



Isaiah Berlin, 1955 (Cecil Beaton)



Anna Akhmatova (Prague's Writers Festival, 2013)

Christopher Bernard

Aubade

A cold night in Leningrad, in the depths of Stalin's winter.
A middle-aged scholar and an old poet
talk all night about poetry, literature, history,
the Russian poets and writers of the century before,
who nourished them as the Bible did older generations
and would generations to come.
"Pushkin," said the poet.
"Pushkin," said the scholar.
"Chekhov," said the poet.
"Chekhov," said the scholar.
"Turgenev," said the scholar.
"Dostoyevsky," said the poet.
They were silent, then they both smiled.

The old poet talked about her husband,
killed by the Bolsheviks in the '20s,
about her friends – poets, writers, artists –
imprisoned, killed, silenced over the decades
by the leaden avatars of power,
about her son and the daily vigil she kept
for seventeen months
outside the prison where they had taken him,
until she at last gave up.
She recited a poem she had written about that.
Then she offered the scholar tea.
They talked, talked, talked,
walking together across the ice floes of the night.

The sun rose,
and they looked silently outside as the light filtered through the blinds
of her room
like two lovers after a long night of loving.

The scholar left not long after
and walked for hours under the cold sun,
dazzled by the light within him.
He remembered their fingers had just brushed
once as she served him tea.

The poet was harassed, mocked in the press,
publicly rebuked and reviled,
called a slut,
denied access to foreigners
and banished for life from publishing
for consorting, with blatant indecency, with a Western spy.

When the scholar finally returned to his hotel that morning,
he fell across his bed
and thought, "I am in love ... I am in love."

This "found" poem is based on a real incident in the lives of Russo-Jewish-English historian Sir Isaiah Berlin and Russian poet Anna Akhmatomova in 1945. It has been told many times over the years, most movingly in Michael Ignatieff's biography of Berlin and by David Brooks in a column in the *New York Times* in the spring of 2014.

Christopher Bernard is co-editor of *Caveat Lector*. He is author of the novel *A Spy in the Ruins*, the story collection *In the American Night*, and *The Rose Shipwreck: Poems and Photographs*. His novel *Voyage to a Phantom City* will be published later in 2014. He has also written plays, written the libretto and score of an opera, and written and directed poetry films. He writes essays and reviews of theater, music, literature and art for the online monthly *Synchronized Chaos*.