

Osip Mandelstam: 394

Toward the empty earth
falling, one step faltering—
some sweetness, in this
unwilling hesitation—

she walks, keeping
just ahead of her friends,
the quick-footed woman,
the younger man, one year younger.

A shy freedom draws her, her hobbled step
frees her, fires her, and it seems
the shining riddle in her walk
wants to hold her back:

the riddle, that this spring weather
is for us the first mother:
the mother of the grave.
And this will keep on beginning forever.

There are women,
the damp earth's flesh and blood:
every step they take, a cry,
a deep steel drum.

It is their calling
to accompany those who have died;
and to be there, the first
to greet the resurrected.

To ask for their tenderness
would be a trespass against them;
but to go off, away from them—
no one has the strength.

Today is an angel; tomorrow
worms, and the grave;
and the day after
only lines in chalk.

The step you took
no longer there to take.

Flowers are deathless. Heaven is round.
And everything to be is only a promise.

—*Voronezh. 4 May 1937*

—translated by Jean Valentine and Anne Frydman