Stanzas

In Memory of My Mother

I.

Speak. But what do you want to say? Perhaps
How a barge on the city river trailed sunset,
How for two-thirds of June, until the solstice,
Summer stretched on its tiptoes to the light,
How breath of linden blew through sultry squares
And thunder rolled from all directions that July?
You once believed that speech craves an underlying cause
And grave occasion. But that’s a lie.

II.

Listen: the grocery store reeks of watermelon rot,
An empty crate clatters at a back door down the block.
From the suburbs, a sudden breeze carries
A handcar’s echo, buries the asphalt in archive leaves.
Drop the Rubik’s Cube—it’s not worth the hassle.
When all plans fail, eat grapes in the rain,
Sit in the silent yard. With your own two eyes, gaze
At what you’ll recall among the crags and cracks of hell—

III.

So get going. Yet a naked branch—the upas
Of school texts—stubbornly touches the window
At night during rain, just as it did long ago,
Feeling the pane that mama washed.
Though I remember very little from school
I still can see each grain of sand pouring through
The narrow glass neck, an unforgettable rustle.
A primitive instrument, but what a throat for sorrow!
IV.
Strike the floor with spite your ever-wobbly tripod,
Haggard charlatan, not hiding your fraud,
So that, reeking of ozone, a specter of water jets out
Under the leaking roof of a state-owned house.
The furniture jolts you with elbow static, so
Speak again, as if tortured, sans schools and manifestoes,
If this hopeless time and god-forsaken place can imbue
Such love in a total deadbeat like you.

V.
The widower, forty-seven-year-old Aizenstadt,
Now roams the kitchen, can’t cop his usual downer.
Is there reason to smile at this, my friend? I think not,
Even if his funeral-black boxers hang down to his knees.
In this land where happiness requires liquor,
Behind empty crates the guys who’ve seen better days
Raise a toast to Andy Chenier or Sergey Yesenin,
Squander their latest pay on drink by tradition.

VI.
After death I’ll head to my city’s outskirts,
Lift my snout to sky, throw back my antlers—
Taken by sadness, I’ll trumpet into autumn space
What human words could not express.
How the barge sailed in the wake of dying day,
How iron time sizzled on my left wrist,
How with a house key, the secret door swung open.
Speak. There’s nothing else to do with this affliction.
Far past the salty, locust-filled steppes

To My Mother

Far past the salty, locust-filled steppes,
Where in the wild, gray wolves still roam,
Perhaps Baskachi still exists—just six
Scattered shacks with gardens to the Volga.

That summer was uncommonly nasty,
Raining day after day, drenching the boats
In their slips. Why does this come into focus,
As through binoculars, from the field of memory?

Ten years later, as a migrant laborer guest
Of the carnival rabble of settled freaks,
I worked in the salty, locust-filled steppes
At the logical conclusion of Volga peaks.

Why has a pastoral, blue-shirted childhood
Come to my hardened remembrance?
How much water, my God, has flowed
Since the original age of communal apartments!

It means we’re dying, and it’s almost all over.
And the Volga runs into the Caspian Sea.
All sorts of people stand on the bank of the river.
This is the Volga flowing to the Caspian Sea.

Everything that’s happened to us will happen again.
My eyes will swim beneath their lids at night—
You’ll be twenty-five again, and I’ll be one.
Fireworks of blue pigeons will burst in azure skies.

I’ll find you in an apartment now blurred by tears
Where the first TV stood, preemie of progress,
Where a reproduction of old holy Iness
Would gaze at us from behind a shower of hair.
I’ll find you mending some clothes.
The needle, under a slanting ray, will gleam.
Remember how we went to seed, the four of us
In this small village with a Tatar name?

The magic crystal of the TV’s bulbous eye
Fills up with blue. The Volga appears.
“You’re really not tired, Ma? Well, neither am I.
So let’s keep going. We’re almost there.”
To land a job at the garage
And sing about a black gun.
And not once in ten winters
Stop and see your old mum.
En route from Gazli in the south
Down a canister of booze,
Screw some girl from Kaluga
And leave her when she’s due.
Gaseteria lamb on Wednesdays,
Cod-pea soup on Thursdays.
At lunch, to vow to a friend
To rough up the garage owner, then
Surmount the promising hill
Of a thirtieth birthday. At dawn
To drive for black market gravel
And sing the black pistol.
And if you can’t catch that gig, doze,
Your cheek on the steering wheel,
Remembering with gloom and woe
That Mahachkala brawl.