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# Anna

David Ray

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*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.