyard gates stare at me
through anchors and mist.

Slow, slow, in faded channels,
a battle-convoy slides by,
while narrow pencil-box canals
show blacker under sheets of ice.

‘I shall perform a smoky rite:’

I shall perform a smoky rite:
disgraced, I see, in the opal here
a seaside summer’s strawberries –
cornelians split into two halves
agates, antlike, their brothers,
but a pebble from deep waters,
a simple soldier’s dearer to me,
that no one wants – grey, wild.

Note: *Opala* in Russian is ‘disgrace’.

'Like a belated gift,'

Like a belated gift,
Winter's palpable to me:
and I'm in love with
it's first uncertain sweep.

It's terror's beautiful,
like the start of what's dreadful:
even the ravens fearful
of its leafless circle.

But most intense, fragile –
is its bulging blueness:
half-formed ice, that fills
the river, lulling, sleepless...

'I'm still alive: I'm still not alone,'

I'm still alive: I'm still not alone,
with a beggar-woman beside me
I take delight in the huge empty zone,
the haze, the blizzards, and the freeze.

In beautiful poverty, luxurious distress,
living alone – consoled, and quietly –
these days, these nights, are blessed,
and innocent labour echoes sweetly.

Unhappy he, whom, like his shade,
barking scares, the wind scythes through,
and poor the one, half-alive, who's made
to beg for mercy from a shadow.

'Oh, sluggish, asthmatic spaciousness'

Oh, sluggish, asthmatic spaciousness –
I'm full of it, to the point of rebellion! –
the view's wide open, catching its breath –
there's a blindfold needed here for my vision!

I'd rather have put up with layered leaves
of sand along the Kama's toothed shores,
I'd have clung there to its shy sleeves,
its bends, its precipices, and pores.

A second, an age – I'd have been working
envying outfalls from every rapid there,
listening to the growth of fibrous rings
beneath the surface of the flowing timber.

‘Don’t compare: the living are incomparable:’

Don’t compare: the living are incomparable:
with a kind of tender dread I consented
to the flatness of the plains, and the circle
of the heavens made me feel afflicted.

I appealed to my servant, the air,
waiting for service, for messages,
prepared for a journey, swam the arc
of never-to-be-started voyages.

I’m ready to go – where there’s more sky –
but pure longing now won’t set me free
from the still-youthful hills of Voronezh,
to those, clear, and wholly-human, of Tuscany.

Note: Mandelstam was exiled temporarily to Voronezh in 1933.

'Like feminine silver, it's forged here,'

Like feminine silver, it's forged here,
what fought with oxides and alloys,
and it's quiet work that silvers
the plough's iron, the poet's voice.

‘Hearing, hearing early ice’

Hearing, hearing early ice
rustling under bridges,
I remember, swimming joyous
tipsy, in above my head.

From callous stairs, squares,
angular palazzos, gripped
by his own Florence, Alighieri
sang more fully,
from exhausted lips.

So too my shade picks
at granite grains, by night
it sees a row of blocks
that seemed houses in the light.

or my shade yawns aloud,
and twiddles its thumbs,

or makes noises in the crowd,
by wine and sky made warm,

and feeds the bitter bread
to importunate swans...

Note. Dante was exiled from Florence. He complained of the bitter taste of another man’s bread, and of how hard it was to

climb and descend another man's stair (see: *Paradiso* Canto XVII). His shade picked its way through the underworld in his *Divine Comedy*.

‘Gaps of the curved bays, jetsam, dark-blues,’

Gaps of the curved bays, jetsam, dark-blue,
and the slow sail extended into a cloud –
barely knowing your worth, yet parted from you:
sea-weed’s false-hair longer than organ fugues –
smelling there of long-standing falsehoods.
My mind’s tipsy with an iron tenderness,
and rust gently gnaws at the sloping ground...
Why under my head is there this alien sand?
You – guttural Urals, broad-shouldered Volga,
flat-lands round – here are all my rights – you,
with all my lungs, I must breathe more of you!

'Armed with a wasp's narrow sight,'

Armed with a wasp's narrow sight,
sucking the axis of earth, the axis of earth,
I smell all: the more comes to light,
and I learn it all, I learn it by heart.

I don't paint, and I don't sing,
I don't scrape a black-voiced bow here,
I only strike at life with my sting,
and love to envy sly waspish power.

Oh, if summer's heat, air's sting,
would only make me, from death
from sleep someday escaping,
feel the axis of earth, the axis of earth...

'I'm sinking down, down, down,'

I'm sinking down, down, down,
plunged deep in a fortress, a den of lions,
under this leavening downpour of sound –
more than the Pentateuch, stronger than lions.

How close, close, your summons nears –
a demand like childbirth, of the first-born –
a thread, made of Oceanian pearls,
the meek baskets of Tahitian women.

Mother of songs, made to chasten us,
approach, deep-voiced resonant singer!
All our rich daughters' sweet-shy faces,
primal Mother, aren't worth your little finger.

Yet time's still unbounded for me.
And I've followed the universe's
rapture, like an organ, sotto-voce,
accompanying a woman's voice.

'I lift this greenness to my lips,'

I lift this greenness to my lips,
this sticky promise of leaves,
this breach of promise, Earth –
mother of snowdrops, maples, oak-trees.

Bowing to the humblest root,
see, how I'm blinded, dazed,
this explosion, to one's eyes
isn't the splendour too great?

Frogs, croaking, couple in spheres,
like corpuscles of mercury,
twigs turn into branches,
and mist's a milky fantasy.

‘A Greek flute’s theta and iota –’

A Greek flute’s *theta* and *iota* –
as if words weren’t enough for the ear –
un-carved, and unaccountable,
ripened, toiled, crossed the frontier.

Impossible to leave it behind:
clenched teeth can’t deny it,
the tongue can’t prod it into line,
the lips can’t dissipate it.

The flautist knows no peace –
it seems to him he’s alone,
that he formed his native sea
from lilac clay, long ago.

With distinct, ambitious murmur,
relentless remembering lips, he
hastens to gather the sounds,
cherish them, neatly, stingily.

Later we’re unable to repeat him,
clods of clay in the palms of the sea,
and when *I’m* filled with the ocean,
my measure can only be disease.

And my lips are unable to sing,
there is murder too at the root.

Involuntarily, waning, waning,
I diminish the power of the flute.

‘Potters made its power, this azure isle – ’

Potters made its power, this azure isle –
green Crete. And baked their offerings
in sounding earth. Can’t you recognise,
underground, the beat of dolphins’ fins?

And it’s easy to recall the sea
in clay made joyful by firing,
while the pot’s cold mastery,
cools the flame of sea, and seeing.

Give me back my labour, azure isle,
vanishing Crete, that work of mine,
and from the breasts of the fertile
goddess, fill the jars with wine.

Long ages before Odysseus,
all this existed, and was sung,
before food and drink, for us,
were ‘my’ or ‘mine’ on the tongue.

But renew, and shine for me,
the ox-eyed sky’s starriness,
and the flying fish – fortuity,
and the sea, saying – ‘Yes’.

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