

1.

Early Poems

from

Goodnight to Mother

1959

In the Bird's Eye

1960

Sources

1962

Impermanent Things

1963

Revocation of Myth

1967

Exile

1970

THE MOUTHS OF STREETS

The mouths of streets are silent, windows go blind,
Cold veins of tracks tremble noiselessly.
In the mirror of wet pavement the sky hangs
With lead clouds full of hail.

My mother is dying in a hospital.
From bed-sheets burning white
She raises her palm—and the arm drops down.
The wedding ring, that hurt when she was washing me,
Slips off her thinned finger.

The trees drink in the winter damp.
The horse, his cart filled up with coal, hangs down his head.
On a record, Bach and Mozart circle
Just like the Earth circles the Sun.

There, in a hospital, my mother is dying.
My mama.

SHE GETS UP

She gets up, moves away from her closed mouth,
She, immobile for so long,
Walks! Steps carefully, like someone
Getting up after a long, long illness.
She walks through his forehead, through my heart,
Through another's tangled hair. She walks — on her own.
For a moment she looks, puzzled,
At the abandoned body and, without regrets,
At us, bent in pain in a morning fog
Like roadside branches. She pushes them
Aside and departs. She fades into radiance.

If I could only believe it! But I didn't see anything
Besides the eyes congealed with tears
And the cold indifferent hands. Mama!

I WAS STANDING

I was standing with my sister over the patch of grave
And we were speaking about some very important things.
The boy is doing better at school. The youngest already chatters.
If you aren't mean to people, they'll be good to you.

The apartment's freshly painted. We bought a table, chairs.
A neighbor stops by sometimes, and says, 'Your place looks nice.'
The plant that mother liked so much is in bloom.
I wanted to bring flowers but was afraid they'd wilt.

The air, tree, stone and earth all listen as we talk
And only the one for whom we bring this news can't hear.
But perhaps she stands behind us and smiles at life's affairs
And whispers, 'I know, my darlings. No need to tell me any more.'

“LOOK,” MOTHER SAYS

“Look,” mother says in my dream,
“Look, a bird soars up to the clouds.
Why don’t you write about it,
How heavy it is, how swift?

“And here on the table—the smell
Of bread, a tinkling of plates.
You don’t need to speak of me again.
There is no me where I rest.

“I’ve passed, I’ve ceased,
It’s enough for me: goodnight!”
So I write this poem about birds,
About bread . . . Mama. Mama.

FUTILE

I carry from childhood all this baggage:
Father's violin in a black case,
A wooden plate with an inscription
To break bread with friends is best,
One narrow road
With a passing shadow of a horse and cart,
A wall marked with mold,
A child's folding bed,
A vase painted with doves,
Objects
More durable than life,
A stuffed bird
On top of a beat-up cupboard,
Ah, and this huge
Pyramid of stairs and doors.
It's not easy
To carry so much.
And I know that until the end
I won't dispose of a single piece.
Until my wise mother
Comes from nowhere to nowhere
And says,
"Give it up, my darling daughter.
It makes no sense."

A HAND

This thing is called a hand.

This thing brought closer to the eyes
covers the world.

Bigger than the sun, a horse, a house,
a cloud, a fly.

This thing of fingers.

This thing with a lovely pink surface.

It is me myself.

It's not merely lovely.

It grabs, holds, pulls, rips off
and its other works are numberless.

It's not merely lovely.

It directs armies,

works the soil,

murders with an axe,

spreads women's thighs

and its other works are numberless.

Its five fingers—five crimes.

Its five fingers—one merit.

THE TIME OF HARVEST AND THE TIME OF POEMS
IS PASSING

The time of harvest and the time of poems is passing.
Sorrel, fern and wild strawberries covered my notebook.
Pine cones and dry seeds of trees
mixed with shreds of sentences.

Not a single poem has yet matured.
The crossed-out words return with clamor.
Light glitters in patches on mowed fields.
This hour too will be more lovely in recollection.

GRANDPARENTS

Our grandparents are happy
in the photo, green as a leaf.
Our young grandmother in love
lays her head on her husband's shoulder.
Grandfather doesn't know yet he has died.
He puffs up his chest garlanded with a fob-chain.
Indulgently he holds his arm around
our young dead grandmother.
He doesn't know yet that next to them
strange cousins rest, and their dead children,
under the porch where breakfast was served
on past mornings of a pleasant summer.
Our grandmother doesn't know at all
that her hands clasp a cold rosary.
In the tilt of her neck happiness plays
like music in a dead instrument.

ANAXIMANDER LANDS AT THE SHORE OF EXILE AND
FOUNDS THE CITY OF SOZOPOLIS

It's me,
Anaximander of Miletus,
exiled from my country.
I can still hear the clatter of black balls
falling into the clay urn.
Guilty.
But one should weigh carefully
what exile is.
Is it only once that a man
experiences exile?
To begin with
you are exiled from mother's womb.
It's the first misfortune, and the cause of all the others.
Later on you are pushed away
from her breast, from her lap.
Exiled from the child's charming ignorance,
then from youth, strength
and from the small hearts of women.
Exiled, one after another, from all ideas
that people value as good.
Finally, after you suffer through all exiles,
you'll be exiled from life,
from this mere sliver of breath.
But exiled from your country?
From that scrap of earth
no more fertile than any other,

from that throng of raucous fellow citizens
who stink of garlic and onions?
So I'm exiled
from brawls, squabbles, stench.
But this isn't punishment. It's almost a favor.
If I were a poet
I'd compose hymns of thanks
to extol my country,
so pleasant from a distance.

It's as hot here as in the oven of an Athenian potter.
The sea's the same
and surely the stars won't be different when they rise.
Here, on this promontory, we'll found
a city of deliverance
from homeland squabbles.
I can already see red tiles,
on which seagulls will rest,
windows shaded by a fishing net,
porches covered by grapevines, among fig trees,
where we'll enjoy the evening.

Exiled — from what privileges?
From the swindles of merchants?
From the insolence of petty bureaucrats?
From the conceit of philosophers?
From the corruption of judges?
From the whorishness of writers?
Or perhaps from the privilege of a crowd's laughter
when jugglers set themselves up near the agora?

And yet,
I, Anaximander
of Miletus,
exiled from my country!
Denied the right to tremble about its fate,
to suffer with it and to cry.

ANGELS

There are angels there really are angels
dressed in jackets in out-of-fashion dresses
they sit at a table drink beer chat
yawn go to bed late
and there in the wardrobe a white wing rests
They don't feel disgust at the dead
at their toil and sweat
because to die is as hard as to pull a plough in spring
In a doctor's white coat they bend over the ill
and to the old they say Well you have to accept it all
In halos of baldness in braids of gray
they pretend sometimes to be a priest who cries alone
with forehead resting on a table
Suddenly they call out a poet's word
their high voice pushes its way through a symphony
and they die young in place of those who don't want to die
or disappear suddenly from under the surgeon's knife
The anesthetist runs shouts Tie up the veins
but they're already far
already in heaven
and only a cloud rustles nearby only a cloud rustles
There are angels there really are angels
they catch every sound idea with the fishing-rod of intelligence
and from pails full of truth pour a bit for good luck
they bake cake poach fish in white wine
they like good jokes
the whites of their eyes shine with laughter

and we don't know whether in a moon-bound vehicle
one won't on the sly squeeze into a space suit
Their calves are too strong as in Flemish paintings
they are corporeal like pale oxen at the stream
but a fiercely kind force is in them
a friendly breeze billows their robes
They sit quietly in a waiting room at the dentist
in an empty chair and are the last to enter
A long silence trails behind them
that's how you can recognize there are angels

2.

The White Manuscript

1970

I WAS BORN

I was born
and I died
I don't remember anything else
a green river perhaps
a green tree
green eyes
and about this so much ado
such regrets about this

OH ANNA JAN

Oh Anna Jan

poor holy images of wood of love and despair

Oh Anna Jan

pagan gods of flesh braided with knots

Oh Anna Jan

a shattered bird of clay

Oh Anna Jan

two words torn apart