

# BEYOND THE CORDONS

## SELECTED POEMS

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BEYOND THE CORDONS

There were corners, blockaded squares, where, for days after the routed demonstration,  
the biting smell of teargas was palpable. If the burnt-out car wrecks  
and ripped-up cobblestones had been removed, still, the missing pavement  
let no one forget: the city center was a zone of uncertainty.

Evening belonged to the sirens, arsonists' chants —  
the squares were traps, the streets borders, trajectories of escape shut down  
in a commander's head: after so many years of peace, finally able to wage war.

\*

No matter where one turned, there were bars, cordons. The buildings'  
stoic grey arrived from farther away than moonlight; the city spoke  
of new wrath in the dead language of ornamental statuary: Poseidon is the chief god here,  
in the continent's centre, where in narrow rented rooms people bargain

for stolen love. The naked stone bodies turned towards each other, like computer screens left on by mistake: the thick poppyseed of visual static sprinkled onto them, as down below, far from every sea, wrath gathered up legions of children.

\*

You write the story of your body with two hands that do not know each other, two voices summon the unknown within you. Gather up the distinctions. Place the blossoming bouquet of lies, explanations, and objections onto your grave, tend your grave, clear away the beliefs falling onto it like autumn foliage. Do not look at the everyday with everyday eyes. The simplest questions are the ones you don't ask, and if someone screams into your ear, ignore them till you have run out of time.

\*

In peacetime, the city centre covers its self-hatred with decorative flagstones, flower-boxes, ordered transportation; decommissioned streetcars, carrying the scent of humans from the ever more terrifying outer districts, are led to its terminal caverns. Life here was

never anything else than the art of the too-slow massacre. Going along the cordons, now at last the alert mind can play with dreams of public hangings, schizophrenic love and suchlike, and believe, intoxicated, that it is engaging in politics.

\*

Sometimes it is necessary to wage war. After all, deep within, relations were never peaceful. A single person is too narrow a space for so many wants and desires. He who has no eyes and ears, always cheerful in others' presence, with owl-like eyes, walking with a millstone around his neck, who, for simplicity's sake, calls himself "I." None of them inhabit this world. All betray themselves. Their state is emergency, and yet they may delight in their own defeat. The one speaking here decrees against them in vain.

\*

What is my problem? Someone who shares my birthday, who's known me at least twenty years, asked: Closing time? Hopelessness? Boredom?

And looked at me, as if explanations meant something. In exchange, I told a story about a grey heron I once saw in a seaside city; it stood every morning on the roof of a red Peugeot in the parking lot, waiting for fish to be thrown from the upper floor of the house opposite. Every morning, this selfsame, unlikely presence exposed to the day. Take this heron as a comparison, I said. For whatever you want.

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If one day you leave, throw no coins over your shoulder. Grow the ice within yourself, as if sitting, eyes closed, on the other side of the moon; practice the art of slow murder. You were never anything else but the astronaut of your feelings. Your spaceship is a piece of blank paper. Do not pity those below displaying their scars after battle, and who, never conquering hardship, dream of Sundays fragrant with food. Take nothing from here, do not believe the rivers, the oceans. You can escape only upwards. It is not worthwhile to recollect upon the Earth.

NIGHT JOURNEY

You write with two kinds of ink. One dries instantly: you can touch it, read it. The other is invisible, like this city hidden beneath recurring lamplights and smells, where you recklessly return, invisible like the woman who awakens, sleeping unseen by your side. What is invisible bursts abruptly from your senses, flowing everywhere before you finish writing one sentence. What is visible follows blindly the light-filled face. Write with eyes closed, as if you still had time.

The way of passion is dark. It's like the journey on a night train which you do not take to arrive at another city, although this is precisely your goal. Whoever boards a night train is building, unawares, a palace for the moon, is crossing the lake-bottom's salt-lit waste, his own desolate regions, weighing the possible and impossible, and only

the lights flickering through the window, the unread station names  
signal that even unstirring, he is on his way somewhere.

In each instant, journeying cuts up space along a different line. Each place  
is a station, threshold, entrance. But you are bound somewhere  
with no threshold or entrance, where one can't stop, can't rest.  
This is all you know for now. It will be the place of your belated birth,  
where comparisons perish. You are preparing for another body that travels  
along with you, as inseparable from you as the two sides of a leaf,  
a mirror's transparent and silvered side.

Do not speak of temptation. The daytime fields have moved  
to the mirrors' blind side: nowhere to see your reflection, and a view of faces,  
a fiftyish man and a young blond woman, makes you fall briefly asleep.  
You sit on a rocky beach, dark basalt columns towering above:  
the water and columns arrayed not at your feet but above you,

multi-story, undulating. Nothing to be done: it's about to come crashing down.  
Still, you tie your shoelaces and scamper like a madman toward the dark cliff wall.

You live in many bodies at once. Can thread, like pearls, the sequence of minutes  
with no past or future, drink the milk of night until you choke,  
but even if you travel far, you return: time measures itself  
in your left-behind body. Minutes call for hours, hours for days,  
days for years, as if you were tearing out basted stitches, arms reaching  
into empty space, opening thighs, head turning, all breaking away from the torso:  
the nights testify against you, your steps around the house a thief's traces.

If there were a brush to paint your face, it should paint you blind.  
For long now you have seen with your body. The eye dwells there and in the eye,  
desire calls you to life and death, to appear and vanish at once, splitting apart  
your body: in vain women's scents, dew-like, alight on your skin,  
you must be born from yourself. Draw your strength from the earth. If no one



can be nourished by two placentas, then let none nourish you, be your own desire,  
the earth that lets you in like a long-awaited lover.

The city where you return at dawn does not know the language of desire, of bliss,  
of things that change or flee, that shimmer disappearing. And yet  
you walk into the broad, palace-lined square like one come to recommence his time.  
How many dogged lies! For decades, attempts to tame imperial grandeur  
have failed here. Let not the triumphal arch erected for the lunatic procession  
admonish you to peace. Your war is only just beginning.  
May your existence be pure trust and longing: in readiness, persevere!

CAPTAIN CORNELIUS'S LETTER FROM PANNONIA TO BURRUS,  
TO THE COLONIAL OFFICE IN ROME

For you, a gently sloping, friendly country; to me, a land  
of sluggish, nondescript winters, its climate unwholesome.  
Only the thick wines offer consolation to the one who,  
fed up with the ill-humored nepotism of governance  
and, past his prime, realizes the odd pasquinade  
is all his talent can yield.

And yet he goes on, hoping yet for autumn love, a bankruptcy  
trusteeship, finding the pointlessness, here,  
of making any change ever harder to bear.  
Even though dying here in peacetime is no easier  
than in any other province, and a reliable technique  
of drainage was implemented over the centuries,

still, this frosty bog fringe was only livable  
after the forgotten wars when they let  
everything rot for a while, and the hyperactive ignoramuses  
weren't bringing charges of mass murder,  
imprisonment. Of course, all the wars were lost.  
But not because they were unlucky.

They lost deliberately, and so they hoped  
to cobble eternal forgiveness for themselves:  
even today, they are entranced by funeral  
marches and the ponderous fantasies of reburials,  
their style, a mere parody, grows truly alarming.  
So we took back this province. I find the fertile

heritage of local customs enchanting. I like  
the colors of the houses, it reminds one of the closeness

of earth: dull browns and yellows succeed each  
other, now and again a patch of mauve,  
but the demands of grey are never resisted. No  
attempt is made to fix the damages of time.

And yet, my good Burrus, what is this but deceit, ominous  
deceit, for the land is theirs, it is their gods who lie  
buried in the ground and whose names they no longer fear  
to invoke. We should resign ourselves; we cannot correct  
the course of time! All our spoils, apart from a few flocks  
of sheep, is yet another unintelligible tongue, into which

it was a waste of time to translate Plato. Luckily  
they are always the first to be scared off by blood.  
And although after yesterday's assault, we may  
expect more, for the moment all is quiet in this redundant

province. Let us hope the fatal infection will not spread from here. I am tormented by sinister premonitions.

*Translated by Erika Mihálycsa*

NOTE ON THE BACK OF A MAP

*In memoriam Gizella Hervay*

The house search lasted until dawn. Osip was arrested,  
the warrant signed by Yagoda. Less than four years later,  
Yagoda himself will be an NKVD prisoner, murdered first. Osip resided  
in the Butyrka prison then. At night, when they transferred him  
to the labor camp near Vladivostok, he was freezing,  
he died there in December in unknown circumstances.  
From there he will write: "In vain is poetry esteemed only in Russia.  
There is no other country in the world where a person is murdered  
because of it." In 1934, proceedings were halted against him,  
thanks to his friends' interventions, but still not declared innocent,  
he was sent into exile to Cherdyn. On the first night  
he threw himself out of the too-low hospital window,  
only breaking his collarbone, bruising his face.

He was obsessed by the idea they would come for him  
at the designated time, carry out the secret  
judgement. You were born the next day,  
this too was a judgement. What a shame we cannot remember  
tomorrow! “Here I lie, my face buried in death,  
and I don’t know why the death of tomorrow would be any different  
than the death of today” — you wrote, and you were not wrong, because  
when Osip lay beneath the hospital window, face bleeding,  
collarbone broken, at the bottom of a freezing pit, like someone  
who could count to three or four before the explosion, and  
time became creased within him. So what street is this? —  
he asked later, pointing at the map. It’s your street,  
answered a woman’s voice. You see, there’s nothing straight within it,  
the whole thing is crooked. And Osip laughed as loudly  
as he could. We should exchange heads, he said,  
and you laughed too, you laughed until the Bucharest earthquake  
that killed Kobak in 1977. But until then, the rains of eastern Europe

soaked many a poor soul through and through. Filth fell  
from their mouths, rusty nails from their hair, brass buttons  
of interchangeable faiths snapped off; the lipstick stains  
of evenings past their warranty can never be erased.  
History made its bed for underground love-making.  
On that day when you stood in the draught of death, I became a man  
according to the laws. Osip lives here with me now,  
in a celestial sublet, you whispered. You both sit on the ladder's steps,  
dangling your legs, look to see what you can see, listen to the silence  
grazing below, steal the cowbells, giggle at everything  
like schoolchildren. I saw how the ladder nearly broke  
under Osip. The brew of the sky rumbled.  
Since then, I walk the unknown streets like a thief. My brain  
grinds out a line of poetry; you and Osip hang before me  
from the last rooftops, like bats on the tips of eyelashes.