

THE HORSESHOE-FINDER / *Osip Mandelstam*

(1)

We look at the forest and say:
 Here's a forest of ship timber, masts,
 Reddish pine trees
 Free of their flapping burden clear to the top.
 They should creak in a storm
 Like solitary pines
 In the enraged unforested air;
 Under the salty heel of the wind the plumbline will keep steady,
 fastened to the dancing deck.
 And the seafarer
 With his unbridled thirst for space,
 Dragging the geometer's fragile equipment through watery furrows,
 Will check the rough surface of the sea
 Against the pull of the earth's breast.

(2)

And breathing the smell
 Of resinous tears, seeping through the ship's planking,
 Admiring the boards
 Riveted, arranged in bulk-heads
 Not by Bethlehem's peaceful carpenter, but by the other one —
 The father of journeys, the seafarer's friend —
 We say:
 They too stood on the earth, on a well-known mountain range,
 Uneasy as a donkey's spine,
 Their tops forgetful of their roots;
 And they stirred noisily under a freshwater down-pour,
 Vainly offering heaven their precious cargo
 For a pinch of salt.

(3)

Where to begin?
 Everything creaks and pitches.
 The air shivers with similes,
 No one word better than another;
 The earth buzzes with metaphor,
 And light two-wheeled carriages
 In the garish harness of bird-flocks thick with effort
 Burst into pieces,
 Vying with the stadium's snorting favorites.

(4)

Thrice blest is he who puts a name on his song:
A song adorned with a name
Lives longer than the others —
She is distinguished from her friends by her headband,
Protecting her from oblivion, from stupefying odors —
Whether from the closeness of a man,
Or the smell of a powerful animal's fur,
Or simply the scent of savory, rubbed between two palms.

(5)

The air is sometimes dark as water, and everything living swims in it
like a fish,
Pushing against the sphere with fins,
The sphere is dense, resilient, barely warm —
A crystal where wheels move and horses shy,
Neara's moist black earth, every night turned up anew
By pitchforks, tridents, mattocks, and ploughs.
The air is mixed as thickly as earth —
It's impossible to leave it, hard to get into it.

(6)

A rustle runs through the trees as through a mossy clearing;
Children play knucklebones with the vertebrae of dead animals.
The fragile chronology of our era approaches an end.
Thanks for what was:
I made mistakes, got off the track, lost count.
The era clanged like a golden sphere,
Hollow, cast-metal, unsupported,
At every touch it answered yes and no
The way a child answers:
"I will give you an apple," or, "I won't give you an apple,"
With a face to match the voice saying those words.

(7)

The sound is still ringing, although the source of the sound has disappeared.
A horse lies in the dust and snorts, lathered,
But the sharp curve of his neck
Still preserves the memory of a race with legs outstretched —
There weren't four of them,
But as many as there are stones in the road,
Coming alive four at a time
As often as the pacer took off from the ground in a magnificent fever.

(8)

And so,
The one who's found a horseshoe
Blows dust from it
Rubs it with wool until it shines,
Then
He hangs it over the threshold
So that it can rest,
Never to strike sparks from flint again.
Human lips
 having nothing more to say,
Preserve the form of their last word;
And a feeling of heaviness remains in the hand
Although the jug
 half-spilled
 while being carried home.

(9)

What I'm saying now isn't said by me,
It's dug up out of the ground, like grains of petrified wheat.
Some
 depict a lion on their coins,
Others —
 a head;
Various lozenges of copper, gold, and bronze
Lie in the earth sharing the same honor.
This age, trying to bite through them, left its teeth marks.
Time is cutting me like a coin,
And already there isn't enough of me left for myself.

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