

Anna Akhmatova

The Sixth
(from Northern Elegies)

There are three epochs in the memory,
And only yesterday, it seems, the first
Occurred. The soul is underneath their blessed
Vault, and the body is basking in their shadow.
Laughter has not died down, and tears are streaming,
A stain of ink is unwiped on the table,
And a kiss is like a seal upon the heart,
Matchless, unforgettable, goodbye...
But this one doesn't last long...Already
The firmament is not overhead, and somewhere
In a dull suburb is an empty house,
Cold in winter and in summer hot,
Where spiders live and dust lies everywhere,
Letters that were like flames have burnt to ash,
Portraits have been changing stealthily,
And people come to it as to a grave,
And, returning home, they wash their hands
And brush a quick tear from tired lids, heavily
Sighing. But the clock ticks, one spring
Becomes another, the sky turns pink,
Cities change their names, witnesses die,
There is no-one to cry with, no-one to remember
With. And the shades slowly pass from us,
Those shades whom we no longer call upon
And whose return would be terrible to us.
And, once awake, we find we have forgotten
Even the road that led to the lonely house,
And, choked with shame and anger, we run to it,
But everything (as in a dream) is different:
People, things, walls, and no-one knows us – we're
Strangers. We got to the wrong place...oh God!
And now we face the bitterest of all moments:
We realize that we could not contain
This past within the frontiers of our life,
And it has become almost as foreign to us
As to our neighbour in the next apartment.
And that we would not recognize
Those who have died; and those whom God parted
From us, got on splendidly without us –
Even better...

