
The Horseshoe Finder

A Pindaric Fragment

OSIP MANDELSTAM

Translated by Steven J. Willett

We look at a forest and say:
Here's a forest for ships, for masts,
Rose-shadowed pines,
Right to their very tops free of shaggy burdens,
They ought to creak in a windstorm,
Like solitary Italian pines,
In the furious forestless air.
Beneath the wind's salt heel the plumbline holds, set in the
 dancing deck,
And a seafarer,
In his insatiable thirst for space,
Dragging the brittle instrument of the geometer across
 sodden ruts,
Collates against the pull of earthly breast
The ragged surface of seas.

But drinking the scent
Of resinous tears, which show through the ship's planking,
Admiring the timber,
Riveted, well-jointed into bulkheads,
Not by that quiet carpenter of Bethlehem, but another—
The father of voyages, the seafarer's friend,—

We say:
They too once stood on land,
Ungainly, like a donkey's spine,
Their tops overlooking their roots,
Upon the ridge of some renowned mountain,
And clattered beneath fresh cloudbursts,

Suggesting vainly that the heavens exchange their noble
burden
For a pinch of salt.

Where shall we start?
Everything cracks and reels.
The air shivers with similes.
One word's no better than another,
The earth drones with metaphors,
And light-weight carts
Harnessed garishly to flocks of birds dense with strain
Burst to pieces,
Competing with the snorting favorites of the hippodrome.

Thrice blessed, he who guides a name into song;
The song adorned with nomination
Lives longer among the others—
She's marked among her friends by a fillet on her brow,
Which saves her from fainting, from powerful stupefying
smells,
Whether it be the closeness of a man,
Or the smell of fur from a powerful beast,
Or merely the scent of savory, crushed between palms.

The air grows dark, like water, and all things living swim
through it like fish,
Fins thrusting aside the sphere,
Compact, resilient, barely warm,—
A crystal, in which wheels spin and horses shy,
Damp humus of Neaira, furrowed anew each night,
By pitchforks, tridents, hoes, and ploughs.
The air is mixed as solidly as the earth:
One can't get out of it, to enter it is difficult.

A rustle runs along the trees like some green ball.
Children play at knucklebones with vertebrae of dead animals.
The fragile chronology of our era is drawing to its close.

What I'm saying now, I do not say;
It has been dug from the earth, like grains of petrified
wheat.

Some
 portray a lion on their coins,

Others—
 a head.

Assorted copper, gold and bronze lozenges
Lie with equal honor in the earth.

The age, which tried to gnaw them through, imprinted
teeth on them.

Time lacerates me, like a coin,
And I'm no longer ample for myself.

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