



Leszek
Szaruga

AFTER
ALL

Leszek Szaruga

AFTER ALL

Translated from the Polish by Frank L. Vigoda

*Poets, artists, this whole weird company,
may not be that important after all. But ban them,
and you'll see that in your towns, homes and countries
it would be as if you banned trash collectors.*



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OPENING

Old poets are open to death, they feel
His breath, a breath that returns
To the source. Nothing shames them, they know
Shame kills truth: they have accepted
Life. In their poems they reveal
Hidden secrets; they easily read
Hieroglyphs of memory and signs of the future.

Trusting like children, they tell us everything.
Judged, they don't fear our sentences.

FROM PATMOS

We will all return there, entering on tiptoe
The white map of silence, *ubi leones*, where lions
Sleep, fed and tired. Their dreams lightly fly
Over the town and the world as we grope
Among the lines of an incomprehensible book. We build firewalls
Against the invasion of nothingness, and keep watch at the frontiers,
At the fringes of words, ready for anything, for death,
Or enslavement. We rummage in the ruins, stir
The ashes. Fog surrounds us, and the silence
Of prophets. Yet someone calls from Patmos in an
incomprehensible
Tongue, the echo of his voice fades in oblivion.

The book starts to burn, smoke rises to the sky.

DON'T SAY EUROPE

Don't say Europe they say, say Death.
Movies stop, libraries burn.
These are not crickets but bombs voting in the grass,
Their clocks murmur in the arteries of the streets.

But Europe says nothing, she takes water in her mouth.
Seeks rescue while holding to the body of Russia,
Laments the fate of her sister Atlantis,
Splits the spectrum of the fire that burned Jan Palach,
Student of philosophy, disciple of Empedocles.

Even if she says something, she does it in a code
That uses meaningless words,
So her tongue works in vain.

During white sleepless nights she mumbles old spells,
Repeats definitions and paradoxes,
Smiles to herself, understands nothing,
Can't feel her own body,
Becomes colder and colder.

There's no hope they say, no rescue.
Venice sinks, Notre Dame crumbles,
Constantine Cavafy is long dead.
Strangers are coming, they speak in a weird dialect
And sing nostalgic songs.

And nothing happens, somehow we live with it.
We listen to their speech, don't understand their words.
We say, it's not important, it doesn't matter.
We stir the ashes of old books with our fingers.

THE WATCH

to Zbigniew Herbert

Yet Fortinbras and Hamlet have finally met
 On the white plain of an elegy, the dueling ground
 That hides the treasure of generations: poor Yorrick's skull.
 It was probably then that time stopped,
 And the ocean of words sealed us in the amber of night.
 Our dreams petrify and disappear in the fog.
 Not tragedy but boredom kills us,
 and pharaoh's ants feast on our eyes.

Hamlet sleeps, Fortinbras sleeps, the earth lays waste,
 A basalt disc thrown to the forsaken corner of the universe.
 The holy books of laws and truths have decayed,
 Princes and kings have moved to legend,
 Animals are dying, the stricken deer is dying,
 A poet still keeps watch at the edge of nothingness.
 He speaks all voices and has no choice.
 He molds talking heads from the sand of history.

A FRAGMENT

Constantine Cavafy's poem sketches a dramatic situation:

*Why this sudden unrest and confusion?
 (How solemn their faces have become.)
 Why are the streets and squares cleaning quickly,
 and all return to their homes, so deep in thought?*

*Because night is here but the barbarians have not come.
Some people arrived from the frontiers,
and they said that there are no longer any barbarians.*

*And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?
Those people were a kind of solution.**

But!

But we know from experience that waiting for barbarians is never in vain. Only impatience can make us believe they will not come. Their coming is unavoidable.

They emerge from among us.

DAY ONE

The foam of the ocean reaches us
Cleansed in Danish straits.
It gently flows against the sand of our desert,
Polishes the shores of the terra Poland.
Brings in sentimental songs,
And nostalgic poems, transparent like wind.

Our women mend nets
Catch particles of amber in the water,
There is a light breeze, the sea is quiet,
White crystals of salt linger in the air.
A seagull's sharp piercing cry
Is like a warning or an oracle.

* Translated by Rae Dalven.

Our memory is empty, overexposed with pain.
 Inland there are ruins of burned towns,
 Poisoned rivers carry shoals of dead fish,
 Broad plains have melted into glass gravel.
 That's what is left behind, there's no place to return.
 Those coming from there die in silence,
 The lord of the abyss King Abaddon's knights.

A black sun rises from behind the horizon,
 The first day of a new order begins.

WŁADYSŁAW SEBYŁA'S* GRAVE

They tied our hands with a wire,
 Badges were torn from us,

we were shot in the neck,
 And shoved in a mass grave.

The frightening memory of us
 Comes and goes. Comes and goes.

So in the borderlands
 They sing of sleeping knights.

This soil with a frozen scar
 Is our Poland now.

* A poet Władysław Sebyła (1902–1940) was a poet and officer in the Polish army; captured in 1939 by the Soviets, he was murdered in the Katyń forest.

Go tell Poland, passerby,
That here her soldiers lie.

FRAGMENTS OF A NIGHT (1)

Dying, they say, should be beautiful,
With open eyes so that you see
The border that splits
Eternity into moments,
A knife cutting space
Into dead cubes. The second

Coming will unite what is divided,
And heal what is cut. In the meantime,
They say,
Death is a redemption: you have
To look at it with your eyes
Wide open in which

Lives fear.

FRAGMENTS OF A NIGHT (2)

It comes
At any price: over dead bodies
Of forgotten friends and colleagues:
Staszek P. found
In a staircase, Andrzej D., shot
At a demonstration, Ania K., murdered
By unidentified attackers. In this way
Hope comes to us. While you

Chisel dead letters
In the stone of memory.

FRAGMENTS OF A NIGHT (3)

Your tear
Rolls down the map of Europe, flows
To the Mediterranean, and dissolves.

I know that last night
You sensed death.

A DREAM

Naked, with a beauty-spot under her left
Breast, leaning towards me from the page
She holds in her hand. Her ambiguous
Smile, a promise of delight in dying,
And waking up in the cry of her body.

At dawn, I noticed in the mirror
A beauty-spot under my right breast.

FRAGMENTS OF A NIGHT (4)

Red dust and sun. Afar, the white Atlas Mountains:
Marrakech. A waft of marijuana, a lump
of sleep and monotonous music

of a different world. You ask
 What I am doing here. I'm looking
 for a distance, I joke.

FRAGMENTS OF A NIGHT (5)

The mortal one says death. Once more
 The world's grave opens to receive the Body. To

 Receive the Word—one last time.

FRAGMENTS OF A NIGHT (6)

They
 Know the future: it has no name. Slowly,

A jet plows through the sky. Silence
 Explodes into gibberish.

POETS

They fed the Leviathan with music of their songs.
 They sang in their cantos, power is beauty,
 The individual is nothing, they argued in earnest,
 We are creating a new man,
 A different world.
 Believe us, believe.
 Our speech is the only truth,

There won't be any other.

This is what the poets said, touched with the madness of the time.
Their dead words circled the globe like heralds,
We listened to them in silence thick with fear.

FRAGMENTS OF A NIGHT (7)

Memory carries the ice floats
Of the images of the future. You hide
In the grave of dreams,

And you survive.

FRAGMENTS OF A NIGHT (8)

A peak, named Świnica. Down below,
Glassy ponds. I climb
A rocky path holding on to
A chain
Above the abyss. Down below,
My shadow is growing. The sun
Penetrates the rocks, drills
My body, sinks
In the water.

The night is coming. The abyss
is calling.

A PASSAGE

I passed the Mountains of Falling Snow
on the way towards the sun and the Sea
that gave birth to Europe. The sky was
clear and deep, trees bore fruit.

I picked oranges, I met
peasants toiling for millennia,
plowing, turning history. I saw
olive groves that I read about
in school: the sacred groves of the past.

I wanted to escape time, cast away
black meanings of words. My delusion
was short-lived: in Malaga, I read
on a wall: "Long live Rudolf Hess."
I saw machines eating earth
and rocks, and concrete villages erected
for German retirees. The sea
hummed helplessly trying to overcome
the noise of omnivorous history.

THE FACES OF A POET

Today poets live longer than their poems.
Różewicz's tired face floats
Above the horizon. It's evening, the epoch is
Setting. A poet carries death
Within. He infects words with it. His
Many faces rise and fall
Above the empty planet. In the darkroom of silence
The negatives of Latin poems are exposed.

GALIA

Processions of madmen go on the burned-out streets.
Their glass eyes reflect the light
Of dead stars,
And snow falls quietly in the endless night.

Here nobody knows anymore that *Galia*
Est omnis divisa in partes tres,
Perhaps Galia is no more.
Continents crumble into stone deserts,
Memory dissipates.

FRAGMENTS OF A NIGHT (9)

The fog
Of meanings on the road
of fate. You go
Blindly. You make up
Answers

To questions that are not. You answer
Them at random:

You live,
You dream.

RESPONSE

Could I stay here (in the
West)? Why do I return (to
Poland)? Always the same questions
I never answer. I won't escape
My fate anyway. It's not patriotism,
Just human weakness. I love
My friends. I like my
Apartment. All in all, anywhere
You can live like a human. And
You always pay too much for it. Here,
There? It's all the same. But
They all (who ask the questions)
Want to catch me red-handed. They want
Me to confirm something. Or to deny
Something. But my life is not
The answer to someone else's questions.

DON'T RETURN

Exiles do not return, here death awaits you.
You'll get lost in the mirror of time repeating words
That no one understands. You won't regain
Your youth, instead lose your senses. You won't return
To yourselves, the noise will swallow you. You'll follow
The traces of dead people and find only the shadows
Of deserted gardens, ashen books
And ruined gravestones. The voices you hear
Are just a delusion. Stay, nobody's calling.

DEFINITION

A word is an intersection of time and eternity
 (I'm just quoting what I heard in my dream. Awake,
 I can't tell who said it, though
 I am quite sure I knew it, I knew
 His name.) In an imaginary space, life.

(PARENTHETICALLY)

the world is a chance
 (sometimes a particular one)
 sleep is a necessity
 (an actual experience)

what has been said
 is not by chance
 (let's put it in
 (ironic) parentheses)

DANCE

Here everybody knows what must happen.
 They wait in silence. Fate must be fulfilled.
 Even if it's just literature, a movie,
 The knife is real, and the blood is real.

The dance of death goes on. Inside the crystal ball of time
 Love makes rounds and hate makes rounds.
 Two splinters of eternity. The black ball of the sun
 Rises above our heads. For the final time.

A LETTER^{*}

(an excerpt)

As for Basia: her eyes were dark, two mirrors
 Of death, set askew. When we came,
 She didn't know how to cry. Enclosed in the tear of silence,
 She already started writing her dry poems about pain. I have
 Her self-portrait from an earlier time:
 Her face, captured in three-quarter view, telling
 And lively, only a hint of her right shoulder, and her hand
 Covering one eye. I can't figure it out:
 Did she unknowingly draw her fate?

TRANSITORY PERIOD

We live in a transitory period which our grandchildren
 May call an epoch. We know nothing about ourselves, yet
 They will classify us like butterflies in a display case
 Of history. We will stare from the glass with our dead
 Eyes, and our childrens' children, the conquerors
 Of stars, will peruse family pictures. This
 Old-fashioned gentlemen, that's me. The picture
 Has already faded. I stand still, looking
 At the sunset. In the upper left hand corner
 There is a shining point. That's why
 This old picture is so important. This was
 The first sign. Then the other came.

Darmstadt, February 1986

* Barbara Sadowska (1940-1986), a poet, mother of a high school student Grzegorz Przemyski murdered in 1983 at a militia station in Warsaw.

DETAIL

(from a painting by Jerzy Nowosielski)

The ball's black sun is in front of the glass, behind
A basketball player ascends to heaven,
Two others are still, suspended in motion
In a semi-dream. The laws of gravity are suspended,
The perspective doesn't work, distances mingle.
Silence out of this world fills the painting.
Only in the upper left-hand corner,
Like in a dream, the silhouette of a housing block
Grows behind the window like a mass grave.

I SAW, I LIVE

I saw interiors of tombs
Of Egyptian pharaohs, Aztec princes,
Their skulls adorned with gold and jewels,
Buried in the pyramids.

I saw the pyramids of skulls
With holes from lead bullets
Excavated from mass graves
In the Cambodian jungle, Ukrainian forest.

I live in the era of opening graves,
I look in the eye-sockets of history.

IDYLL

San Christobal de las Casas: high
 Curbs, rain water running down the narrow street.
 Indian market with hungry eyes.
 I look in the dictionary: Cuanto cuesta eso?

Beads of patience polished with tears
 Gathered into a bracelet of semiprecious stones.
 The baroque pearl in an austere mountain setting
 Sounds in the evening with the voice of church bells.

ECHO

To Jola Lothe and Piotr Lachman

There's something symbolic in the course of events,
 Say the politicians. Their words Hoover above the graves
 Of the murdered. Trees of forgetting grow
 On these graves. Their leaves are pale,
 Their crowns rotten. The politicians' mouths are white.

Parliamentary amphitheaters resound
 With an echo of Antigone's words.

FROM MY DIARY (1)

A new epoch has begun.
 We're burning portraits of old leaders,

Tearing down monuments, changing names
Of streets and squares. Everybody is very busy.

All of a sudden the new order
Has no opponents. Nobody knows why
The old one lasted so long.
No one ever wanted it.

Many of us don't know what to say
When we are allowed to say anything. Taken by surprise,
We hardly catch our breath. We fear
Our own words. We fear ourselves.

Trees grow as before.
Sun turns into stone.

A CHANCE

Silence will cover everything, epochs will be mixed up.
We know this and stubbornly dig the tunnel of dates
in the rock of eternity. We think we can make it
Even if nearby others have ended their work buried
In rubble. We put the secrets of our bodies
In graves believing they will resurrect
On the other side. We cling to words
For we think they will calm our fear,
And lead us to light.

THE OTHER SIDE

to Adam Ważyk

There, on the other side where
Clocks die and rainbows fade,
Magic signs are clear
To the uninitiated;
There, amongst the voices of yet unborn
Poets, there, yes, there,
Once again all the poems
will sound in full voice: those
Of old, and the later ones. Their
Voices will mix up.

The old poets calmly await
Death. They have known it since childhood.

FROM MY DIARY (2)

Look, they are taking down the wall.
Those who built it
Today cross it
With olive branches.
They place them by the crosses
On the graves of those who were killed
while trying to escape.

Quiet covers the graves,
The silence
Of those who made it.

AN APPLE

Why look at Mount Fuji? or..., if a few apples on a table gave Cezanne all he needed.

Jozef Czapski

Everything is in everything.
 The history of the world has been shut
 In Tutankhamen's tomb.
 The snail crawling up Mount Fuji
 Carries on its back the home
 That you left in Pompeii.
 The road's end is inscribed in its beginning.
 The fruit of good is the fruit of evil.

FROM MY DIARY (3)

Now we can cross the wall from both directions.
 Guards direct traffic, sometimes they ask jokingly
 If we'll return. Their eyes have become alive,
 And you see fear. But the wall still stands,
 And will stand, just like when there was no wall.
 And when the guards disappear we will take their places
 Guarding the seal of hatred and pain.

We were divided, and although the borders
 Get blurred, speech still divides us
 We say "them" and we say "us".
 Words like stones fly across the wall
 That grew in our souls growing out of them.

The wall of words, the words of the wall, it lasts forever.

Astonished we see how speech changes
And petrifies into gravestone inscriptions.

AFTER ALL

Now, after all is over,
We begin a normal life.
Historians will count the dead.

Facts will be more or less true
To life.

THROUGH THE ARTERY

to Iwonka

Chest-pain: a sign—it's time
To start marching towards the other side
Of words, light. No, it is not the way
Into darkness and silence. True,
It happens in silence and darkness,
But it's a passage through an artery
Narrow like charred bone, like
Mold leftover from a cannibals' feast
A millennia ago, a feast in the glow
Of fire somewhere deep in a cave. To there
We return, to the shadows on the wall, with whom
We talk for so long without words.

MEETING

We meet again. By chance
You touch my hand. Your smile
Opens new avenues. You are
Who you are. I watch as you pass
To the other side of the street and disappear
Into the crowd. I
Lift my hand to my mouth. I am
The one who's passing. A crumb of memory.

*where are you going
with this raindrop on your back
you stubborn beetle?*