

## GEORGE STANLEY / Versions of Russian and French

### Two versions of poems by Anna Akhmatova

#### Our Age (an imitation)

Why is this age worse than all those preceding?  
Because deranged by greed and desirous of pleasure,  
we borrowed against the cancer that was eating us,  
the wound we could not close.

West Point Grey still chills in late sunlight,  
its rays gleam off shop windows & cars,  
but deep scratches have appeared in some of the house doors,  
and rows of ravens weigh down the power lines.

Akhmatova's poem, written in 1919, during the Russian Civil War, is about *grief*. I have changed this to greed. It is also about "the decline of the West." I have substituted the name of a Vancouver neighbourhood.

## Lot's Wife (a translation)

The great man followed the envoy of God  
out of the city, down the road to the black hills.  
The woman, hurrying behind, was beset by a thought:  
It's not too late, you can still look back

to the red towers of Sodom, where you were born,  
the street where you would play, the porch where you would spin,  
the high-windowed room where you lay & gave birth  
to children to be presented to your gentle lord.

She looked. And straightaway struck by a deadly pain,  
her eyes went blind. In the act of turning back,  
her body froze to shimmering salt,  
her swift feet & ankles clove to the ground.

Who among us would mourn for this woman?  
Isn't she thought the least of our losses?  
But I in my heart will never forget Lot's wife  
who gave up living to look back once at her life.

What Akhmatova has added to the story in *Genesis* is the idea that Lot's wife was a local Sodom girl.

## My Room

after Baudelaire, "La Chambre Double"

1

Did I dream this room?  
A refuge for my soul,  
a cell of rainbow light,

where I can bask at sundown  
in negligent regret  
for the passing of desire

on a chaise longue that seems  
itself to dream, in the carved  
sleep of furniture, under fabrics woven  
of the sun's last, long rays?

No bad art on the walls!  
No painstaking realism to distract  
my soul from the dream's  
agreeable clair-obscur!

A tang of cinnamon whiskey  
rides on the vaporous air  
as close to sleep fleeting visions  
come to be slower to fade.

## 2

Against cascading white curtains, ensconced on a white divan,  
the Queen of my Dreams, in basic black (with pearls)  
lounges before my eyes. Whence came she here?  
No matter. I see her. I *recognize* her.

Her eyes whose blaze migrates across the dusk,  
superior eyes that subjugate their slave,  
black, glossy stars that waken awe in me,  
awe, admiration, and enrapturement.

Of what supernal power am I the heir,  
lapped round by waves of peace and mystery?  
What life had I before this marvelous dream  
whose sweet perdures, minute by minute, second by second?

But wait! There are no seconds, minutes. Time's no more!  
This is eternity! The realm of eternal delight!  
Then there's a knock at the door.

## 3

THEN THERE'S A KNOCK AT THE DOOR!

A knock like a sock in the jaw,  
a knock like a kick in the nuts.

The door opens. Three spectres enter:

1. An auditor from Revenue Canada—he wants to measure the floor area of the room I've deducted for business purposes;
2. The kid I bought a coffee last night at Blenz—he's back to tell me the rest of the story of his life since he left Kelowna;
3. The editor of *Thrush* (formerly *Thrust*) magazine: "I just happened to be in the 'hood, can I pick up that poem—'My Room'—you promised me? Is it finished yet?"

My paradise collapses.  
The Queen of my Dreams, all her magic  
& wonderment, vanishes.

And I remember! I remember!  
This hole, this pad, this cell of tedium  
is mine. This is my room.

I see the dusty, ugly, box-like furniture,  
the armchair leaning on its broken leg,  
the grimy window, the spotted mirror,  
the stack of poems, with lines or whole half-pages  
    roughly crossed out,  
the daytimer with doctors' appointments  
    neatly penciled in.

The fragrance of an altered world,  
the sense of a perfected sensibility,  
are supplanted by the reek of smoke & coffee grounds,  
& all around, faint but sharp in the room,  
the smell of one man alone.

In this my world, where I gag with disgust,  
one object seems to smile back like a friend  
(like all friends, it promises flattery, then desertion).  
On the carpet, by the desk, I spy a screw  
of white paper, charred at one end: a fat roach.

And oh yes, Time is back, the louche old King,  
attended by his wretched retinue  
of Thoughts, Memories, Shame, Remorse,  
Apprehension, Premonition, Worry, Anxiety  
(& let's not forget To-do Lists).

The red second hand unbudges & starts its trek  
across the barren steppe to the next tick,  
and as each joyous second leaps from the clock's face,  
it turns cartwheels in the air & cries:  
"I am Life! The life you cannot live,  
the life you cannot not live."

There is just one second in a person's life  
whose role it is to bring really good news.  
But why is it, *la bonne nouvelle* causes  
such terror in everyone who hears it?

Time wears the big hat. Life is his rancho.  
And me he drives like a panting, running steer.  
The Range Boss leans from his saddle & taps me with his taser:  
"Get along, dogie! Head down, slave! Live, loser!"