

Zbigniew Herbert

A Parable of King Midas

At last golden deer
quietly sleep in the glades

and mountain goats as well
their heads on a stone

aurochs unicorns squirrels
in general all game
predatory or gentle
and also all birds

KING MIDAS DOES NOT HUNT

once he got it into his head
to lay his hands on a Silenus

Three days he chased him
till at last he caught him
hit him with his fist
between the eyes and asked:
- what is best for man?

The Silenus neighed
and said:
- to be nothing
- to die

King Midas returns to his palace
but gets no pleasure from the heart of a wise Silenus
stewed in wine
he paces pulls at his beard
and asks old men
- how many days does the ant live
- why does the dog howl before a death
- how high would a mountain be
piled from the bones
of all past animals and humans

Then he summoned a man
who painted on red vases
with a black quail feather
nuptials parades and hunts
who asked by Midas
why he set down the life of shadows
answered:

- because the neck of a horse galloping
is beautiful
and dresses of young girls playing ball
are like a stream alive and inimitable

Let me sit down beside you
entreats the painter of vases
we will talk about people
who in deadly earnest
give to the earth one grain
and gather ten
who repair a sandal and a republic
count stars and obols
write poems and lean down
to pick up from the sand a lost clover

We will drink a little
and philosophize a little
and perhaps we both
who are made of blood and illusion
will finally free ourselves
from the oppressive levity of appearance

Translated by Alissa Valles