

Zbigniew Herbert

*Why the Classics*

1

in the fourth book of the Peloponnesian War  
Thucydides tells among other things  
the story of his unsuccessful expedition

among long speeches of chiefs  
battles sieges plague  
dense net of intrigues of diplomatic endeavours  
the episode is like a pin  
in a forest

the Greek colony Amphipolis  
fell into the hands of Brasidos  
because Thucydides was late with relief

for this he paid his native city  
with lifelong exile

exiles of all times  
know what price that is

2

generals of the most recent wars  
if a similar affair happens to them  
whine on their knees before posterity  
praise their heroism and innocence

they accuse their subordinates  
envious colleagues  
unfavourable winds

Thucydides says only  
that he had seven ships  
it was winter  
and he sailed quickly

3

if art for its subject  
will have a broken jar  
a small broken soul  
with a great self-pity

what will remain after us

will be like lovers' weeping  
in a small dirty hotel  
when wall-paper dawns  
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What will happen  
when hands  
fall away from poems

when in the other mountains  
I drink dry water

this should not matter  
but it does

what will poems become  
when the breath departs  
and the grace of speaking  
is rejected

will I leave the table  
and descend into the valley  
where there resounds  
new laughter  
by a dark forest

*Translated by Alissa Valles*