

## From the Country of Silence

*A letter is like an otherworldly communication, less  
perfect than a dream but subject to the same rules.*

—Marina Tsvetayeva

### I

In an occupied country with no name  
the past stretches endlessly behind me,  
always more visible than the proverbial  
light at the end of the tunnel.

I move toward the future  
as if my body clock were set to the hour in Ecuador.  
Then I stretch out in bed there is nothing to touch  
except the Amazonian silence of the forests,  
the immense blank splendor of the Ural-Andes.

I dream of a ruined abbey in Wales on a March afternoon,  
gray stones against gray sky; the sun  
notable by its almost permanent absence,  
the crows by their presence.

Someday, maybe, the Gates of All Language will be loosed  
and people will go forth, however tentatively,  
uttering words they scarcely dare begin to believe,  
like *glasnost*, *perestroika*.

### II

But I live where night dreamers  
are subject to seizure,  
where letters are scoured by anonymous censors  
for words or combinations of words  
that smack of questions without answers,  
that might ask some actual or hypothetical reader  
to smuggle icons across a sealed frontier.

Nevertheless I light a candle, daring the fire  
to illuminate and burn till daylight,  
asking you, reader, whoever,  
wherever you are, to swear  
to commit just one line to memory.

Someday these poems will be forsaken  
like so many medieval abbeys—  
roofless, broken-windowed, naves and transepts  
collapsed into bare stone, ruins—  
worn memorials whose meanings no one is any longer able to read.  
Then I would hope to achieve, as Saint Marina says,  
the handclasp without hands, the lipless kiss.

—John Drexel