

Classic Poetry Series

Zbigniew Herbert

- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

A ballad that we do not perish

Those who sailed at dawn
but will never return
left their trace on a wave--

a shell fell to the bottom of the sea
beautiful as lips turned to stone

those who walked on a sandy road
but could not reach the shuttered windows
though they already saw the roofs--

they have found shelter in a bell of air

but those who leave behind only
a room grown cold a few books
an empty inkwell white paper--

in truth they have not completely died
their whisper travels through thickets of wallpaper
their level head still lives in the ceiling

their paradise was made of air
of water lime and earth an angel of wind
will pulverize the body in its hand
they will be
carried over the meadows of this world

Zbigniew Herbert

A Description of the King

The king's beard on which saucers and ovations
fell until it became heavy as an axe
appears suddenly in a dream to a man condemned to die
and on a candlestick of flesh shines alone in the dark.

One hand for tearing meat is huge as a whole province
through which a ploughman inches forward a corvette lingers
The hand wielding the sceptre has withered from distinction
has grown grey from old age like an ancient coin

In the hour-glass of the heart sand trickles lazily
Feet taken off with boots stand in a corner
on guard when at night stiiffening on the throne
the king heirlessly forfeits his third dimension

Zbigniew Herbert

A Halt

We halted in a town the host
ordered the table to be moved to the garden the first star
shone out and faded we were breaking bread
crickets were heard in the twilight loosestrife
a cry but a cry of a child otherwise the bustle
of insects of men a thick scent of earth
those who were sitting with their backs to the wall
saw violet now - the gallows hill
on the wall the dense ivy of executions

we were eating much
as is usual when nobody pays

Zbigniew Herbert

A Knocker

There are those who grow
gardens in their heads
paths lead from their hair
to sunny and white cities

it's easy for them to write
they close their eyes
immediately schools of images
stream down their foreheads

my imagination
is a piece of board
my sole instrument
is a wooden stick

I strike the board
it answer me
yes--yes
no--no

for others the green bell of a tree
the blue bell of water
I have a knocker
from unprotected gardens

I thump on the board
and it prompts me
with the moralists dry poem
yes--yes
no--no

Zbigniew Herbert

A Russian Tale

The tsar our little father had grown old, very old. Now he could not even strangle a dove with his own hands. Sitting on his throne he was golden and frigid. Only his beard grew, down to the floor and farther.

Then someone else ruled, it was not known who. Curious folk peeped into the palace windows but Krivonosov screened the windows with gibbets. Thus only the hanged saw anything.

In the end the tsar our little father died for good. The bells rang and rang, yet they did not bring his body out. Our tsar had grown into the throne. The legs of the throne had become all mixed up with the legs of the tsar. His arm and the armrest were one. It was impossible to tear him loose. And to bury the tsar along with the golden throne - what a shame.

Zbigniew Herbert

About Troy

1

Troy O Troy
an archeologist
will sift your ashes through his fingers
yet a fire occurred greater than that of the Iliad
for seven strings--

too few strings
one needs a chorus
a sea of laments
and thunder of mountains
rain of stone

--how to lead
people away from the ruins
how to lead
the chorus from poems--

thinks the faultless poet
respectably mute
as a pillar of salt
--The song will escape unharmed
It escaped
with flaming wing
into a pure sky

The moon rises over the ruins
Troy O Troy
The city is silent

The poet struggles with his own shadow
The poet cries like a bird in the void

The moon repeats its landscape
gentle metal in smoldering ash

2

They walked along ravines of former streets
as if on a red sea of cinders

and wind lifted the red dust
faithfully painted the sunset of the city

They walked along ravines of former streets
they breathed on the frozen dawn in vain

they said: long years will pass

before the first house stands here

they walked along ravines of former streets
they thought they would find some traces

a cripple plays
on a harmonica
about the braids of a willow
about a girl

the poet is silent
rain falls

Zbigniew Herbert

Architecture

Over a delicate arch--
an eyebrow of stone--

on the unruffled forehead
of a wall

in joyful and open windows
where there are faces instead of geraniums

where rigorous rectangles
border a dreaming perspective

where a stream awakened by an ornament
flows on a quiet field of surfaces

movement meets stillness a line meets a shout
trembling uncertainty simple clarity

you are there
architecture
art of fantasy and stone

there you reside beauty
over an arch
light as a sigh

on a wall
pale from altitude

and a window
tearful with a pane of glass

a fugitive from apparent forms
I proclaim your motionless dance

Zbigniew Herbert

From the Top of the Stairs

Of course
those who are standing at the top of the stairs
know
they know everything

with us it's different
sweepers of squares
hostages of a better future
those at the top of the stairs
appear to us rarely
with a hushing finger always at the mouth

we are patient
our wives darn the sunday shirts
we talk of food rations
soccer prices of shoes
while on saturday we tilt the head backward
and drink

we aren't those
who clench their fists
brandish chains
talk and ask questions
in a fever of excitement
urging to rebel
incessantly talking and asking questions

here is their fairy tale -
we will dash at the stairs
and capture them by storm
the heads of those who were standing at the top
will roll down the stairs
and at last we will gaze
at what can be seen from those heights
what future
what emptiness

we don't desire the view
of rolling heads
we know how easily heads grow back
and at the top there will always remain
one or three
while at the bottom it is black from brooms and shovels

sometimes we dream
those at the top of the stairs
come down
that is to us
and as we are chewing bread over the newspaper
they say

- now let's talk

man to man
what the posters shout out isn't true
we carry the truth in tightly locked lips
it is cruel and much too heavy
so we bear the burden by ourselves
we aren't happy
we would gladly stay
here

these are dreams of course
they can come true
or not come true
so we will
continue to cultivate
our square of dirt
square of stone

with a light head
a cigarette behind the ear
and not a drop of hope in the heart

Zbigniew Herbert

Home

A home above the year's seasons
home of children animals and apples
a square of empty space
under an absent star

home was the telescope of childhood
the skin of emotion
a sister's cheek
branch of a tree

the cheek was extinguished by flame
the branch crossed out by a shell
over the powdery ash of the nest
a song of homeless infantry

home is the die of emotion
home is the cube of childhood

the wing of a burned sister

leaf of a dead tree

Zbigniew Herbert

I Would Like to Describe

I would like to describe the simplest emotion
joy or sadness
but not as others do
reaching for shafts of rain or sun

I would like to describe a light
which is being born in me
but I know it does not resemble
any star
for it is not so bright
not so pure
and is uncertain

I would like to describe courage
without dragging behind me a dusty lion
and also anxiety
without shaking a glass full of water

to put it another way
I would give all metaphors
in return for one word
drawn out of my breast like a rib
for one word
contained within the boundaries
of my skin

but apparently this is not possible

and just to say -- I love
I run around like mad
picking up handfuls of birds
and my tenderness
which after all is not made of water
asks the water for a face

and anger
different from fire
borrows from it
a loquacious tongue

so is blurred
so is blurred
in me
what white-haired gentleman
separated once and for all
and said
this in the subject
this is the object

we fall asleep
with one hand under our head
and with the other in a mound of planets

our feet abandon us
and taste the earth
with their tiny roots
which next morning
we tear out painfully

Zbigniew Herbert

Lament

To the memory of my mother

And now she has over her head brown clouds of roots
a slim lily of salt on the temples beads of sand
while she sails on the bottle of a boat through foaming nebulas

A mile beyond us where the river turns
visible-invisible as the light on a wave
truly she isn't different--abandoned like all of us.

Zbigniew Herbert

Mr Cogito and the Imagination

1

Mr Cogito never trusted
tricks of the imagination

the piano at the top of the Alps
played false concerts for him

he didn't appreciate labyrinths
the Sphinx filled him with loathing

he lived in a house with no basement
without mirrors or dialectics

jungles of tangled images
were not his home

he would rarely soar
on the wings of a metaphor
and then he fell like Icarus
into the embrace of the Great Mother

he adored tautologies
explanations
idem per idem

that a bird is a bird
slavery means slavery
a knife is a knife
death remains death

he loved
the flat horizon
a straight line
the gravity of the earth

2

Mr Cogito will be numbered
among the species minores

he will accept indifferently the verdict
of future scholars of the letter

he used the imagination
for entirely different purposes

he wanted to make it
an instrument of compassion

he wanted to understand to the very end

- Pascal's night
- the nature of a diamond
- the melancholy of the prophets
- Achilles' wrath
- the madness of those who kill
- the dreams of Mary Stuart
- Neanderthal fear
- the despair of the last Aztecs
- Nietzsche's long death throes
- the joy of the painter of Lascaux
- the rise and fall of an oak
- the rise and fall of Rome

and so to bring the dead back to life
to preserve the covenant

Mr Cogito's imagination
has the motion of a pendulum

it crosses with precision
from suffering to suffering

there is no place in it
for the artificial fires of poetry

he would like to remain faithful
to uncertain clarity

Zbigniew Herbert

Mr. Cogito and the Imagination

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Zbigniew Herbert

Nothing Special

nothing special
boards paint
nails paste
paper string

mr artist
builds a world
not from atoms
but from remnants

forest of arden
from umbrella
ionian sea
from parkers quink

just as long as
his look is wise
just as long as
his hand is sure -

and presto the world -

hooks of flowers
on needles of grass
clouds of wire
drawn out by the wind

Zbigniew Herbert

Objects

Inanimate objects are always correct and cannot, unfortunately, be reproached with anything. I have never observed a chair shift from one foot to another, or a bed rear on its hind legs. And tables, even when they are tired, will not dare to bend their knees. I suspect that objects do this from pedagogical considerations, to reprove us constantly for our instability.

Zbigniew Herbert

Pebble

The pebble
is a perfect creature

equal to itself
mindful of its limits

filled exactly
with a pebbly meaning

with a scent that does not remind one of anything
does not frighten anything away does not arouse desire

its ardour and coldness
are just and full of dignity

I feel a heavy remorse
when I hold it in my hand
and its noble body
is permeated by false warmth

--Pebbles cannot be tamed
to the end they will look at us
with a calm and very clear eye

Zbigniew Herbert

Report from the Besieged City

Too old to carry arms and fight like the others -

they graciously gave me the inferior role of chronicler
I record - I don't know for whom - the history of the siege

I am supposed to be exact but I don't know when the invasion began
two hundred years ago in December in September perhaps yesterday at dawn
everyone here suffers from a loss of the sense of time

all we have left is the place the attachment to the place
we still rule over the ruins of temples spectres of gardens and houses
if we lose the ruins nothing will be left

I write as I can in the rhythm of interminable weeks
monday: empty storehouses a rat became the unit of currency
tuesday: the mayor murdered by unknown assailants
wednesday: negotiations for a cease-fire the enemy has imprisoned our messengers
we don't know where they are held that is the place of torture
thursday: after a stormy meeting a majority of voices rejected
the motion of the spice merchants for unconditional surrender
friday: the beginning of the plague saturday: our invincible defender
N.N. committed suicide sunday: no more water we drove back
an attack at the eastern gate called the Gate of the Alliance

all of this is monotonous I know it can't move anyone

I avoid any commentary I keep a tight hold on my emotions I write about the facts
only they it seems are appreciated in foreign markets
yet with a certain pride I would like to inform the world
that thanks to the war we have raised a new species of children
our children don't like fairy tales they play at killing
awake and asleep they dream of soup of bread and bones
just like dogs and cats

in the evening I like to wander near the outposts of the city
along the frontier of our uncertain freedom.
I look at the swarms of soldiers below their lights
I listen to the noise of drums barbarian shrieks
truly it is inconceivable the City is still defending itself
the siege has lasted a long time the enemies must take turns
nothing unites them except the desire for our extermination
Goths the Tartars Swedes troops of the Emperor regiments of the Transfiguration
who can count them
the colours of their banners change like the forest on the horizon
from delicate bird's yellow in spring through green through red to winter's black

and so in the evening released from facts I can think
about distant ancient matters for example our
friends beyond the sea I know they sincerely sympathize
they send us flour lard sacks of comfort and good advice
they don't even know their fathers betrayed us
our former allies at the time of the second Apocalypse

their sons are blameless they deserve our gratitude therefore we are grateful
they have not experienced a siege as long as eternity
those struck by misfortune are always alone
the defenders of the Dalai Lama the Kurds the Afghan mountaineers

now as I write these words the advocates of conciliation
have won the upper hand over the party of inflexibles
a normal hesitation of moods fate still hangs in the balance

cemeteries grow larger the number of defenders is smaller
yet the defence continues it will continue to the end
and if the City falls but a single man escapes
he will carry the City within himself on the roads of exile
he will be the City

we look in the face of hunger the face of fire face of death
worst of all - the face of betrayal
and only our dreams have not been humiliated

Zbigniew Herbert

The Ardennes Forest

Cup your hands to scoop up sleep
as you would draw a grain of water
and the forest will come: a green cloud
a birch trunk like a chord of light
and a thousand eyelids fluttering
with forgotten leafy speech
then you will recall the white morning
when you waited for the opening of the gates

you know this land is opened by a bird
that sleeps in a tree and the tree in the earth
but here is a spring of new questions
underfoot the currents of bad roots
look at the pattern on the bark where
a chord of music tightens
the lute player who presses the frets
so the silent resounds

push away leaves: a wild strawberry
dew on a leaf the comb of grass
further a wing of a yellow damselfly
and an ant burying its sister
a wild pear sweetly ripens
above the treacheries of belladonnas
without waiting for greater rewards
sit under the tree

cup your hands to draw up memory
of the dead names dried grain
again the forest: a charred cloud
forehead branded by black light
and a thousand lids pressed
tightly on motionless eyeballs
a tree and the air broken
betrayed faith of empty shelters

that other forest is for us is for you
the dead also ask for fairy tales
for a handful of herbs water of memories
therefore by needles by rustling
and faint threads of fragrances--
no matter that a branch stops you
a shadow leads you through winding passages--
you will find and open
our Ardennes Forest

Zbigniew Herbert

The Envoy of Mr Cogito

Go where those others went to the dark boundary
for the golden fleece of nothingness your last prize

go upright among those who are on their knees
among those with their backs turned and those toppled in the dust

you were saved not in order to live
you have little time you must give testimony

be courageous when the mind deceives you be courageous
in the final account only this is important

and let your helpless Anger be like the sea
whenever you hear the voice of the insulted and beaten

let your sister Scorn not leave you
for the informers executioners cowards - they will win
they will go to your funeral with relief will throw a lump of earth
the woodborer will write your smoothed-over biography

and do not forgive truly it is not in your power
to forgive in the name of those betrayed at dawn

beware however of unnecessary pride
keep looking at your clown's face in the mirror
repeat: I was called - weren't there better ones than I

beware of dryness of heart love the morning spring
the bird with an unknown name the winter oak
light on a wall the splendour of the sky
they don't need your warm breath
they are there to say: no one will console you

be vigilant - when the light on the mountains gives the sign- arise and go
as long as blood turns in the breast your dark star

repeat old incantations of humanity fables and legends
because this is how you will attain the good you will not attain
repeat great words repeat them stubbornly
like those crossing the desert who perished in the sand

and they will reward you with what they have at hand
with the whip of laughter with murder on a garbage heap

go because only in this way you will be admitted to the company of cold skulls
to the company of your ancestors: Gilgamesh Hector Roland
the defenders of the kingdom without limit and the city of ashes

Be faithful Go

Zbigniew Herbert

The Monster of Mr Cogito

1

Lucky Saint George
from his knight's saddle
could exactly evaluate
the strength and movements of the dragon

the first principle of strategy
is to assess the enemy accurately

Mr Cogito
is in a worse position
he sits in the low
saddle of a valley
covered with thick fog

through fog it is impossible to perceive
fiery eyes
greedy claws
jaws

through fog
one sees only
the shimmering of nothingness

the monster of Mr Cogito
has no measurements
it is difficult to describe
escapes definition

it is like an immense depression
spread out over the country

it can't be pierced
with a pen

with an argument
or spear

were it not for its suffocating weight
and the death it sends down
one would think
it is the hallucination
of a sick imagination
but it exists
for certain it exists

like carbon monoxide it fills
houses temples markets

poisons wells
destroys the structures of the mind

covers bread with mould

the proof of the existence of the monster
is its victims

it is not direct proof
but sufficient

2

reasonable people say
we can live together
with the monster

we only have to avoid
sudden movements
sudden speech

if there is a threat assume
the form of a rock or a leaf

listen to wise Nature
recommending mimicry

that we breathe shallowly
pretend we aren't there

Mr Cogito however
does not want a life of make-believe
he would like to fight
with the monster
on firm ground

so he walks out at dawn
into a sleepy suburb
carefully equipped
with a long sharp object

he calls to the monster
on the empty streets
he offends the monster
provokes the monster

like a bold skirmisher
of an army that doesn't exist

he calls -
come out contemptible coward

through the fog
one sees only

the huge snout of nothingness

Mr Cogito wants to enter
the uneven battle
it ought to happen
possibly soon

before there is
a fall from inertia
an ordinary death without glory
suffocation from formlessness

Zbigniew Herbert

The Trial

During his great speech the prosecutor
kept piercing me with his yellow index finger
I'm afraid I didn't appear self-assured
unintentionally I put on a mask of fear and depravity
like a rat caught in a trap an informer a fratricide
the reporters were dancing a war dance
slowly I burned at a stake of magnesia

all of this took place in a small stifling room
the floor creaked plaster fell from the ceiling
I counted knots in the boards holes in the wall faces
the faces were alike almost identical
policemen the tribunal witnesses the audience
they belonged to the party of those without any pity
and even my defender smiling pleasantly
was an honorary member of the firing squad

in the first row sat an old fat woman
dressed up as my mother with a theatrical gesture she raised
a handkerchief to her dirty eyes but didn't cry
it must have lasted a long time I don't know even how long
the red blood of the sunset was rising in the gowns of the judges

the real trial went on in my cells
they certainly knew the verdict earlier
after a short rebellion they capitulated and started to die one after the other
I looked in amazement at my wax fingers

I didn't speak the last word and yet
for so many years I was composing the final speech
to God to the court of the world to the conscience
to the dead rather than the living
roused to my feet by the guards
I managed only to blink and then
the room burst out in healthy laughter
my adoptive mother laughed also
the gavel banged and this really was the end

but what happened after that – death by a noose
or perhaps a punishment generously chained to a dungeon
I'm afraid there is a third dark solution
beyond the limits of time the senses and reason

therefore when I wake I don't open my eyes
I clench my fingers don't lift my head
breathe lightly because truly I don't know
how many minutes of air I still have left

Zbigniew Herbert

Three poems by heart

I

I can't find the title
of a memory about you
with a hand torn from darkness
I step on fragments of faces

soft friendly profiles
frozen into a hard contour

circling above my head
empty as a forehead of air
a man's silhouette of black paper

II

living--despite
living--against
I reproach myself for the sin of forgetfulness

you left an embrace like a superfluous sweater
a look like a question

our hands won't transmit the shape of your hands
we squander them touching ordinary things

calm as a mirror
not mildewed with breath
the eyes will send back the question

every day I renew my sight
every day my touch grows
tickled by the proximity of so many things

life bubbles over like blood
Shadows gently melt
let us not allow the dead to be killed--

perhaps a cloud will transmit remembrance--
a worn profile of Roman coins

III

the women on our street
were plain and good
they patiently carried from the markets
bouquets of nourishing vegetables

the children on our street
scourge of cats

the pigeons--

softly gray

a Poet's statue was in the park
children would roll their hoops
and colorful shouts
birds sat on the Poet's hand
read his silence

on summer evenings wives
waited patiently for lips
smelling of familiar tobacco

women could not answer
their children: will he return
when the city was setting
they put the fire out with hands
pressing their eyes

the children on our street
had a difficult death
pigeons fell lightly
like shot down air

now the lips of the Poet
form an empty horizon
birds children and wives cannot live
in the city's funereal shells
in cold eiderdowns of ashes

the city stands over water
smooth as the memory of a mirror
it reflects in the water from the bottom

and flies to a high star
where a distant fire is burning
like a page of the *Iliad*

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