

TOMAS VENCLOVA – selected poems

AZOVSTAL

Hail to you, forgotten Goddess of History!
With your rocket-shell retinue, slaughtered soldiery
We recognize you – emerging – that day of fear,
When caterpillar treads and helicopters cross the border.

Then we grow accustomed to your rule. At first:
A high-rise's ruptured chest, trees ablaze on the coast,
Blasted train junctions, the endless steppes' theatre
Where, mired in black earth, Mazepa was cursed by Peter.

For Death is still young. She needs agility, time –
To train, master her craft – slowly takes aim,
Flails for a while: the body greeted by shrapnel
Only after the fifth try – after, a dead lull falls.

A drone traces an invisible path in the air.
The twenty-year-old guard slowly leads an elder
Behind a fence's shelter – what matter he's a civilian –
For both, the last few meters will only lengthen.

A pea coat's owner abandons one site of ruin –
Occupies another. A satellite docked in the heavens
Impassively looks on. Cannons blast a nitrogen cistern:
Ten blocks have been taken – *gloria nostra aeterna*.

How distant the harbors and train stations of salvation!
Facing the checkpoint: friend or foe? It's unknown –
Will they shoot or let you go – chickens left by gates
For looters, goats loose in yards – turn the gaze

To the map with unmarked *Trostyanka, Merefa, Irpin* –
With their torn-off roofs thrusting up through nettles,

And caught in the throat: the stench of those no longer,
While children learn to say “traitor”, “rifle”, “hunger”.

A bullet, not a seagull, incises the low tide’s line,
Beyond a broken window, a mirror reflects clear skies –
Descendants born in shelters will observe it with fear,
For not God’s kingdom, but a sky of nuclear threat is near.

Clotted blood stains. The bass and alto of explosions.
For every Thermopylae there will be an Ephialtes.
Bid them farewell – for honor or shame, you don’t know:
The path’s cut off: in the end, the Medes will break through.

So then, Goddess of History, war remains war.
In a hostile city: a sunshine-struck boulevard.
A student under a linden grinds a cigarette into sand,
Repeats the old line: “How sweet it is to hate one’s fatherland”.

And the soldier – his comrades won’t recall his patronym –
Subsists on stale air in the underground labyrinth,
Yet when his words cease, stone and concrete will repeat
The defiant riposte Cambronne hurled at his attackers.

Trans. Ellen Hinsey, reprinted courtesy of The Irish Times

Excerpted from: Tomas Venclova, *The Grove of the Eumenides: New and Selected Poems*, translated
by Ellen Hinsey, Diana Senechal and Rimas Uzgis (forthcoming, Bloodaxe Books).

TOMAS VENCLOVA

CALIGULA AT THE GATES

Our respite was short-lived in the end.
But after long hardships it had seemed
It would never draw to a close. Friends
Invoked poetry and feasted in gardens,

Schools upheld the spirit of wisdom,
Flute-tones sailed under arcades' white,
Markets rustled in the squares each day,
And galleons transported holds of spice.

We marveled at color-washed mosaics
And were tempted by sun ripened fruit,
We ridiculed the words of the prophets
But, agelessly, they proved to be true:

The room is besieged by clashing steel,
The heavens darken; the sea's forces rage.
Blow out the candles and close the gates.
Beyond them - Caligula and the plague.

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PREHISTORY

I.

To recognize the unwelcoming places where you grew
up in another land, before the last century was through:
a fruitless stretch of dunes, willows, a warehouse wall
by the shore will hardly recall who lived here at all.

The lonely rushed through these streets with a taxi and three
carriages, while seltzer dripped on park paths. At three-thirty,
German girls gathered on the other side of the tracks,
saying *Süsses Kind* over the strollers along their path.

They yearned for the empire's signs, walked the yellow
sand, and applauded the shadow on the balcony in the old
town, until their hairdos, hats, and rings were sunk
in bland waters by Marinescu in his victorious sub.

II.

There is more to the landscape: importantly – the sky
and the piercing waves that gaze right into its eye,
smokestacks, stork-nest poles, willows sparsely scattered along the lower banks of the canal,
the stink of flatfish, the wind rocking a shabby
yacht by the bridge. I see the teacher, holding his key,
returning from the Red Cross for a nap –
he gazes joylessly over his temporary flat:
laundry hung to dry in the garret, shutters knocking,
plaster peeling (onto the cradle?), bookshelves leaning
from Marxist tomes, and beyond the Danè river, he sees,
like a monotonous echo, timber frame homes recede.

III.

The clatter of hooves – spoons and faience ring in answer.
The eye can spot a low Anglican church by the harbor.
Its roof is like the cover of an earthenware jar.
Nothing further. Europe's threshold or boundary –

these flat shores, these swamps, fertilized equally
by the bones of Skalvians, Old Prussians, Vistula Veneti.
Catalogues of the past: *nach Osten, Westen*, one flees –
ships are sunk, the implacable weight of the sea
presses mustard gas drums. An irresistible current:
its echo bursts repeatedly on the desolate grassy fort.
And so the limpid reflection below a frozen skiff gleams
in morning cold, clearer than the skiff itself, it seems –

IV.

so deep, like a voice hardly recognized in a dream
but which, in repeating a pointless sound, can mean
more than the people to whom one speaks. A nymph,
unsleeping Echo, reigns over the world that is left.
Above the vanished city of my birth, from Bothnian
skerries to Skagerrak, from the fuming Eastern
Cape to Spit's End, a clear rhythm, as from a trumpet,
sails out beyond us, announcing the Last Judgement:
it will wake us in the dark, lead us home from imprisonment,
so that we might be thankful for everything – even when
time erases all shape and gesture, like an experienced
censor, from the sheet of paper, the photo, and the text.

Trans. Rimas Uzgiris

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Limbo

At half past seven,
the square awakens, lightens –
a cloud's shadow and the sun
chase each other across flagstones,
turn them into a map of being,
and non-being; the chairs
of nearby café climb one upon
the other, like Pelion on Ossa,
and slate-coloured doves
draw circles between arcades and stone masks,
but never reach the towers
crowned with tiara and bonnet
(and, a bit further, like a cap that's
been dropped a small church protrudes).
Umbrella sails fly – a commercial harbour.
A statue twists upward, a tongue of flame.

At half past seven,
stones tumble like dice,
acacias rustle – a wing
parses Latin to the wind,
and a triumphant droplet
disturbs the fountain's pliant
surface. Intermittently, you hear:
now, a camera's click, then, a cell phone
ringing nearby, in a curtained hall
filled with city maps from the last century,
(towers, stations, official buildings).
Bicycle tyres try to navigate the convex surface of the square,
and a long monologue of bells ripens
without punctuation marks.

The air is generous and cold.
Mirrors alone are reliable – above all, when they reflect
Nothing. Or at most, a line of type, hanging upside down
(desert, ambush, hostage crisis,
another secret factory,
the dictator loves football, forbidden for his subjects),
all easily covered over, by turning the page.

At half past seven,
in this, the most peaceful of the circles set aside for us,
umbrellas squeak over wet tables,
a light's ray under a tree falls
on necklace and brooch,
a load of sugar weighs down
the freckled snowdrift of a cappuccino,
fingers trace on the tablecloth, turpentine
is caught in the thuja's armour,
and time grows – alien, progressively heavy,
becomes itself without our
will or knowledge The clock's dark hand
counts out its fraction, and the little orchestra
on the tilting deck plays on.

Trans. Ellen Hinsey

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