Jovan Zivlak

REVELATION

the concentration camps did not exist.

no executioner existed. nor torturer.

our wounds are fake.

the screams unreal. no one ever called on heaven

no one ever left on a path of no return.

sisters

mothers

are false relations.

our suffering’s a semblance. memory’s superfluous.

along the scaffolds are characters from stories

the questions are primordial superstitions

everywhere there are but phantoms of changes

that did not take place

and events that will not begin.

there’s no murderer. nor prosecutor

nor exchange between life and death

nor angel nor his dark brother

nor father nor son

nor sisterly shroud beneath the fortress walls

nor prayers under an oak nor weeping on the water

nor death rattle on stone.

nor darkness in the mud.

there are neither hostages nor witnesses

nor child crucified in nightmarish desolation

water doesn’t flow nor does the sun shine

no word exists that will loose us from death

nor convert who recalls revelation

nor exile who curses at exile.

o angel of silence

o heir of measures

if nothing existed if nothing happened

why does your heart engrave the blade of nothing

why do you turn to tail the phantoms of eternity

and whom will you thank that you are still alive.

ODE

why i mention joy

why i summon hope

why the letter

why the clarity

the black angel

the homeland. is there a cause for it

is it initiated from somewhere

that consequence that accumulates

one after another and rolls this way that way.

or did the devil teach

this head to start singing

and keep on until

it falls mute.

THE GANDER KING

i was sitting on a green mound

above a pond. motionlessness of noon

and frozen outlines of geese. i threw a stone

into the water. it chose

its path by way of my hand. rings wavered

on the water

like the rings from other stories

different from themselves

fed in vanishing

by their spines.

and as if someone had flayed

the skin from their backs

so they turned

into a visage i’d already seen

the visage of the gander king

who preaches eternity.

WINTER REPORT

everything finally could have been

different and everything didn’t have

to happen this way. but every

outcome is an occurrence

while acceptance and rejection

are two gloves before which

we wriggle. maybe if i were nimbler,

if i’d risen quicker from the table

if i’d done that before the tropical

rains or if i’d lit the fire

could i have burnt the scattered questions.

but the outcome’s not pronounced

the dark is not described.

i’ll come out into bad weather

to trample a path

and i’ll carry the knowledge

on my shoes.

THE WICKED GUEST

here’s how i was born

it’s a long story. in a manger. in a drying barn

between the pigs’ tails. in a cornfield

where the idle magpie rummaged and the field mouse

peered fearfully in case an owl appeared. about wisdom

everything had been written already and as if i had come into a known

life. mother hid me: a little monster that screeched

and toothlessly sought the whole kingdom. father renounced me.

from there the tales of sinlessness. legends of flight

were spun while i in truth don’t know whether it happened. later

i pushed my way through schools. among the knowers who

would wave the switch and tap their feet while they sang

songs of the only god. i fixed in memory how they shared out

and how the dishes were filled: from greater to lesser, never otherwise.

how it is gathered

and decanted and i sensed how the worm attacking an apple opens

secret schools and seduces its pupils. the wine and all the rest arrived

later. and the wanderings. and the sea. and water. and feasts at which

it was as if my mouth was gagged. why some would look at me strangely.

did they want me to be a foreman or a destroyer. a singer of songs

or a wicked guest who makes an uproar.

i stumbled while i waited for remission

to whine in one life

or to forgive in two.

OH SAD SACK SONNY

i’d like to sing.

to sing out at full voice.

but when i think

how much gloom is in the previous

songs

how much pain in the refrains

unhappiness in the calls

my brethren are inexpert in that art

clarity will disperse our power

and then sad sack sonny

what use will that be to

a homeland.

AS I AM INFORMED

i let you go, little letter,

to wander all over without me.

it couldn’t have been otherwise:

acceptability testifies to

acceptability

that is your land and let

a chirp spread over it or

screeching

as it prefers. and someone who will

shove their nose between the lines

will see all kinds of things. here most likely there’ll

be salt

but not the kind i used to throw

before the sparrow or somewhere else.

they don’t listen to tales of that kind any more

as i am informed.

HA

birds sing

no one summons them

neither saint nor singer.

the water is tormented

the mirror shattered

while tininess weaves short crumbly sentences

all the livelong day.

plaster falls

grass grows

closeness grows firm

how am i to listen to those letters

to call out ha

to chase them away

to sing elsewhere

as they used to sing

to one soul that was

perfect.

EXAMINE MYSELF

is my hope in vain.

the motherly lap. a downpour

of flame above the table.

here where i picked up bread and

wine. under the crown of a walnut

compressing my tongue. is my

hope in vain. merry

words. a flock of gnats. clarity.

a hand moves the press. the sermonizer

speaks floating above the multitude.

have i memorized what i learned.

human language. the laws of nature.

i sit at the dinner table and examine myself.

JOYFULLY BOUND TO THE EVENT

on the foundations of this and that

the building should be continued.

let’s say a wall raised vertically

over the ground line.

not at all wastefully

gradually with dependability

brick upon brick

the mixture of cement of mortar

of language. stringing sweep

upon sweep

lifting the view to a higher height

under the line drawn by graphite

pencil. that’s a home.

i lie wrapped in a sheet: warmth

knowledge. as far as i’m concerned i can

go down. take a stroll. look over

life etc.

but the cube of sugar dissolves

and the water’s boiling.

joyfully bound to the event

i don’t move a muscle.

LITTLE TONGUE

what blooms at the crack of dawn

what will fade at twilight

that will be found out in cheery primers.

o voiceless teachers of life

abecedaries from which we spell out all that will come to pass.

scents of earth. grammar lessons. human joy

that you count yourself out with obituary notices. from what kind of bowl

to pick up a language that strikes disturbance. who shall open

the frozen purse behind whose barriers the face of the undead

creator sneers amusedly. population with uncounted adjectives

you who swoosh through nontransparent names. shaking up. periods of calm.

sunstroke that like timidity creeps through dark

corners. storm winds from the north. growths in front

of residences: our hope disappears with nature. agreements.

fatal gestures. faith that overcomes the elements. here

thus flickers a little tongue that obeys the wisdoms

of the general god. here where everything should be subject

to great change. shall it be hard for the seeker to grasp

those crafty transformations. shall he know

though the wind scatters the impressions left by a slippery being

that the one who speaks

no matter how he strains his neck tendons

learns to speak most truly

only when the blade with which

they cropped his tongue disappears.

THE LIGHTING IS WEAK

if you exist oh creator

verb of turning.

but it has already been repeated countless times

that your yeast isn’t thrown into anything.

if you exist

therefore

uninvolved

considered

hard-skinned like a saint on an elevation

while he follows what will never and never

touch him

can any kind of creature start to tremble

remembering your heroisms.

for what is done to increase love

and who raised a pulley into the heights. but you where are you

whom descendents would address

at whom father and young would look

where is the rose from which eloquence flows

the mouth where is it that will once and for all

spit me out. therefore if you exist brick

from a firm door

say how the whole thing ran. he who is

truly a witness will know from which height

to testify.

or say: ladies and gentlemen. comrades

i can’t sing out that piece just like that

the lighting is weak

the music miserable

the pay barely enough to get by.

BEND

before i understood what it was about

before i had advanced my own reasons

before i knew where i was headed

before i could know where i had left from

and where to start what i had started

before i had scented the diamond

tasted of deafness

sung in the desert

they advised me:

bend your head. hunch over.

but isn’t it bent enough

haven’t i done it so it’s visible.

bend it so it really shows

hunch so you cast a shadow on uprightness

hunch so that we rejoice in hunchedness

take it into your heart

pierce your soul with it

be master of your limbs

be inspired by hunchbackedness

shine like a disk that doesn’t fly

glow like bentness that can’t be repeated

that will lower unbentness

that will put a brake on its tongue

to sweep with its words

to shorten its height

muddy its visibility

to limit its width

hunch yourself for your own sake

for the sake of worldly fame

of salvation that’s within arm’s reach

continue so that we grasp hunchedness

so we understand the mercy with which we’re rewarded

so we are exalted by the strength that we’ve taken

so we are confirmed in the mind with which we’re mindful

so we depend on the bentness

that we gave to you.

THE LEASH

along the street that was flooded with twilight

between the yards where willful knowledge sang

and the dulled fields through which the raven cawed

a tiny dog is pulled on a tight chain.

the boy who pulled him looked like the blind future

with sharp eyes like judgment in his heart he was making a decision

while his head was unwrapped like the horizon

absent like what would fool him

light like the light that is only acknowledged once

he was leading the dog down the slopes of darkness

of the one who in the dark growls and can't bear it.

but the reason was above both of them

he who had carried out petty crimes

and he who held the leash

to neither of them

is a measure given

not one controlled with barking at the unfamiliar

not one didn't breathe from the motives he recalled

and no one knew what was in their embryo.

the dark reason was evening out scores

what's going to happen will happen in faith

that he perished outside of knowledge

that the path of death is the path of a devilish birth

and that the path of love opens through staggering.

THE ISLAND

the war never ended. i remember the dawn when

i was leaving my home. it was everywhere. it held an hatchet

behind the doorpost. on the bed it had piled a body draped

with a wolf's skin.

it looked like a peacock that was eying me dubiously

and getting ready to peck my hands. it lowered the blinds

on the windows. it was hiding so i couldn't see it.

i knew it was breathing down my neck

it tied up my breath and made things transparent

to which i had dedicated my vision.

it addressed me scornfully:

you who chew quartz you'll expect to vomit it

you'll learn to remember what you've forgotten

i am your knowledge that you waking predicted

that which you'll turn back to see will be darkness

the father who will never return

the sea off which flame will arrive

from which you'll go deaf.

who is stronger than war

i whom nobody asks about anything

an island from which only the name will remain

a usurer who'll loan to me

a weapon that kills before it's forged

or a snake that crawls in where it's no place for her.

THE TOMCAT

*For Svea Haske and Maksi*

when i got to Berlin

i ran into a tomcat who met me

at the door

he looked at me like a teacher eying an ignoramus.

his protectress told me he was fatally ill

and no longer went out in the garden and didn't lie down in the gleaming grass.

he looked me over as if I was

someone from far away who would carry his chains.

but he quickly realized that i was his brother

that my panting was similar to his

and that my breathing was like crying.

he lay in a corner staring into the distance

as if he was examining what waited for him there.

berlin is spacious and leans on the water like a prairie

maybe it will meet me once more like a fish

mute to tell me anything about its past life

but prepared to lend its muteness to any schoolchild.

BRECHT'S HOUSES

*for Robert Wein*

rain's falling in berlin and i go under the overarches

to fly over the rooftops and go down under the earth

to see a living dead man who lies beside his darling.

he was a hell of a learner

he waned to know more than a tyrant and less than a stone

he wanted to get away from insidious blows

and to find himself with weak friends

they had thin robes through which winter stung

through which the cold rain poured

and here i am in Berlin in his nest.

the water goes down my cheeks

while i climb there where the worlds were or their other sides

speed or sleepiness

a multitude that needed to save the whole.

i climb up the stairs in order to

look over the room for conversations

to sniff the deathbed

to marvel over the vessels of illusions

a smal terrace and a great many cups

bowls with a dull gleam

spoons with which food was picked up

between sentences that like flocks

settled in the doorways

in the treetops of the garden that

gleams like cemetery evergreens in the wilderness.

and somewhat farther the cemetery paths

and the dead laid out as if at a market

behind my back huguenots and opposite bert

with a great big head

stately notables

plaques with names

stones planted carelessly

who could have gathered them here besides death

cold wisdom from which we learn that no one will

speak up about what has to be kept silent.

I TURN AROUND IN GOD

i sit in god amid god's

devices. at god's table surrounded

by his machines. voices and noises

of the indistinct angels. in god's

belly with god's purpose. all that is

unutterable is unconquerable and is not maintained

in the fraudulent mirror. a little piece

of god's soul in me wriggles

restlessly in god's spaces

among god's images

before god's love

before god's sins.

i think of god's arson

of god's anarchy

of god's fury. god's brothers

gods hostages i see in death

in god's justice death reaches them

god's atrocity

and god's crime is on their burned

faces. i turn in god's conversation

in god's straining

in god's fear

that i don't remain alone by god

in his grandeur

in his endlessness.

gods crucifixion utters god's words

saves its head

saves god's purity

supports god's lostness

crowns god's sorrow.

i turn in god

to see where god's heads are flying from

where nothing advances from

and i can't see the end of it.

WEIGHT

two and two make four

paltry knowledge but dependable

how much it was helpful

when i was counting

what the crack of dawn would make known

when i was guarding what needed to be lost.

the bill was the wilderness

while the water was peaceful

and a murmur flew into the heights

and a sparrow-hark sang in the wildness

but those who were passing only looked at me

as if at a weight that is yet to be laid

on the scales.

while i made haste to chew up what could be expounded

i waved as much as my heart knew how to calculate

i saw that water was mixing up the numbers

that the air was devouring the sums

that a clap of thunder threw out fragments and scattered them

in tails of light

that the roof was the place where works turn to stone

and the supports give way

so that the underground climbs with a hank of fire

and pours over the cities

that to leave doesn't also find

that to shore up doesn't mean to save

that to find doesn't mean to take on the deferred

to go away lacks the soul of return

that the one who returns has no memory

and that when three go away but one returns

it's as if no one returned.

i saw a shadow that grows in the dark

a treetop that looms over the trunk

a swallow that attacks an eagle

a hatchet that returns on the shoulder of an angel

however much you gather

however much you forget

will be too much.

HAYSTACK

i’ve forgotten the noises of the treetops

which the voice of the silvery owl broke through

the attic in which she wove her other life

the prattle that threw me over the unnamed groves

the muteness where i would meet my heart as it dissolves

before the breaths of promises

i forgot the voices that arrived through

the gestures of night that in its wings

hides the kind-voiced beat of tiny creatures

whose eyes flash like tomorrow that will light up

the mouth that with substance renews being

i forgot the slippery canals along whose slopes

the grass blazed and in whose stomach purpose was transformed into law

while law into measure which my look could not multiply

i was a flier of whom it’s not known whether he’s a hunter in a blind or

a dedicator

i was in an angelic trumpet in which the air was peaceful

then i didn’t know that fire was starting to burn in nearby

and that its glow is the reflection of unchangingness

and that the haystack burns only in order to calm us

and that the arsonist is innocent while the measure is dispassionate

like an event that must take place

and that every arrangement is outside intelligence

however much water you’ll spill is already calculated

and every time when you snatch it closer to the hearth

your hand will not untangle that  
like a soul that waits for a blind angel

to teach it that doing is a fire that does not calm down

and that blindness is sight that casts far away

large ears and a babbling mouth

that blaze like incombustible straw

IN THE DUSK

In the dusk before the scythe

they found a warren of rabbits

they brought a young one that trembled

i was a boy when i pressed it to my chest

i shivered like a heart that wanted

to become a fire that pours out mercy.

in my hands time scatters

blood burst out of his nostrils

love mixes up with death

and his breath went out.

i was the scythe that doesn’t stop in its swing

that falls as if it hasn’t bought even a moment

and squeezes breathing into a death rattle.

IRON JAWS

what are our cites like

what villages.

house next to house

unpredictable paths roads

vehicles legion

uncountable sounds.

each habit is a custom

and the custom cause for sobbing

and when they carry or see off a dying man

and when the police gather in swarms in broad daylight

and when the dark mass of descriptions is neatly laid aside in waterproof bags.

how much of it there is no one knows

while the former knowledge was more dependable after all

the signature of commissars or of a senior official

a chance that guarantees wisdom that is not forgotten

he’s caught even today from a flyer throwing the most wanted

people without names

women without passion

doormen without the familiar diligence.

bones are sniffed and artificial hips

photograph their arms and iron jaws

and send them forward without big words.

and you go down the street on every balcony a handful of prophets

some of them clamber up on a wooden chest just to stand over us

to put the truth on our heads from above

wherever you turn everywhere are promises

from the screen they shout that it’s the day of decision

that it’s the moment not to miss

and that they’ve found the lookout from which to see the farthest.

if you stand you don’t know how long it will last

if you sit you’ll miss your bus

if you start thinking you’ll forget where you set out to go.

translated from the Serbian

by Sibelan Forrester