

SAMPLER

Concert at a Railway Station

SAMPLER

Osip Mandelstam

*Concert at a
Railway Station*

—a selection of poems—

*translated from Russian
by Alistair Noon*

Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2018 by
Shearsman Books
50 Westons Hill Drive
Emersons Green
BRISTOL
BS16 7DF

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(this address not for correspondence)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-601-1

Translation copyright © Alistair Noon, 2018.

The right of Alistair Noon to be identified as the translator of this work
has been asserted by him in accordance with the
Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.
All rights reserved.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some of these translations have appeared previously, mostly in earlier versions,
in *3AM Magazine*, *Asymptote*, *Black Herald*, *Blackbox Manifesto*, *B O D Y*,
Cambridge Literary Review, *Cerise*, *Circumference*, *Eyewear*, *Fortnightly Review*,
Four Centuries: Russian Poetry in Translation, *Glasgow Review of Books*, *Grasp*,
Guernica, *Horizon Review*, *Litter*, *Long Poem Magazine*, *Mayday*, *Molly Bloom*,
NOON: journal of the short poem, *nth position*, *Ofi Press*, *Oxonian Review*, *Paris*
Lit Up, *SAND*, *Shearsman*, *The Asses of Parnassus*, *The New Statesman*, *Truck*,
Washington Square Review and *York Literary Review*.

Thanks to the editors concerned.

CONTENTS

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Translator's note | 9 |
|-------------------|---|

from *Stone*

| | |
|---|----|
| <i>The muffled sound of the fruit</i> | 13 |
| <i>Read only what children would read</i> | 14 |
| <i>Against the pale-blue enamel</i> | 15 |
| <i>No moon but a clock-face. How's it a sin</i> | 16 |
| On Foot | 17 |
| Hagia Sophia | 18 |
| Notre Dame | 19 |
| Bach | 20 |
| <i>In the quiet suburbs the porters</i> | 21 |
| The Admiralty | 22 |
| Cinema | 23 |
| Dombey and Son | 25 |
| <i>Poisoned bread, not a drop in the air</i> | 26 |
| [Valkyries] | 27 |
| <i>Let's rhyme about Rome, that city of wonders</i> | 28 |
| <i>"Ice cream!" Sun. The air hisses out</i> | 29 |
| <i>Let the brief names of the flowering cities</i> | 30 |

from *Tristia*

| | |
|---|----|
| A Menagerie | 33 |
| <i>The night that can't be undone</i> | 35 |
| <i>Salamis, breath-taking island</i> | 36 |
| The Decembrist | 37 |
| <i>Our hostess had time to say a few words while the stream</i> | 38 |
| [Meganom] | 39 |
| Tristia | 41 |
| <i>As if we'd laid the sun in the ground</i> | 43 |
| <i>I miss mosquitoes in winter</i> | 45 |

from *Poems 1921–1925*

| | |
|---|----|
| Concert at a Railway Station | 49 |
| <i>One night, as I washed in the yard</i> | 50 |
| Light Rain in Moscow | 51 |
| Century | 52 |
| The Man who Finds the Horseshoe | 54 |
| The Ode on Slate | 57 |
| <i>Through the gypsy camp of the darkened street, I'll rush</i> | 60 |

from *New Verses*

| | |
|---|----|
| <i>What dreadful spot are we headed for now</i> | 63 |
| Armenia | 64 |
| [Leningrad] | 69 |
| <i>Like the bulk of a nation starting</i> | 70 |
| Lamarck | 71 |
| Impressionism | 73 |
| To the German Language | 74 |
| <i>We live, but feel no land at our feet</i> | 76 |

from the *Voronezh Notebooks*

from the *First Notebook*

| | |
|--|----|
| <i>I live in key kitchen gardens</i> | 79 |
| <i>Hey there, Earphones, Earphones you snitch!</i> | 80 |
| <i>Voronezh, Crow-Town, permit me to go</i> | 81 |
| <i>What street are we on?</i> | 82 |
| Black Earth | 83 |
| <i>You took away my seas, the run and the running jump</i> | 84 |
| [The River Kama] | 85 |
| <i>We're brimming with life, and that's capital</i> | 87 |
| <i>The full-weight ingots of Roman nights</i> | 88 |
| <i>St. Isaac's freezes to each dead eyelash</i> | 89 |

from the *Second Notebook*

| | |
|--|-----|
| The Birth of the Smile | 90 |
| <i>I marvel at the kids and snow</i> | 91 |
| <i>Goldfinch friend, when I tilt my head</i> | 92 |
| <i>Today is kind of yellow-gobbed</i> | 93 |
| <i>Inside the mountain, the idol sits idly</i> | 94 |
| <i>[Core of an ocean, this region</i> | 95 |
| <i>The goldfinch goes into shudders</i> | 97 |
| <i>I feel the winter begin</i> | 98 |
| <i>It isn't cheap, this yeast</i> | 99 |
| <i>January. Where can I go to vanish?</i> | 100 |

from the *Third Notebook*

| | |
|--|-----|
| Verses on the Unknown Soldier | 101 |
| [Reims – Laon] | 106 |
| <i>So that the sandstone, mate of the wind</i> | 107 |
| <i>I raise these leaves to my lips</i> | 108 |
| [Verses to Natasha Shtempel] | 109 |

Children's Poetry

| | |
|----------|-----|
| Balloons | 113 |
| Ants | 116 |
| The Egg | 117 |

Occasional and Joke Poems

| | |
|---|-----|
| From <i>An Anthology of Ancient Nonsense</i> | 121 |
| <i>Baron Emil grabs a knife</i> | 121 |
| [From Dmitri Shepelenko's album] | 122 |
| <i>As if some prophet down from talking with the Lord</i> | 122 |
| <i>Natasha's back, but where's she been?</i> | 122 |
| <i>Oh Natasha, how clumsy of me</i> | 122 |
| Decision | 123 |

Uncollected Poems

| | |
|---|-----|
| <i>So if our enemies took me captive</i> | 127 |
| <i>Should I take charcoal for the highest praises</i> | 128 |

| | |
|--------------------|-----|
| Biographical Note | 132 |
| Notes on the Poems | 137 |

SAMPLER

Translator's note

The translations were originally made from the edition Osip Mandel'shtam, *Sochineniya v dvukh tomakh, Tom pervyi*, Moscow, Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1990, compiled by P.M. Nerler, with notes by the latter and A.D. Mikhailov. They were reworked on the basis of A.G. Mets's 2009 edition, Osip Mandel'shtam, *Polnoe sobraniye sochinenii i pisem v tryokh tomakh, Tom 1*, Moscow, Progress-Pleyada. Despite numerous editors' and scholars' efforts, the authoritative text of many poems – in particular, the post-1930 poems almost entirely unpublished in Mandelstam's lifetime – remains unstable. This derives from uncertainties as to whether changes and variants resulted from deliberate artistic choices and revisions, (self-) censorship, concealment, miscopying, misdictation, the memorization process, false recollection at a much later date, and/or oral transmission, or lack of access to copies deposited with friends for safekeeping, or a combination of these, on the respective parts of both Osip Mandelstam and his wife Nadezhda Mandelstam, his *de facto* secretary while he was alive and plenipotentiary literary executor – at great personal cost to herself – after his death. As an indication of this textual instability and to facilitate comparison, some variants have been included in the main text placed in square brackets, where they represent additions, or in the notes where they are alternatives. The Mets edition has also been followed with regards to the naming of poems, omitting titles by which poems have subsequently become known but which were not Mandelstam's.

The selection and its title are the translator's. Notes have been largely kept to a minimum of what seems necessary to understand discrete references, without being exhaustive as to the background to the original poems' writing. Readers interested in the latter are referred, with regard to the later poems, to Richard and Elizabeth McKane's *The Moscow and Voronezh Notebooks* (Bloodaxe, 2003). Some non-exhaustive bibliographical information can also be found in the notes.

I am grateful for the critical work of scholars including Clarence Brown, Clare Cavanagh, Gregory Freidin, Mikhail Gasparov, Yuri Levin, Lada Panova, Andrew Reynolds, Omry Ronen, Olga Sedakova and Peter Zeeman, as well as to Ralph Dutli for his comprehensive biography of Mandelstam (in German; translations into Russian and French exist but

none into English at the time of going to press). Thanks are also due to earlier and other current translators of Mandelstam, whose work has, among other things, provided me with an opportunity to cross-check my own interpretation of the originals; José Manuel Prieto's account of translating into Spanish the poem that has become known as "The Stalin Epigram", and translated here as '*We live, but feel no land at our feet*', was particularly helpful (<http://www.bu.edu/translation/files/2011/01/Allen-Handout2.pdf>, last accessed 2 September 2017). I am extremely grateful for the assistance provided to me by Iliya Bolotyansky, Vadim Erent, Alexander Filyuta, Ilia Kitup, Eugene Ostashevsky, Nadja Otten and Alexei Prokopiev in answering frequent and extensive queries, as well as to Kelvin Corcoran, Henry King, Andrew Reynolds, Justin Quinn, Emma Liggins, Antonia Maxwell, Christian Hawkey, Anthony Barnett and Antony Rowland for assistance, support, information and feedback, both major and minor, to Tony Frazer for his patience, also to Alan Baker and John Bloomberg-Rissman, and not least to Sabine Heurs, for putting up with several years of frequent distracted silence intermittently interrupted by mumblings in Russian and English. All shortcomings in the translations remain mine.

SAMPLER

from

Stone

SAMPLER

SAMPLER

The muffled sound of the fruit
that carefully broke from a branch,
amid the incessant chant
of the silence deep in the woods...

1908

SAMPLER

Read only what children would read,
and dream what children think matters;
once the great things lie scattered,
shake off grief and rise to your feet.

Existence exhausts me to death –
oh nothing it owns is of worth.
But I love this desolate earth:
I've never known any place else.

In that distant garden, I'd rock
on a wooden swing. I recall
how the spruces were dark and tall
in the delirium of the fog.

1908

SAMPLER

Against the pale-blue enamel
that April makes conceivable,
the branches of birch trees will stand
and gradually ripen to evening.

Their pattern is sharp and complete,
that stiffened gauze is fine,
like a drawing that somebody's neatly
traced out on a plate of china.

Some merciful artist performs
a design on the glassy heavens,
knowing the transience of such force,
oblivious to the sorrow of death.

1909

SAMPLER

No moon but a clock-face. How's it a sin
that while it dazzles my eyes I examine
the muted stars' milky light?

Poet Batyushkov,¹ son to a parson,
how he'd spout on. "What's the time?" they'd ask him.
"Eternity", he replied.

1912

SAMPLER

On Foot

*To M.L. Lozinsky*²

Nearing mysterious mountain tops,
I can't defeat the fear I feel;
content with every swallow aloft,
I love how the bells rise into a peal.

I'm an ancient walker. A chasm reveals
a sagging bridge I approach and cross;
I think I can hear the snow uncongeal,
how the whole of time ticks on stone clocks.

But I'm no traveller whose name would stop
your eye on pages the light will steal.
There's a grief I sing but keep concealed.

The flying bells bear my soul off,
but avalanches roll in the hills for real.
No music pulls me back from the drop.

1912

Hagia Sophia

Hagia Sophia, where the Lord ordained
that the emperors and nations should halt,
that dome of yours hangs on a chain
from the heavens, observers report.

The centuries followed Justinian's lead
when, for the sake of gods that were foreign,
Ephesian Diana allowed him to steal
one hundred and seven green marble columns.

But what was your architect thinking
as he lavished out apses and recesses,
and with his intensity of spirit and vision
deployed them to the east and the west?

Sublime temple, afloat in the world
your forty windows a triumph of faith
the four archangels on sails unveiled
in your dome are an even sublimer sight.

Outliving centuries, nations, topped
by a sphere, it's wise this building,
and the seraphim there and their echoing sobs
won't warp its dim-lit gilt.

1912

Notre Dame

A basilica stands where Roman justice
judged another nation: displaying its nerves,
as joyful as Adam to have stood there first,
the light cross-vault plays with its muscles.

But a secret scheme is revealed outside:
the strength of the saddling arches forestalls
the buckle and collapse of the laden walls,
and the war-ram of the bold vault stays idle.

Maze of the maker, forest to pass
understanding, the Gothic mind's abyss,
Egyptian force, the meekness of Christ, alas,
oak beside reed where plumb-lines are tears.

But what might I one day create,
stronghold *Notre Dame*, I'd think on my trips
to study and study those monstrous ribs:
a kind of beauty from hostile weight.

1912

Bach

The parishioners are children of dust,
no icons here but the boards
where the psalms of Johann Sebastian
are nothing but numbers in chalk.

What clashing voices reside
in disorderly pubs and cathedrals,
but Bach, you exult like Isaiah:
nobody trumps you in reason.

High-level squabbler, I guess
you found the mind good handrails
by holding hard to the evidence
when you played your grandkids chorales.

And sound? Old man, you're stubborn,
and none of those sixteenth portions
are anything more than your granddaddy
in the polysyllabic organ.

Now, the Lutheran preacher
ascends to his pulpit's blackness
and mingles the din of his speeches
with yours, that would answer in anger.

1913