

Zbigniew Herbert

*Achilles. Penthesilea*

When Achilles pierced Penthesilea's breast with his short sword, he twisted it – as is proper – three times in the wound, and saw – in a sudden exaltation – that the queen of the Amazons was beautiful.

He laid her carefully on the sand, took off her heavy helmet, shook her hair loose, and delicately laid her hands on her chest. However, he did not have the courage to close her eyes.

He looked at her once more with a valedictory gaze and, as if compelled by a strange force, began to weep – as neither he himself nor any other hero of that war had ever wept – with a voice subdued and incantatory, low-pitched and helpless, resounding with lamentation and a cadence of remorse unknown to the son of Thetis. The vowels of that lament fell on Penthesilea's neck, breast, and knees like leaves and wrapped themselves around her cooling body.

She herself was preparing for the Eternal Hunt in forests beyond. Her eyes not yet closed looked from far off at the victor with stubborn, clear blue – loathing.

*Translated by Alissa Valles*