

Akhmatova's Husband

for Vera Dunham

Akhmatova's husband, Gumilev,
 was a poet and an explorer.
 He wrote poems about wild animals
 and had fantastic ideas:
 a red bird with the head of a girl
 and a lost tram that goes wandering . . .

shedding fire "like a storm with dark wings,"
 passing over bridges,
 by a house with three windows
 where a woman that he loved once lived,
 and, rushing toward him,
 two raised hooves and an iron glove.

Gumilev fought in the Great War
 with almost incredible valor,
 twice winning the Cross of Saint George.
 He envisioned a little old man
 forging the bullet that would kill him.

It wasn't a German bullet, it was Russian.
 Gumilev was killed by his own countrymen
 as poets in Russia frequently are.

Everyone talks about Akhmatova
 but no one talks about Gumilev.
 That wouldn't have mattered to Gumilev.
 When the man from the government came to kill him,
 "Just give me a cigarette," said Gumilev,
 "and let's get it over with."