# Two Tragedies in 429 Breaths

Susan Paddon

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This is to certify that the thesis prepared
By: Susan Paddon
Entitled: Two Tragedies in 429 Breaths

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Signed by the final examining committee:

Jill Didur Chair
Mary Di Michele Examiner
Andre Furlani Examiner
Stephanie Bolster Supervisor

Approved by _____
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**ABSTRACT**

**Two Tragedies in 429 Breaths**

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*Two Tragedies in 429 Breaths* is a book-length poem series exploring the experience of loss through engagement with the works of Anton Chekhov. The poems are told from the perspective of a daughter who reads Chekhov obsessively while spending a spring and summer caring for her mother, who is dying from pulmonary fibrosis—a respiratory disease that affects the body not unlike TB. Like Anne Carson's *The Glass Essay,* in which the speaker's world is heavily influenced by her reading of Emily Brontë, the speaker in *Two Tragedies in 429 Breaths* observes the world around her through the prism of the relationships in Chekhov's work and life.

Throughout the collection, the speaker addresses Maria Chekhova and studies Chekhov's wife, Olga Knipper, as she tries to penetrate and understand her own complicity in the veneer of normalcy that her mother seeks to maintain despite her deteriorating condition. The narrative continues after both Chekhov and the speaker's mother have died, demonstrating how the lives around these central figures carry on, but are nonetheless intrinsically linked to their loss.

Heavily reliant on the epistolary form, the collection is divided into six sections. The first five are given the name of a month (May through September) and follow chronologically what is happening in the speaker's home, while providing a narrative that follows Chekhov's life (beginning with him and his sister as children and ending in July of 1904 when the writer dies in Germany). The final section, "After," explores the notion of the archive that remains after death for both public and private figures. What can we

know? What do we have the right to look at? Photographs function as both objects to be studied and artifacts to be preserved, and represent a notion of privacy that is lost after death.

The concept of simultaneous tragedies is another theme in the book. The idea comes from one of Chekhov's short stories, translated as both "Enemies" and "Two Tragedies," in which two deaths taking place at almost the same time lead to an exploration of the hierarchy of suffering. Can one death be more important than another? Does regret or sadness arising from other traumas become self-indulgent in the face of death?

Religion also plays a key role in the lives of all of the protagonists, whether in the beliefs of the speaker's mother and Olga Knipper, or the agnostic doubts of Chekhov and the speaker herself. All of them in their way struggle with death and the prospect of an afterlife.

This project has been highly influenced by the work of Sharon Olds, Susan Sontag, John Berger and Anne Carson. For my research, I am indebted to the work of Donald Rayfield, Harvey Pitcher, Jean Benedetti, Michael Finke, and of course, Anton Chekhov.

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In Loving Memory of

Barbara Gail Anderson Paddon
January 31st, 1941 – August 13th, 2008

*For Pamela and M*

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"Why are the songs so short?" a bird once asked.
"Is it because thou art short of breath?"

(A. Daudet) from the personal papers of Anton Chekhov
Notebook 1892-1904

There are moments worth repeating.

The tenant of regret is never the one we expect.

*I am going to tell you everything.*

*April*

*(red ink on Loblaws receipt)*

*There are days still*
*to come,*

*Maria.*

*Listen. Nothing is over*
*yet.*

*For you the trees are listening. Hear them*
*listening.*

Lately, I've found myself whispering to Maria Chekhova in my head.

*Oh, sweet Masha,* I say.

I have come home to take care of my mother.

*"But I am drawn here to this lake like a seagull."* (*The Seagull*, Anton Chekhov)

Place on a Lake

My mother lives in a house on a lake that freezes
like a thousand meringues, every winter,
just beyond the shore. From the edge,

it is big as any ocean. She does not live
alone. My father is there with her. Together
they weave a happy front, eat McDonald's

on Mondays and pretend that everything
will be okay. Life is a list they have to get
through. My father's roots are in this place

on the lake, though it is not what it once was
when the ferry still came from Cleveland, when
Lombardo played the bandstand, before

the factories, and the smoke stacks that won't let my mother forget
that this is not her home, that she grew up on a real ocean,
with real orange trees in the front yard. Now

she dreams of orange trees, you can see it in the way
she closes her curtains, she lies awake at night

reliving conversations from bygone decades, visions
as clear as a well-remembered dream, the sounds of misplaced
emphasis, the offence she may have caused, *help me think of something nice*,
she whispers to my father to quiet the voices that keep repeating
in the cold cold sheets.

*Chirrup, Chirrup.*

There is a dog disrupting
a magnificent brown finch in the magnolia. *Bromide,*
I call. Even in my dreams I have become obsessed
with Anton Chekhov. The steppe
outside my window

is cold as all hell.

In the dream, the dog doesn't answer, but a real stirring inside
my mother's house reminds me I've been far away and
I must get back.

It is my mother who is closer to Chekhov. The wings inside her,
changing like the peppered moth.

I am more Masha. The sister,

devoted protector, inspector, I keep secret watch,
note blood on pillow casings. I've read
every cough he ever wrote, only
in my dreams they always seem to get better.

There is this recurring vision of a boy
who jumps foxholes on the steppe, who walks
confidently in the rain.

This House

This house, a stage, set by my mother, object
by object, when she first got sick. No two props
are more than three steps apart, the maximum
distance she can travel now, without a pause.
I am her leading stagehand, Danchenko,

driver, bodyguard. Like the old woman
at the Chekhov House Museum in Yalta,
who keeps the books, looks after the upkeep, and
collects tickets at the door, I've been told
how to manage this show.

There is a little boy who runs
through the garden in Yalta, eats the first raspberry
off the bush, while his father contemplates
stealing a small piece of the linoleum
from the front entrance of the writer's home.
This he does with a pocket knife on his key ring
to take back to Pennsylvania for almost no reason at all.

Paris, Cité Jandelle
(one month earlier)

She said she knew I was leaving
even before the call came.
She was the one who loved Chekhov first. His face
blu-tacked to her side of the room. His eyes
between bars of light when the morning sun came in.

By day, she read obituaries for auction houses,
prepared condolence cards for the inheritors
of fine coloured glass lamps and walnut tallboys. By night
she ate jars of white asparagus and palm hearts with chopsticks
and consumed herself in his books. She said, with *The Grasshopper*
butterflied across her lap, she would suck the poison from my wounds
if that was what was required.
And she would share with me his books.

The day I left Paris, I cried all the way to the station,
and not just because of my mother. She said
she had the weight of lead in her guts. Until then,
we'd agreed that we had both always loved stations.

I promised her a lot of things that I knew would be impossible
once I was gone, and she defiantly didn't promise a thing.

She walked alongside the train as we pulled out.
I watched her as she smoothed her hair.
It was melancholy in the spring air.
And in the darkening sky.
And in the train car.

Breakfast

Now I study Chekhov's notebooks
and read his letters. I take them with me
to my oatmeal and toast. It's his inabilities
that interest me most. The number of steps
he couldn't take. The drink he couldn't have.
How he fell on stage, his head thrown back
behind him like a doll when they made him
take a bow.

In the next bedroom, the humidifier rattles.
There is humming from the Hepa filter.
The walls reek of mould spray,
but there is no mould, never was, and nothing
is how I remember it. My mother labours
over each breath as she sleeps. We don't know
what is consuming her and no one
can help us with this. I tear towels apart
when I am alone in the bathroom
in order to settle my nerves.

When I was a child and used to
lie next to her, I would synchronize
our breath. I would pretend
I could climb in and out of her belly
like a marsupial.

When Chekhov was too sick to leave his bed
he would count the knots in the wood paneling
to keep his thoughts from going astray.
Maria warmed his pyjamas and kept
his cupboards clean. She always fed
the cranes in the yard.

There is Sun in the Garden

We will go to the flower market
after all. It's good for her to get out.

My father comes into the kitchen,
with a milky green tea and a dark stain
on his company shirt. He took

an early retirement from the telephone company
more than a decade ago. "I think I'll poach myself
an egg," he mumbles. He's quietly working on his

independence. We know what time it is
by the neighbouring school bell. The sound
makes an electric zap, like a lab rat running

the wrong direction in an undersized maze.
A quarter to nine. It jolts us
on a dozen occasions each day.

Before the end of first period, we
prepare ourselves to go. My mother manages
to will herself from the kitchen chair, to the door

and out along the uneven cement path to the car,
with only the aid of a walker. Her breath rattles,
and I imagine her lungs an empty cage.

I trail behind with a couple
of oxygen tanks and she gets half of her body into the car,
her core twisted, and draped over

the passenger seat, she hangs precariously
out the door. One leg and then the other.
*I did it,* she says.

Faith

All I have of faith are memories from childhood when God
smelled of mothballs and fresh snow evaporating on the fur coats
that hung in the long church corridor, mixed with the stench
of Oscar de la Renta by the room where we ate maple cookies
and drank carton lemonade out of Styrofoam cups sometimes.
It was something you could taste at the back of your throat,
like metallic blood in the dentist's chair.

I remember my mother whispering with her eyes tightly closed
on the icy mountain road, when my sister and I threw punches,
when my father got sick and when her brother died, when I didn't
come home when I said I would. When I said I would.

Easter Day

Church bells, distant canticles
called him to the street. He could walk
through everything.

Like when he walked the streets of Petersburg, ill-dressed
because the show wasn't going
his way. He had forever lost his faith

many miles before. Maria
would always be the first to search, to drop
everything, not sleep

until he came back home. The others
thought they knew better. Leave him to wallow
in success for a while. But they'd turn

to her first. We need a Chekhov play! A sister
can work magic on a stubborn man,
they'd recite, for you he'll do anything, Maria!

She would pray for him and on behalf of him.
He envied her religion.

And he was good to her, her brother.
Save that July when he couldn't manage
a syllable to put her mind at ease. And there were other things.

If she had been born the walker. Someone who could get away on foot.
Who loved to roam the empty streets at night,
the church bells, the distant canticles.

*"Realizing that Uncle Sasha had disappeared, Chekhov quietly made his way towards the kitchen, opened the door very slightly and began to observe the scene ... Aware of Chekhov's absence, Olga [and Maria] left the room as well ... themselves in turn watching Chekhov watch Uncle Sasha."* (*Seeing Chekhov,* Michael Finke)

Watching

From her back garden, my mother's neighbour
is watching us again. It's not her eyes I see,
but the shadow she casts through
the old vine-covered lattice work
that must have taken such
small hands to make.

Leona's neck is craned
towards the row of speckled green
on green leaves that separates
her yard from ours.

I know what she looks like
standing there, not because I can see her,
but because I have seen her
so many times before.

No one visits her now. Not even her
grown up children. She has to get a man in
to cut the lawn.

In her arms, she holds the little Bichon
who's almost nine. All of her love
goes into that hold, the way one hand
meets the other under his
spotted pink belly, like five
expertly spliced ribbons.

We have grown silent
on our side of the property line.
Leona listens to our silence
carefully, not to let us know
she is listening.

Something is not right, she thinks.
Perhaps it's her duty to keep on eye on us.
Keep tabs on who goes in and
out of this house. You never know

when you might be of use.

I go now to the hedge
where our gardens meet
to see if I can't say hello.
But her shadow has vanished.

I'd forgotten the small purple flowers,
still nameless in my memory,
that flourish here
in the shade.

*May*

*(black ink on Coca-Cola carton)*

I am convinced I hear Maria moving in the night.

She slips around the house with stealthy footsteps. She listens
for breaths, counts them on a wooden abacus,
notes them in a book.

*Maria,* I call out,

*Where have you been?*

Chekhov's Sister, 1873

Two legs deep in the water,
there was this girl, Maria,
beside her brother, fishing. She (the sister)
held a blanket
so that he wouldn't drown.

Before drying him off, she checked
his scrawny body, big head,
for leeches. And he hardly noticed her
there among the brambles, the bracken.

They walked along the train tracks home, single file
together, as lovers do
in tired moments,
kicking up dust, both of them, deliberates.
She, there to keep him company,
not to tell the others
he needed her.

My Sister (one)

is a suburb girl, never thinks of moving, she has everything she needs a short drive away. It's clean where she lives and she has help once a week

for her house, her big empty rooms, her butler's pantry. And her dog is sick and shits and pisses on the furniture that was new last year. She feeds

him organic biscuits from the specialty shop that she buys on her way home from work in the city and rubs him down in brown nut oil. On

weekends she rolls her own short crust pastry and roasts locally grown chestnuts and Hubbard squash. She has dinner parties for thirty people and

feels like a failure if a guest has to ask where the bathroom is or where to put her coat. My mother and I pretend everything is status quo when

my sister visits. I moderate and listen to their jokes. I hide the new puffers, the oxygen store, and promise my sister the wheelchair is only

for very occasional use. All of this because my sister is going to have a baby. And for my mother, that baby trumps everyone else.

Maria, 1878

Five for the holidays. A summer
of brothers. Taganrog was a stinkpot in July.
Their parents were gone
on a pilgrimage (Moscow,
holy relics,
Polytechnical exhibition, rich cousins
in Shuia). Maria,

the only daughter,
was left to observe the wanton habits
of adolescent merrymaking.

Even then she could remember
a time, long lost,
for hunting starlings,
and ripping the spines of books
only to bind them together again.

Later, much later, she would also remember
the names of back street brothels,
the then foreign stench of sweat
and lust on her brothers' coats
that she and her mother
could never get clean.

She would hate it, and want it
and, even later, dream it again,
and all over
again.

Kitchen Garden

On their first date, Chekhov took Olga Knipper
to his home in Melikhovo. He showed her
his pond, his flowers, and her favourite, the kitchen garden.
Courgettes, garlic, sugar snap peas, the future lovers played
long games of patience while the sun drew lines
in the garden, the samovar whistled, and their cheeks
grew sore from a constant grin. In the evening, she chased him
around the edges of the property. Once
it got dark, they made love inside the house.

It is May. My mother is watching me plant the flowers
we bought, instructing me geranium by geranium, purple
agapanthuses, recalling what it meant to be in love
for the first time in the spring of her youth. Gary Bergman
took her to see *Lawrence of Arabia* in Nashville
on a rainy night. Her hair got soaked
as they came out of the late showing, but it didn't matter.
Nothing mattered then, because there were still deserts
between there and now and Gary Bergman
kissed her that night for the first and last time.

Room 45, Hotel Dresden, Moscow

I like to imagine
peacock wallpaper and starched sheets. The bathroom
was down the hall.

Before they married, it was their Moscow meeting place
each time he came to the big city.

And if she got there first, straight from rehearsal, did she stand,
shoulders back, before the long dusty mirror to practise not being Arkadina
for a while. Her hair let loose at the temples
like a pair of ribbons. She rubbed rose water
on her knees and feet.

On the way up, two lemonades, he might have told the bellboy, and
a kopeck not to return again that evening. Did he stop each time
on the landing to catch his breath,

hoping to hear a quarrel down the hall, before going in. It was such a long
journey from the South.

When their clothes came off, I know how she would have undressed him,
slowly first (he wore so many layers) under the white of the white sheets.
Outside the city fast asleep.

And how many times he must have almost whispered,
with his nose pressed to the back of her,

they had everything

so long as wanting was ever enough.

Unsent Letter #1

*To:*
*9 Cité Jandelle*
*Paris*

*Dearest J,*

*It feels like both an eternity and yesterday since we saw one another last. I can picture you, cigarette in hand, on the balcony of our flat. Do you still have that blue terrycloth robe?*

*It's Sunday. My father has taken my mother to church.*

*Do you think of me from time to time? I wonder how you would remember me now. I don't go anywhere but to the shops and back.*

*I'm sure that you will never get this letter.*

*xoxoxox*

*June*

*(black ink on graph paper)*

*Maria, Maria,*

*watching me tonight*

*I can't sleep*
*my eyes shut tight.*

*Maria, Maria,*
*stay with me,*
*tonight?*

What She Said

And this morning she made me so angry. What was it that she said? *You miss your life*. That was it. *You miss your life … of course you do sweetheart. I'm sorry you have to be stuck here with me.* Like I am some kind of mope. Like I don't try to smile. Like I don't try to be patient and kind. And she has to go and say that.

The Rules

Don’t ask a woman who is dying
how she is doing. Don’t discuss next
year, next Christmas or curable diseases.

Don’t sleep in, in her company.
Don’t mention widowers who date.
Remember, for someone with a pulmonary
illness, too much excitement, tears, or
laughter can be fatal.

Be careful what books you bring to read.

*"If you were really, truly happy, you would never even notice if it was winter or summer. If I was back in Moscow, I wouldn't care what the weather was like."* (*Three Sisters*, Anton Chekhov)

Two Muses

*Who's ever heard of salting a cantaloupe?* My mother is reading
*Chatelaine*. She doesn't look up.

I have Chekhov's *Three Sisters* open on my lap. I am lonely today
despite having had good dreams. And the sun is even hotter now.

We will go shopping for something to do. Attempting
small tasks is supposed to help the anxious feeling.

*You don't look well, honey*, my mother tells me.
*Are you wearing make up? Go take a walk outside.*
*Why not get your hair cut? How about*
*giving Tammy a call?*

It is conversations like this that shaped my adolescence.

I have to separate pages 14-15 from a dribble of honey.
There is sweat between my fingers. The kitchen fan
is fumbling above my head. The last time
I read from this copy, I was living
in Paris, below the Buttes Chaumont
on a tiny side street that has gardens
in front of the houses.

Yesterday we had news from the doctor.
Lung capacity has dropped another couple percent.

I want to do something unwarranted. I want to
berate my mother.

I have come to the part when, despite their incessant talk,
*(to Moscow, to Moscow* they recite)
it becomes clear Maria, Olga, and Irina
are never going to leave
their father's home.

Yalta, 19xx (one)
*Chekhov to Olga*

Dear Doggie,

Thank you for your sweet letter. I have been in the garden with the hounds most days. Gorki was here. I'm much better. They are building a shipyard on the grounds by the sea. Very noisy. And just when I feel I could write, there is a knock at the door. You would laugh if you could see me deal with the curious ladies. You would surely be jealous of their plump cheeks! We eat the biscuits Masha left for me. By now haven't you found a lover? If you cheat I won't blame you. I remember Moscow! I've no news from Danchenko, which is odd.

I press your hand in mine, loving, Chekhov.

The Moscow Arrangement

From time to time, Maria and Olga Knipper
shared a flat in Moscow. They had the capacity
to be the best of friends.

Olga did her best to be a good host
between rehearsals and parties. Said kind

things to everyone about her sister-in-law. They pinky swore
not to keep secrets; they would share everything
that was possible to share. So what

if once in a while Maria didn't tell Olga
about his wheezing, or exactly what the doctor
in Yalta had said. So what if she sometimes
kept his symptoms

to herself. Is it really so terrible if once or twice Maria
took some small pleasure in the actress fucking up?

When she didn't go to her husband when she'd promised.
When she fell down drunk. When she let Maria
run back to be with him. Again and again.

Yalta, 19xx (two)
*Chekhov to Olga*

When you are sipping champagne, I'm counting flies on the loaf. When you're entertaining dull crowds, I'm here de-dog-earing hoards of books. *Blue* you say? Remember your husband and think of the little half-German he wants to have, if ever we have cause to be in the same place (before vermin becomes him). It is so dull to be alone.

Why is it that I'm here and you stay there?

Yours, faithfully. C.

Silent Agreement

My mother and I have a silent agreement:
there is no time for new things. So we relive her favourites.
*Singing in the Rain*, *The Kingston Trio,* Swedish rye bread, the time my dad
had to buy me a bicycle because I wouldn't stop riding around
the Canadian Tire store and I was only three.
He didn't know I could ride.

She doesn't keep much food down, especially in the evenings.
I have to help her in the bathroom. Another secret we keep.
She takes rainy days personally now. She won't say it,
but I know what she is aiming for, how she would kill
to have that baby in her arms even just once.

Early Afternoon

When my sister comes home
for the weekend, I set the two of them up
on the back porch with a basket of towels and socks
to fold. My mother likes these busy tasks
no matter how long they take to finish.

My sister is supposed to keep her feet up
after a dizzy spell at work. The doctor insists
on strict precautions. And they are happy
to sit out there together taking in the sun.
My father joins them for a time.

My mother goes on about old church board politics,
her grandmother's flower gardens in Sweden, she critiques
television commercials from memory. There are a lot of things
about this life she would change.

Early afternoon is the best time to be out there.
Usually you can see a cardinal or two. I suppose
once in a while I wonder if they notice
that the ice-tea is delivered, that the watermelon
comes scooped on a platter, that there is homemade
rhubarb jam on the flax toast.

But all we have, our moments out there in the sunshine.
The trick is being okay with letting each one pass.

Two Tragedies

There was blood on her dress when she got on the train.
Someone said she turned green before fainting.
It took two guards to lift her body from the platform.
She looked like a dead thing being carried away.

Two doctors came in the night to perform a secret operation.
She said she hadn't even known. Must have been the reason
she fainted in Gorki's play the week before.

Stanislavski was with her in the morning. Maria would fetch her
in a few days to bring her to the writer's home.

The problem was in the timing. She hadn't been to Yalta
three months earlier and a baby couldn't have formed

and disappeared just like that. Two doctors said she almost didn't
make it. The writer and Maria looked after her,
Chekhov moved around with two sticks.

But the problem was in the timing. He could forgive her
anything. This he had to get out of his head.

She did get better. That was her gift. No
miracle. Just the luck of the draw.

The problem was in the timing. There was blood
on her dress.

Seasons Change

like an axe where we are from.
Each day is hotter
than the one before.

I have made us gin and tonics
that we drink outside in the yard
before the minister comes
for her weekly visit.

My mother wipes sweat from her breast
with an embroidered hanky. She has been
a good Lutheran since she can remember, but
there's no Lutheran church here, so
for the last thirty years she has settled
for United.

When she was sixteen, she spent a summer
eating fried chicken, roasted corn
and potatoes with all the good Lutherans
of the north-west. Her mother had to send
a new set of clothes when the ones
she brought would no longer do up. Otherwise

my mother had always kept her figure,
she'll show you in photographs. When the minister

arrives, it's my cue to go back inside where it might
be even hotter. These talks are private. And I am learning

that it is even harder to not believe in God.
I wonder if Maria had to lie the way I do.
*No, no, Chekhov's well, the goat's milk*
*has worked a treat.*

I wonder if all this lying means
that I could never be
a good Lutheran.

When Chekhov died, it was a day or two
before Maria heard word. He didn't want
Olga to send for her to come.

Olga gave Chekhov a Lutheran funeral

in a little church near Badenweiler. She would have
buried him there too if weren't for the telegrams:
*Bring Chekhov home!* His body

was returned, boxed alongside
a fellow countryman,
to Moscow by train.
They rode the whole way
in an airtight oyster car.

*"I am terribly bored…I get up when it is still dark. Imagine it is dark, the wind blows and the rain beats on the window."* (Anton Chekhov)

Quiet Hours

*What time is it?* My mother's voice startles
from beyond her book.

What no one ever mentions is how boring it is to be ill.

The days here are measured
in better and worse than
yesterdays. Today will be better.
There are birds on the lawn.

I have given her a new, dust free, copy
of *An Anonymous Story*. She got annoyed
with the wife in *Lady With a Lapdog,*
before getting to the end.

*Couldn't you find something*
*a little more uplifting?*

We go through the lists:

*Pay CAA membership. Pomegranate juice. You have to manually*
*turn the coffee pot off, open the dryer door, keep silver*
*in plastic bags, milk for your father*, *weeds in the patio stones.*

She has always been very good at preparing
for things. I found her starting to dress
at 5 a.m. this morning
when I let the dog out to run.
Forty-five minutes
for her trousers alone.

We go to the shops before lunch
to minimize our chances of seeing
people we might know.

We learn that we can move
best today with a grocery basket
balanced on her lap and the wheelchair
on loan from dad's friend Al.

*Get some nice preserves for Leona*, she says.

When I come back, I find her still in aisle ten,
fruit and veg. She is helping a young boy,
no more than thirteen, to smell out
a good tomato.

My Sister (two)

Between the two of us, she's the one who never climbed out the window in the middle of the night to drink beer on the hill by the YMCA, never

dropped acid on the football field before a school dance. She got scholarships, a big job with a big salary and full benefits. She wears Gucci

boots and listens to Sinead O'Connor really loud when she is home alone. It's my fault that she is not here with us now. If she were the one

to have come home, maybe she would have thought to run to the States; the MAYO clinic doesn't have restrictions on lung transplants.

But she doesn't know how sick our mother is or how quickly things are changing or else she'd be here. That is what I will have to remember later

when my sister doesn't understand. Why I didn't mention the regular vomiting, the bruises, the screams in the night.

Yalta, 19xx (three)
*Chekhov to Olga*

If you tell me to believe you, I will. I've no use for rumour and gossip. I don't go checking after you, and any abuse you think you're taking is your matter. You can see, being in Yalta has its advantages. Although, some clatter would be a welcome change.

You'll be on your feet in no time and running to your sour husband whose life is a bore. Darling, you know you have great power over this mind that awaits you.

I take your hand in mine. Anton.

## The Many Sides of Maria

They say Bunin loved her,
pressed his body up to hers, pushed notes
under her door when he came to stay.

As best she could, she kept her passions
to herself. Privately preferred laudanum
to love. It is there in the photographs,
the young girl with bullets for eyes
who could have taken the world by storm
in another life had she wanted to. Her
students said there was no one better.

But none of this is left
in her letters.

My Father

I keep a pen and paper to note things down.

Over the years, my father has found my notes
around the house, but never asked me about them.

*It's quite a book you must be writing*, he says today out of the blue.

We go through the house searching
for anything. Mould, dust, poison.
The doctor says

it is just one of those things. He doesn't realize

what a shrug of the shoulders
will mean. How my father will blame himself
without an answer.

How he will go over everything.

Eventually, once, he will tell two friends. They will
be out eating breakfast sandwiches
after a round of golf. He wants to know
if all this is his fault.

In September of 1951, Olga Knipper stayed up
half the night going over old lines, the parts that Chekhov
wrote for her, as though hearing them for the first time.
Her secretary, who slept in the next room,

said it was as if she were speaking
to old friends. She had been so
young then. How could she have understood
what was really being said?

Olga never left the theatre to be with Chekhov.
Her Moscow apartment was on the 7th floor,
without a lift. Each time they parted, he left
in a worsened condition.

If she could only play *The Cherry Orchard* now.

My father tells his friends about my notes
and they nod in some kind of understanding.

But when they go home to their respective wives
they don't mention the breakfast sandwiches, or
the tremble in his voice, or that he got lost
driving them home.

*"... everything around was young and warm and near, everything—the trees and the sky and even the moon—and one longed to feel that it would always be so."* (*The Bishop*, Anton Chekhov)

Chekhov's Bishop Dreams

of not being a bishop.
Returning to a rural life, replete
with simplicity, relieved of other-worldly
commitments. With a mother's eyes
unaverted by awe. For whom death is still
not understood.

The bishop dreams of eating cakes, and dirty jokes
and drinking whiskey
until the wee hours of the night
in the parlour. Pretty girls
in pretty dresses, their cheeks
the colour of wine. And
rest without fear,
sleep before death.
To be anonymous,
again, but not forgotten.

Unsent Letter #2

*To:*
*9 Cité Jandelle*
*Paris*

*Dearest J,*

*I have been painting you a portrait of A.C. from a photograph I keep.*
*It's the one where he is wearing a checkered tie (I'm sure you know it).*

*It's his eyes that I can't get right.*

*How are you? How is the city? Do you still think of me from time to time?*

Yalta, 19xx (four)
*Chekhov to Olga*

Tolstoy was here. Thinks I should
reconsider my religion.

*July*

*(black ink on Benadryl card)*

*Dearest Maria,*

*Things are changing again.*

*We have propped up the head of the bed to keep her from choking while she sleeps. My father decided on stacked coffee tins.*

*We are using the big ones—Maxwell House.*

*P.S. How did you stay so good? Do you remember how good you were?*

*"Everywhere is a desert to the lonely man."* (ring inscription, Pavel Chekhov)

Yalta, 19xx (five)
*Chekhov to Olga*

We spend so  little time,

I  don't even know  if you talk

to yourself,

and

it's so dry here.

All my love,
Anton.

Water Baby

This morning we bought a portable air conditioner from Sears.
My father will install it tonight once it cools down.

I helped my mother to get into the pool today.

She loves to float on the foam pool noodles
with her head back, semi-submerged.

She can move her legs freely in the water. She doesn't seem
to get out of breath. She watches the clouds pass overhead. I wonder

what it makes her think about.

Control

The last time my sister sees my mother at home,
my mother watches her husking corn on the cob
for our dinner. My sister protects
her belly with a softly cupped hand and smiles.
Their shoulders go up and down
at something my sister has said. I watch them
through the kitchen window.

She will go back to the city in the morning. My mom
has told her she is feeling much better and should be able
to visit herself soon. There is a winery in Niagara
where the three of us can have lunch.

I have to stop myself from being angry when my sister
lets the silky yellow strands of corn husk
that have missed the garbage bag I set up for just this reason,
catch wind and take off across the grass.

They blow further still, eventually sinking into the clear waters
of the swimming pool. They dance there, like reeds
in the shallows of a small ocean.

Badenweiler, Germany

When Chekhov and Olga arrived in Badenweiler,
the writer spent his days jotting down notes to loved ones,
dreaming of Italian lakes, nights in Trieste,
and delicate almond biscuits, the powdered
kind that dissolve into nothing
on the tongue.

Dearest Masha,
(He sat at his desk, a glass of seltzer water next to his pot of ink.)

I am already better. Tell everyone. Health is coming back to me.
(But even his fingers were shrinking.)

P.S. Olga is going to a dentist. I don't notice now, as I go about,
that I am ill.

There was not a sound in the hotel room or outside it. There was little
movement in the street.

Hotel Sommer, Badenweiler
(several days later)

Darling Doggie,

My sweet love, as I write, you are away laughing in the room next entertaining the young brothers tonight. How we … you found two Russians, Rabenecks(!), to be sure, in Badenweiler I'll not ever know. Today when you went to Freiburg, I walked the garden, almost got caught in a squabble with two drunk Germans. Leo came to my rescue. We had a chat about fishing. I dream of it, and you; seeing you arrive off a train, your hat blowing. There's nothing we can do now. I feel it coming. Be well. Don't pine. Remember this.

I take your hand in mine.

Hotel Sommer
(still in Badenweiler)

The room is hot. Outside the sun is at its height. There are clothes strewn over the two chairs on the left-hand side of the bed. A broad rimmed woman's hat is hanging on a hook. A game of solitaire is set out on the little writing desk. There is a painting of a willow tree on the plastered wall. In the corner of the room, a man is coming to his end.

The Day They Come

Leona is the first to meet the triple response team when they arrive at our home.

My mom's stats dropped during a routine check-up first thing in the morning. They had to unplug the oxygen machine to get her on the stretcher and plug

her into a more reliable heart. There is no room for me in the small room. So many hands, so many torsos. Then, everything goes into slow motion for a while.

Someone asks me if I have packed a bag, the pill list, what has she eaten, how long has she been like this? One of the workers recognizes my mother as his former

keyboarding teacher from 1999 as he slips a tube up her shirt. He tells me this with absurd excitement, his white teeth beaming, against the black brown of his summer tan.

*August*

*(pencil on white notepaper)*

*Maria,*

*I've been making lists*

*of ways*

*I don't want*

*to die.*

Goodbye Lessons

I tell this to you
as you fall in and out of sleep
in your hospital bed.

*The dry wind howled as the train left the station. Maria Chekhova was taking the arduous three-week journey to Moscow by herself. The stifling air reeked of cigarette smoke in the carriage. The*
*men and women on the train were brown with sun and dust. It was the summer of 1921.*

We have come to the end
of a long summer. Last
night it rained for the
first time in weeks.

*The writer's sister was going to secure his papers that had long been left in the city. When they arrived in Simferopol, she was forced into another carriage. A luggage carrier full of even more peasants than the last. Only standing room was available.*

Your body is working
hard to keep up
with the machines
that blink all day and all
night like a train
approaching from
a distance.

*"Bourgeois! Get her off this train," the peasants yelled when they saw how Maria was dressed, the*
*leather case she held. She tried to make herself as small as possible so that the yelling would stop.*
*She tried to hide her face in the frenzied crowd.*

I offer you water.
You take only
a very little.

*A woman next to Maria had a little boy at her side. The boy was reading one of Chekhov's stories, Van'ka. "Do you know who that is?" Maria asked, pointing to the spine. "Anton Chekhov," said the boy. "Well, that's my brother," the old woman said and smiled.*

Your eyes open again.
This is your kind of story.

*When the boy's mother realized it was true, she gave Maria food and water and stayed with her until it was time to go off in separate directions.*

I take your hand in mine. When I arrived
this morning, you were scared.
You wrote on a pad of white paper
that you thought they might
intubate tonight. Yesterday
I promised I wouldn't let them, now
we both know the impossibility of things.

*The little boy waved until Maria was completely out of sight and when he could no longer see her,*
*he told his mother that he would pray for her safe journey home.*

I tell you this story because
I started praying last night.
Nothing too sophisticated,
just what you showed me
a long time ago.

Jacksonville

The photograph is dated
nineteen sixty-three, Jacksonville
scribbled across the back. You are posed
by the pier, wearing stilettos,
like you often did in those days, your blouse open
just so. If you got on the plane
home he wouldn't ask you again, you told me
but if you hadn't got on that plane—As a child,
I dreamt about your past life, used to practise posing
like you. Draped in one of dad's shirts, arms akimbo,
a belt wrapped tight around my little frame, the bottoms of my heels
pressed against the arches of your shoes.

Tonight your heart leaps heavily against that
beautiful freckled chest. A summer spent
by the pool, it says,
I am growing tired, it says.
I lick my thumb and wipe
a smudge off your cheek, still holding
the fork to your mouth when
the doctor comes in. He is young. He is handsome
and flirts with you but he doesn't know
how beautiful you are behind that plastic mask. He has never
heard you say *good morning* or tasted wild blueberry cake
fresh from your oven.
I want to pull out the Jacksonville
shot to see if your beauty can inspire a miracle,
I want to shake him into God. I want to smell you
once more, with the backs of my white thighs
stuck to your bare knees while you talk on the telephone.
I want you to be here
in the morning, or
I never want to wake up.

Code Blue

That night we went out for dinner
on the lakefront to that little restaurant that's changed hands
such a number of times.

It was the first time the three of us had gone out without you
in recent memory. We ate slowly and talked about nothing.
We ordered three Cokes with our food. After dinner

we walked along the shore by the oil drums and picked up
lucky stones from the gritty sand by the shore. We launched
thin ones out into the waves while the sun grew giant before us.
We did not hurry about a thing.

I knew it would happen that night. That was why we returned
to the hospital after visiting hours. They were in the middle of a procedure
when we got there, so they said we had to wait.

We didn't think it would be over a loudspeaker
that we would hear it, a code blue for your lucky numbered room.
The perfect young doctors raced passed us down the hall.

We all said later, if only we had been braver, we would have burst through
the doors, forced our way like good villains to your room.
But we stood there.

The last thing you said to me when you could still speak, you wanted
to know where all of your worry would go.

My Sister (three)

pretended I was hers when they first brought me home.
They made her wear a mask because of her cold, but she held me.

She smoothed my peach coloured hair with her growing pink fingers.
Each night she would get out of her bed to watch me
and pretend that she could see into my dreams.

Once I spied on her for a whole summer. She drank cases
of Doctor Pepper, read the Dollanganger series and swore
she had ESP. That was the summer we both believed
we could do anything.

## The Minister's Visit

At midnight, when the mosquitoes have finally grown tired, my mother's
neighbour, Leona, is awake to watch the exodus. Her porch light
still going after they've fled. This is how she sees

when the minister arrives
at our door. He crosses

her lawn and then ours. Even
if she had been waiting all summer
for this, his arrival
causes her heart to flutter,
*Oh, God no, oh God no,*
the voice that is inside says.

Her worn out body
makes it to the couch
just before her legs collapse.
She rests there, returning
to the position that she has already
spent most of the night in,
and so many nights in,
next to her T.V. remote, next to
her half-finished pile of Cheetos
delicately placed over a patterned
paper towel.

Leona makes a shopping list of supplies
for a quiche to bring over to the house.
She writes a card that she keeps
for just such an occasion.

When she is finished, she cries
for everything bad that has ever been.
Not because this loss
is so great, but because loss
is a reminder of loss.

Her little Bichon presses his claws
into her thick thighs and licks the orange
powder from her fingers. He sniffs
the corners of her eyes tenderly
and she even thinks she hears him whisper,
*I am here, Leona.*

Before going to bed, she pulls
the heavy curtains
so that no light can get in.
There is so much to do
in the morning.

*Dearest Maria,*

I know where the worry goes. I know where
the worry goes. I know where the worry goes.
I know where the worry goes. I know where
the worry goes. I know where the worry goes.
I know where the worry goes. I know where
the worry goes. I know where the worry goes.
I know where the worry goes. I know where
the worry goes. I know where the worry goes.
I know where the worry goes. I know where
the worry goes. I know where the worry goes.
I know where the worry goes. I know where
the worry goes.

*September*

*(pencil on brown paper bag)*

*Oh, Maria,*

*what have I done?*

*I should have told her everything.*

A Photograph Before Death

Near the end of the first act,
in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, Fedotik
takes a photograph of all the dinner guests
to show up at Irina's birthday party. This is Chekhov's way
of preparing us—someone is about to die.

We found a photograph of you
taken only a week or so before your funeral, your shoulders
tanned from the hot summer sun. You hated
every attempt at a photograph I took all summer, every
time you were asked to smile. Like we were already preserving
you for ourselves. But in this last image
you look happy. I did not take this photograph.
It's you and dad in the swimming pool, he has his arm around you,
your oxygen hose hovers over the water, it traipses
past the camera on timer, out of view across the hot patio stones and
makes a mad dash into the distance,
like a rascal child, it ruins
the carefully planted agapanthuses.

Belaia Dacha, 19xx and 19xx

When the uniformed men
arrived at the white house in Yalta
on the porch overlooking the flowering
fig trees, and quince, Maria was always already
three days hungry.

Her brother was now long gone. She'd hired a hungry girl
to stay by her side for support in the raids. And there was even less
food to go around with the incessant mewing
of cats by the door.

Maria gave the intruders rules
upon entry. Mostly they did
as they were told.

They washed their hands after using the toilet,
shared their cigarettes and picked the horse shit from their boots
before coming inside. She felt lucky. Everybody had heard
what had happened to Dostoyevsky's house.

The looting would always go on for a period. They often
took even more than her food. Shots rang out in the night, broke windows
and whispered a kind of violence. But not the bandits, nor the anti-Bolsheviks,
nor the Whites could go in his room.

When it happened again with the Germans,
she had a few days to prepare the house.
She hung Goethe where Gorki had been,
Set out photos of the Daschunds, and
translations in German of her brother's work.

*What I know of war is a certain kind of prison*
Maria couldn't get the words out of her head.
*I too am like a prisoner.*
*But what is this prisoner like.*

My Father's House

He doesn't erase her handwriting
on the kitchen wipeboard,
or throw anything out
from the fridge. Her glasses sit
on the sideboard
(for almost no reason
at all).

## The Night Before She Died

Maria dreamed of the yard in Yalta.
All of the fruit trees were crying
and she didn't know why. The dogs were there.
Olga too, just back from America, eating a giant
pumpkin pie in the shade. Maria sat down
in the middle of the lawn and began to laugh.
She laughed so hard her stomach cramped and
her feet began to rise up beyond her control.
The movement continued to her knees and hips,
and before she knew it, she was floating upside down,
her dress billowing in the warm breeze
and still she was laughing, utterly and
uncontrollably now. The trees stopped crying
to look at her and all at once, they began laughing too.

Sometimes

If Olga had lived with him
in the white house by the sea,
he never would have had time to write.
At least, that was what he said. And yet
later on it was as if the years had passed before him
and all of a sudden he missed the time they had never had.

Sometimes, as he became more confined to his bed,
under the bow window, he would think she was there
beside him. He would fight her for the pillows and the sheets.
Sometimes he would call out her name.

Once in a while, when the telephone rings
I think for a moment it will be my mother. I can see her
in the lamplight of her living room, twisting the phone cord
around her left hand, rocking in the big green chair.

Sometimes I think to myself she will be there, in my inbox
when I get home (I still have a lot of questions),
when there is still nothing left to say.

Waiting for her Girl

In a residential neighbourhood, not so far from the Moscow Arts Theatre, Olga Knipper-Chekhova, Russia's most enduring actress, in her ninety-first year sat waiting in a creaking captain's chair for her girl to return. The girl was about to do her feet. Her leg lay propped on a tatty stool. She held the newspaper from the previous day. She needed morning light and the paper never arrived until afternoon. *I've never missed a cue in my life*, she called to her girl at the kitchen sink filling a bucket with hot water. The girl manipulated the faucets with a certain expertise. Outside the air was cool and wet. The thaw was in its early stages and young people were gathering on the sidewalks once more. *Ask Stanislavski!* she carried on. Of course, the girl—only twenty-three—was only half-paying attention, the task at hand being quite enough. And the old actress was always so pleased when the water temperature arrived just right for her feet. The girl didn't know Stanislavski anyway, nor could she have asked him if she did. Stanislavski was dead. Dead. Meierhold, Nemirovich, Kachalov, Lilina, Vishnevski. Long dead. The actress scratched a tiny patch of dry skin below her right knee—she looked at the bunion on her foot that would soon be filed down, turned to dust, ready for another to take its place.

That Old Season

I wonder what will happen to things like Christmas. To that summer when I was eleven and we rented a cottage in Muskoka on the lake. I will go on but I will not be ready for the dreams. The dreams that say you are still alive and dying and dying and alive. The dreams where I forget about you in rooms I have equally forgotten about. Dreams where even though I try to hold you, you jump from Ferris wheels and I see your swollen body hit the ground. Yes I will go on, I will get better and throw myself into things. I will occasionally take pills to breathe. I will still want to break plates when you have been dead long enough to call it the past. That old season. Like when the light, inside and out, was different for a while. I write down most things in a kind of letter: this is what we did while you were gone.

Knipper's Death

She'd prepared certain things
like fresh azaleas, clean underclothes,
her favourite photographs in view.

She didn't drink champagne,
she did not special order a funeral shroud.
On the mantle piece she kept a card duly noted
*Last card from Masha*, to help her biographers
through the lot.

When it came out in the papers, most of Russia
stopped drinking their tea
for a moment.

They thought she had gone
many years before.

*After*

Archive

On the blank blank he blank.
How Tolstoy came to see him.
He sent Olga 400 kisses August 13th 1900.
He kept *Hamlet* by the side of his bed.
He never mentions tuberculosis (except in the early play, *Ivanov*, although his characters are virtually always sick).
There are three Chekhov house museums. One holds the originals, while the other two hold duplicates of his possessions.
Facsimiles of a good life including a replica of a bench that Gorki sat on, replica pillows on his beds, and shaving kits.

Levitan was his very dear friend.

The first time he got sick was on route to his grandfather's. The second time was going to the island (Sakhalin) in the middle of Siberia with wet boots on his feet.

We keep your dresses hung neatly in the cupboard, under the linen tablecloths and the silver punch bowl.

Albuquerque, New Mexico
*Mother and two unidentified others, 19xx*

You are straddling a stranger in the photograph. I can see the shape
of his large shoulders, the breadth of his chest, lying on the bed beneath
you. You are half his size.

And there is a girl with you in the room. She is the one who has captured
you both in the shot. Her camera and reflection in the mirror. It wasn't
like you to get caught.

It's strange I care so much about who they are or whether or not you loved
him, or if he was good to you, your twenty-something self, when this photo
doesn't even belong to me. I just happened to find it among your other
private things: the unidentified man in the hotel bed, and you in
Albuquerque that night.

Margaree, Nova Scotia

I imagine you on the porch of the house that I will build one day on the land I am going to purchase. I have found two rattan chairs like the ones your mother kept on the wrap-around veranda when you were a child. You see, I have taken you back to the ocean of your reveries, your past life. I have brought you east and I have planted you here so that the sunshine can wake you. You will stay here with me until I catch up to you in years, no matter how long it takes me. We are only a kilometer from the ocean here. The river is close enough to sound like a bath running. I remember how you loved hot baths even in the summertime, especially in the summertime. You would let me open the door and talk to you. I asked if God was a real man, sitting cross-legged on the shag carpet where the hall and cold tiles met. He was, you told me, without question.

A Visit to the National Portrait Gallery, London
*Last Portrait of Mother* by Daphne Todd

Pillows and dust covered clouds
encase the light that ripples
over bone. You can almost
hear her last breath. The one
everyone talks about. The one that would
leave the mouth agape
for eternity.

Hers is a Levitan portrait. The grain
coloured flesh of a mother, by daughter,
three days gone still wearing her hospital bracelet.

I had a letter from Paris today. J is going
to Egypt after all with her mother,
thanks, she says, to me.

There is a woman standing next to me
holding a small child's wrist in her hand.
I recognize the child's glance
looking up at her.

I wonder if this is what I have also
been attempting. To preserve
my mother in manageable pieces

to remind myself, to feed something
that is feeding upon itself.

Mourning
McDonald's Parking Lot, Southwestern Ontario

*Ever been to the southwest of England*, I ask. You are a friend I haven't known since high school, but we've been meeting up regularly since I've been home. We go out in the evenings to do yoga and eat fast food while I am staying with my dad because you are all that I know here anymore. *No*, you say, and also shake your head. Your two mobile phones strapped to your waist belt for the booze delivery business you run. Your burger dripping onto the paper wrap you have neatly unfolded across your lap. The evening is humid for October and we are sitting in your new Ford.

It's the way it rains there, I say after a moment. At first it barely makes you wet. Then all at once it quickens into a flood of bucketing showers. It belts down so hard the pellets bounce back up and explode. It must be something to be a fish in the river there, you say. When the rain stops, it's like it never happened and everyone goes on their way.

I saw a rainbow once when I was a child, in Bristol on the Gloucester Road. It looked like it was coming out of the spire at St. Anne's. It was so beautiful that we felt sorry for the people walking in the wrong direction to see it, we wanted to shout "rainbow" like you would shout "whale" on a tourist boat, half-knowing that by the time anyone heard us it would have disappeared.

That's how the tears come now. They surprise me and they're gone.

Closed Doors

I'll never know how my parents loved
when their bedroom door was closed
tight, the sturdy furniture
that was always too big
for a room of its size.

Or why we followed my father's car
in our New Yorker that time we saw him
drive out of a street that wasn't on his usual way home.
Why we didn't honk, or mention it later over dinner.

If there were certain perfumes that he liked
of hers more than others or if he would even have thought
about that. I wonder now if he sometimes takes the bottles
off the dresser and holds them
to his nose for a moment when my sister is there
on the other side of the door, picking up
the mess he needs to make.

There are things I hope
about my mother. I hope she felt
love each time they promised one another
everything would be alright.

Unsent Letter #3

To:
*9 Cité Jandelle,*
*Paris*

*It's a strange thing who you tell and don't tell about death.*

*We are lucky, my sister says, to have known the unconditional kind of love.*

*For a while it made me stronger. I could walk confidently into any situation feeling I had sufficiently suffered.*

*It's just us sisters and dad now. If only we could have inherited her religion.*

The Hospital Notes

*They moved me into here. They are keeping a better eye on me. I can't get up. The nurse last night was really good.*

*Hi kiddo. Pat was here. Nice. What are you doing? Don't worry. Promise not to worry. Promise. I love you.*

*I've been awake since six!!!! You should come first thing in the morning!!! Did you get doggie diapers? Any body call? Don't tell them I'm here. Only Pat and Bev. Where's your father?*

*I ate half my pizza. Wasn't bad. Feel a bit better today. I like your shoes. You should keep your hair brush in your purse. You can get a chair if you want. Any body call?*

*You sure gave me some hard times, kiddo. Of course I do. My baby. I am so lucky to have such wonderful girls. Thanks for coming home. I don't know what I would have done without you.*

*P.S. I'd like you to send flowers to the nurse from the first night. She was really good.*

*Tonight they want to put tubes down my throat. Don't leave me. That damn doctor.*

*It's everything I'm going to miss.*

A Passage

There are words we understand even in the silenced movie, like *breathe!* and *mother fucker!* and I know you are not coming back.

Trickle water on the violets anyway.

Break the china plate like your best friend's mother did when you were eight and over for dinner and not supposed to see. The lamb shank juice like blood on the flocked wallpaper.

I can still see you and sense you.

A month before his death, Anton Chekhov scribbled in a note to his sister, Masha, *Live happily and don't be down.*

It is a soft passage into the night.

A Dream

I imagine this boy,
a small boy. Someone to have driven toy cars with,
built complicated forts with, deep
in the woods. I see him
healthy.

My mother is there. She is rosy-cheeked
and no taller than the seat of a chair, only she stays
her distance, watches me and the boy play.
Each time I get close to her, she has already moved on,
disappeared.

Since no one else is around
I concentrate on the boy.
We throw marbles in the sand
out of purple and gold bags and
grow old and tired enough
to fall asleep.

I've heard a lot of people
have this dream.

**Notes on the Text**

p. 19. In “Paris, Cité Jandelle (one month earlier),” the last stanza is an adaptation of the final passage in Chekhov’s “The Beauties.”

p. 39, 41, 50, 56, 59. The poems entitled “Yalta, 19xx” are based on the collected letters of Anton Chekhov to Olga Knipper, translated and edited by Jean Benedetti, but do not attempt to replicate any one letter, nor do they quote directly from them.

p. 44. In 1902, Olga Knipper suffered a miscarriage. Donald Rayfield, among others, speculates that her pregnancy was the result of an affair, although this has never been proven and many Russian scholars reject this idea altogether.

p. 51. In fact, Maria’s letters do not remain.

p. 62. In this poem, I have loosely quoted letters sent by Chekhov to Maria from Badenweiler in June of 1904, translated by Constance Garnett.

**A Note on Chekhov**

Anton Chekhov was born on January 29th, 1860 in Taganrog, Russia, the third of six surviving children. He studied in Moscow to be a physician but ended up falling in love with writing, eventually becoming the highly prolific author of short stories, short novels and five major plays (*Ivanov, The Seagull, Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*). Already during his lifetime he was considered one of the greatest short story writers of all time, a consensus that endures to this day. Known for both his humility and generosity, he set up free medical clinics for peasants wherever he lived.

Chekhov spent the majority of his life as a tubercular, although he rarely admitted to being ill. In 1890 he went to Sakhalin in Siberia to interview inmates at the penal colony and study the region. In 1901, he married the actress (and lead in most of his plays) Olga Knipper in a secret ceremony. The two met during a rehearsal for *The Seagull*. His sister, Maria Chekhova, became his primary caregiver when the writer moved to Yalta for better air. Their mother, Evgenia, also lived there with them. Knipper remained in Moscow to work and occasionally Maria would live there with her.

Chekhov died in 1904 in Badenweiler, Germany, having gone with Knipper to the Black Forest town for its good air quality. Chekhov continued to deny his condition until the last moments when, with a glass of champagne in hand, he declared "Ich sterbe"— "I am dying." Maria Chekhova remained in his home in Yalta and kept it as a Chekhov house museum until her own death. Knipper remained in Moscow, and toured with the Moscow Arts Theatre. Both Knipper and Maria lived through Stalin's regime. Olga Knipper continued to write letters to her husband long after he died.