

# LAMARCK\*

OSIP MANDELSTAM

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TRANSLATED BY JOHN GLAD

If life is but a blot on a dying day,  
If this shy boy, this timid patriarch was right,  
Then I will occupy the last rung  
On the rubbery Lamarckian ladder.

From my lips will grow tentacles,  
My trunk will be hooped in rings,  
My suckered fingers will thrash an ocean floor  
And I will disappear like Proteus behind a horny mantel.

Behind us float the brandy-glass eyes  
Of a crustacean world.  
We see for the last time  
Life's refraction.

He said:  
Of what use was Mozart?  
You must denounce hot blood  
And be silent as the spider.

Nature has packed away this long brain  
Like a sword into scabbard.  
She has forgotten those whose grave is green,  
Whose breath is red, whose laugh is supple . . .

May 7–9, 1932

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\* Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829) was a French naturalist who believed that environmentally acquired characteristics could be passed on to future generations. Stalin accepted both the doctrine of Lamarckism and its child—egalitarianism (nature is identical for all of us and nurture is all-powerful). The Russian Jewish poet Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938), who was to perish in a Soviet forced-labor camp, mused on the subhuman nature destined for us by Stalin's dehumanizing "nurture," if Lamarckism were indeed true.