

A Photograph from Venice

for Varvara Shavrova

I stand in your shadows in the Campo San Gallo
Wars later, lens-blinked time transfixed in cobalt blue,
Varvara and Georgii, Venice 1910:
You two transfixed: elegant, unknowable, innocent.

Who crouches under cloth to capture your likeness?
And who is that man behind you, staring out?
I count and count the pigeons in your midst
Count until they fly in bloody dreams –

In dreams of snow and flight, abandoned orchards,
Armenia in smoking ruins, Moscow frozen, starving,
Terror writing out its lies on the skin of vanished men
Whole worlds turned upside down, the disappeared

Whose faces live only in sepia photos like this of you,
The photos from the house in Tiflis, Sudebnaya Street:
Akhmatova, Borovski, Sudeikin, Gorodedski -
What music was played there on cello and piano?

What words rang out in shining panelled rooms?
I scan to see what lives in image under tissue: A shoe truncated
at the edge of a summer outing snap. A jealous eye cuts
out a rival but the faces hold hurt love and pride.

I turn the pages of the crimson albums and my light
Gleams back from eyes of a White Guard officer
Great Uncle, beribboned patriot cut down as a dog.
I have your name, Varvara, I trace our line in lens and brush,

Bright shadows hatched again to shape, to life
the birds in swirling stillness, the hand that points so certain
of your place; I think the man behind you is a beggar,
Did you hansom him for luck, or walk away?

I make this image for the altar of Saint Gallo's church
And pray I may forgive this most grievous loss, these sins.