

A woman with dark hair is shown in profile, looking out of a window. The window is covered in raindrops, and the scene is bathed in a cool, blue light. She is wearing a plaid shirt. The overall mood is contemplative and melancholic.

Poems from the other side of silence

THUNDER

LESZEK ZIELINSKI

Leszek Zieliński

THUNDER

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Other poetry books by Leszek Zielinski

“Ogień i lęk” (Fire and Fear), A. Poray Book Publishing, New York, 1981. Received special recognition award by Towarzystwo Krzewienia Nadziei (Hope Inspiring Society), Chicago, 1981

“Dzień zraniony” (A Wounded Day) - A. Poray Book Publishing, New York 1982. Literary Award by Polish Writers in Exile Union - Londyn, 1984

“Spalona rzeka” (Burned River), Serpent Publishing, Chicago, 1984

“Drugie niebo” (Second Heaven), Artex Publishing 2009

“Doczekanie” , Artex Publishing, 2011

“Po drugiej stronie milczenia” (The other side of silence), Artex Publishing, 2022

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FOREWORD

Leszek Zielinski is a Polish emigre whose poetic debut took place while in exile. His poetry has the character of works written by authors without homeland. Exile, for many writers is a drama, and just a decision alone to remain in the West becomes a tragic choice. But this choice does not signify any failure of a poet or writer – very often it is a positive and stimulating force.

Zielinski was born in Sochaczew, Poland. He arrived in the United States in 1975 and almost immediately started publishing his works in Polish-American press. Later, as an editor, he joined the Polish weekly, “Gwiazda Polarna.”

He is a true poet, believing in what he writes, respecting every word. While reading his poems one cannot resist the feeling that he tends to live in somewhat different worlds known only to him. In that world reality intertwines with the dream. realism with fantasy, the dream suddenly changes into painful and difficult cognizance.

Zielinski can abruptly transform the gentleness, and subtlety of his verse, turning kindness into brutality, love into pain, and a peaceful, and quiet mood into death. Hope suddenly becomes hopelessness. Joy becomes sadness. He continuously – and this is his obsessive theme – fears the phantom and nightmare of senseless existence.

His world, unreal to us, is often fiction to a poet. He creates from dream visions as if it were supposed to be the continuation of a dream. It is a typical phenomenon among writers in exile who live on the brink of two worlds: the country of their origin, and their new homeland. The realities of those two worlds interject with each other. and continuously lead to inner conflicts for poets and writers who persistently, and often desperately, search for a place in the world.

Zielinski’s poems are a type of confession of his own mental states, psychological emotions, feelings, etc. The erotic threads of his poetry are touched discretely but very convincingly. In his world inanimate objects become partners in dialog and in the struggle with hopeless, helpless, and painful consent to the failure to conquer, and subdue the reality of the world; a struggle which turns into existentialism or even nihilism.

Edward Dusza

On December 13, 1981, the martial law was imposed in Poland. The authorities sent out the military divisions, and the special anti riot units called ZOMO, into the streets.

Thousands of Solidarity activists were detained, including its leader, Lech Walesa. Massive protests ensued. Arrests followed, thousands of leaders were interned. Solidarity members were forced to leave the country and live in exile.

But the struggle for freedom continued...





Leszek Zielinski, 1981

WINTER DAY

December 13, 1981

arrests

beatings

screaming

rifles drumming on the doors

friends I tried to warn

before they dragged the best men out

interned them

and then

s i l e n c e

telephone lines cut

radio off the air

quiet darkness

nightmare

my sister's solitude

faced the tank armadas

thundering through the streets

fear attacked from every corner

as I listened for the shots to come

and blood to spill

more memorials to human rights

defeat and still more crosses

the day they gagged my country

was wintery and fiercely cold

I felt the chills throughout my body

I felt it wedging into brain

NO DOOR WILL OPEN

how long can a man be gagged
where no sound can elude the word
how long can a tree stand still
and hope for the sun to rise

we hide above the gardens
where flowers bloom in the underground
blood has a color of fear
yet no door will open on its own
we learned the lyrics of the anthem
the hymn of people who abolished
bread and butter
for the will to speak
yet you have stood like stones
wondering
pondering
calculating
the risk of our lives
no doubt when time comes
they will die like all great heroes do
in silence or in bullet's whistle
one of their enemy
one of their brothers
monuments to the dead!
tombs to the living!
we bite our tongues
censoring speeches to our wives
teaching children
how to construct intrusive thoughts
and how to bend history's rules
to the demands of the rulers
no door will open on its own
on this or on the other side

WOMAN

She would get up at 5 am
make coffee
she would stay up late at night
do household chores
She had a heart that meant so much
I used to visit her from time to time
We drank some wine
listened to Chopin
entangled in the clouds of smoke
we talked about Sartre till dawn
I was eighteen –
I remember well –
when making a speech at a Mayday Parade
she yelled a few words against the leader
I waved white and red flag
she screamed: “Freedom!”
Policeman kicked her from behind
another knocked her down

Later they took her to the station
handcuffs on her hands
You couldn't find a trace of white skin on her face
all bruised scarred swollen clotted with blood
“You can kill a man – she said – but you cannot kill the soul “
They tried to prove her wrong
injecting treatment twice a day
I went to see her
touched her face with a smile
She whispered: “It won't be long now”
“Hold on” – I said
She did
She touched my lips:

her hand was soft as the wind
I felt as if the flowers from her window
brushed me across with sadness
I used to visit her on Thursdays
and it always rained
We talked about friends
the outside world
we sat silently at times
She was released next spring
We married shortly — in June
The sun was high and you could tell
the happy couple that we were
Friends came to share champagne with us
and broke their glasses against the wall:
“For happiness!” — they said
Not much time elapsed when police came back
arresting me for protesting in the Downtown
In jail I learned we had a child
A girl
They let me out a few months later
A short goodbye at silent airport
the last embrace the kiss the tears
Years in exile chased by shadows from the past
Occasional news smuggled out
and “Censored” stamp on the envelope
My wife died My daughter’s fate – unknown
Years later I stroll among the ruins of our time
we left behind
I don’t ask about anything
For me – it’s enough that I’m still crying

THE TORCH

we are the diehards
torch ready to flame
generation split by despair
no knife will cut our veins
no bullet will silence our voice
we are ready to die
so that from the ashes
could return a more vigilant crowd
we are the kamikazes
with graves marked in advance
prison wall will not conceal
thoughts incised of freedom
a scar in the heart burns deeper
than a policeman's club
they cannot kill the hope
nor starve our minds
nor vacuum our souls –
the czar will fall into his own disdain
we are the diehards
generation of flames
we are the torch
the light for those who'll come next
to scrape our blood from city streets
we are of those who paid the price in 1830
giving their lives defying the tyrant
of those who once again in 1863 shook up the world
trying to crush the chains –
to sever from the Russian grip
of those who rot in Warsaw sewers
rising the city to a fight in 1944
for freedom and independence
and turned to ashes in the end betrayed

we are the diehards
of whom politicians speculate
what's our worth on the stock exchange
or how much they'd lose if we resist
and blow to hell the rotten system
they go to sleep
kiss their wives
eat fatty breakfasts
watch TV
they buy they sell they negotiate
they calculate the price of humanity
they never feared a rope around their children's neck
and haven't seen their heirs die too soon
they light up candles on the Christmas Eve
symbolic gestures of their concern
they talk and talk again
and go to sleep happy they've done their deed
but we are the diehards
of nations in retreat
we are the flicker that will burn the Olympic fire
till the end
we are the torch
we are the light
we are of those who died before
whom rivers took inside
of those who went in smoke in concentration camps
we are of those who rot in jails
demanding freedom – human rights
we are the torch

WARNING

Nobody warned me
that freedom would mean sitting at the police station
with my book of uncensored poems – all in my head
I sinned by hiding a dangerous thought
at the time when police were searching my brain:
they put on the table conversations I had with God
grocery list picture of you
our common and simple life
lovers' secrets
but they — those well-educated men
from secret service searched for the unpublished
unveiled possibility of thoughts
which I hid in my heart

Nobody warned me either
that liberty would mean a fear to speak
to look into the eyes of my interrogation officers
and that their questions would not leave me time to
respond

Nobody warned me that freedom
could be a distance from their side of the world
to my jail-cell

Today they've gave me my mind
filled with warnings
however
they kept the picture of you

TO A MAN

You were a man to me
contrary to your convictions
we played life as if it was a chess game
in your little notebook you wrote my quotes
and you laughed with a spring laughter

We talked about life with no crossbars
and words with no restrictions
Love was a passion between our worlds –
you were the most faithful man

When I had to stay in bed with a cold
you read me poetry - yet -
you kept looking to the outside
The shadow stood behind you hiding your face

What are you running away to the outside? – I asked
Your eyes almost faded your hands trembled:
There's not enough space for our living together

At times you brought me warm buns
from the bakery shop at the corner
you'd wait for in line for hours
“Instead of flowers” – you whispered as if ashamed

By fall the empty trees remained behind
your coat no longer hung on the door's hook
the floor turned silent as in fear
I guess even candles burn out sometimes
at dinner to which one never arrives
December 13 1981 – you broke the door
with uncertain smile of authority
The books kept falling down the shelves

and treason entered here by surprise
Policeman pushed me
I hurled down the little vase
in which the roses were still dying —
those you gave me on our anniversary
Falling down the stairs I heard you yell:
“Take all for the trial!”

You were such a close friend to me
Now you keep standing there
staring into life in that empty room
where your conscious thunders
picking up the shattered pieces you wonder:
“Did the roses have to die?
Am I condemned for obeying orders?”
In a letter you would write:
“It was for a good cause
We saved the country “
I know – you were such a good man
and if it wasn’t for the jail
martial law sentence
I would buy you a loaf of bread
I’d wait for in line for hours
and I’d let you choke on it
You were a good man to me
a good man

POLAND

Oh Poland
filled with uncertainties of green cornfields
quiet forests
stretched from pain to pain
from treason to treason
as if your shoulders couldn't conceal any hope
for those spending their lives caged into a fistful of fear

Oh motherland
where crosses mark the burning fire of insurrections —
blooming buds for some graves for others

Oh Poland
thoughtful and warm land of disquiet nights —
you long for a tearful smile
on the pain-ridden faces of your sons
Let us shine for you
let us bright up your days
so that you wouldn't have to use
the blind man's stick anymore
Let's open up our hearts
dismantle hatred from the past
Let's talk again —
we haven't seen each other for so long
let us confess the sins and let's forgive

Oh Poland
may we forget the fear of guns stuck at our backs
and the policeman's grip
Let us your sons return

ISLAND

As a lonely island
isolated under constant fire
from all sides
my country kneels
bursts from within
frightened yet alive
As a lonely island
to where freedom does not sail
my country stands
like a stone though terror prevails
my country is still alive
Its passions equal death
now gagged and beaten
imprisoned interned yet alive
even at gunpoint
my country will rise again



DAUGHTER

she dreams
- in empty rooms
where spiders weave their webs
she reaches above the limits
to the clouds —
she dreams
she walks —
on a lonely beach
dances with waves and winds
throwing her thoughts away
skimming stones
she walks in pride
she dies - year after year
among the crowds
where no one stops to look
and no one stops to share
she dies within the time

EYES IN THE WALLS

Eyes in the walls
you chose to stay in the inner parts
of dark monotony
getting down
getting stoned
getting there
windows smaller narrower
cracks in the walls
you chose to descend
from the passage
to bounce from uncertainty into necessity
for those in the house
and those outside the windows
shallow thoughts
split reality
within you outside you
factor of choice
like the eyes in the walls

TRANSIENT

The fire entered the air
from within you
the river
the smoke –
a cloud for a while

Sighs with wings
a memory
so little left
a touch
no hands in your embrace
and no heart



WISHES

To turn the earth upside down
for waters to flow like blood of lovers
in May and June
I wish I could stop the time from dying
in the history rooms

To brush the roads from dust
and nibble on the roses' buds
to stroll along the country paths
and smile with flowers in the sun
to hold a hand still warm from love
To reach the clouds in summer
and to caress the heated sun
and not to burn the hand
I wish I could have someone here
who'd lift the curtain to the outside

WHITE LAKE ROMANCE

The fury danced on the white lake
its last romance
with the wind
I stood in silence among the rocks
my eyes shocked and startled

Its dance continued
till the lake wove into passion
and its heart burst with foam
tears on its pale face longed for a chance
a time to dry
soothed by the breeze's gentle touch
the fury sighed its last whirlwind
and swirled around me weeping

I ONLY REMEMBER

I only remember the time of distant whispers
and night covered with a touch
darkness in between
but outside the world was dancing
I only remember the shadow of thoughts
never ending mornings
in a broken light
the walls that smiled
in the scene where people used to have hearts
I only walk away once from a lifetime
and it seems too late
for those on the other side
like a chance to retrieve the echo of songs
I only remember the blue October nights
the hopes in madness
and I turn old
with the leaves I fade
and blow with the wind away away away

ENDURANCE

Sometimes
we just come to see
if we were worth it
afraid to knock
to enter
we stand from a distance watching
how pain pays us back
for our hopes

Sometimes
it is just another step
for the conscience —
you may call it – life's endurance
And sometimes
it is all in vain
and always too late

SILENCE WITHIN SILENCE

It is only the quiet darkness
that eyes pierce through
the heavy mass of nothingness
shadows of thoughts move slowly in circles
squares and parallels
Night in the royal satin
holds its arms around

Silence – the true confession of heart's desire
mutters the breathing words
It is only the wish —
to open the air with laughter
break through the wall of void
and reach for another wish
But there is only silence within silence!

MOUNTAINS

So we are like mountains
staying alive
with human misfortunes

So we are like oceans
swimming with pride
to crash the shores

So we are like flowers
taking desires
for passing time

And we are like memories
in lives gone by
in grief and joy or laughter

RAGTIME

that music so deep
blue-eyed parallel
intensity tone after tone
soul's crescendo
the piano groaned
ragtime
ragtime
ragtime
hands into hands
the memory remembered
days after days
monotonous fragrance
flash after flash
interchanging promises
walks side by side
behind with years of reconciliation
he - in a torn shoe burnt out prince
she – queen without court
and the piano groaned
ragtime
ragtime
ragtime
cemetery without colors
standing among thoughts
listen! listen to the wind
strumming the sound
of that piano
ragtime
r a g t i m e
r...a...g...t...i...m...e!

NO ONE LEAVES HERE

There is our life among the cemeteries
Returning into void
from which we became
in a passion's breath
On a backward road
we are but the glittering recollections
The road up - the road down –
the one we take
to find our cemeteries
They are so quiet lonely
the cemeteries in the evening
The memories come here –
of those from the time that died
And stay as nothing leaves here
Chrysanthemums grow above
Someone's hand may touch the grave
as it used to touch us
in casual hellos and goodbyes
Only the colors remain –
those of springs and autumns
as no one leaves here anymore
but the time

TEMPEST

Shattered midnight
only silence in the darkness outside
moved from street to street
zig-zagging between trees
the room broke out in lights
halftones on the walls swayed
they swayed those realities of abandoned hopes
Shattered the night
when the wind blew in the windows
dark was the vision
oh how dark seemed the silence
of no hands and of no words
Different dimensions
like misunderstanding
lines between lines
unfinished phrases
stubborn misfortunes
of choices
soft color of lies
Shadows banging in imagination
heroes from the past
lovers' disillusioned times
like the flower in the sun
and no water

RACING WITH THE WIND

The hills stood in silence that grew heavier
as the day wore on
occasional shadows
sliding among the trees
kept warning us —
this wasn't the time
Downhill racers - we talked about the risk
the snow felt like the morning touch
we gained our speed
struggling against the silhouettes of skiers
piercing down
a curve a slide a bend —
another slide another jump —
faster than thought
we managed to disappear
in a sudden bliss —
the snow burst like a scream —
we hit the ground twisting
rolling my mind grew pale —
They told me later
there were flowers at her grave
I keep skiing
searching for a ghost and racing
racing with the wind

EMPTINESS

shadow after shadow
they spring from the night whisper –
outside of us the world was dying
streets with no footsteps
street lamps with no hands
fog - outside of us
homes without people
no visitors either
yet someone drew the curtain

no one draws from the river
and the thirst burns
no one sails with us
but the ocean
to unknown shores
we walk into trees
with no names
the crowd like the wind –
a stranger
we are stuck in the dream
in which the world dies silently
we vanish and yet
there is nothing outside outside of us

RIVER

She wished to be a river
changing places and lives
into a voyage of no returns
She packed for a trip
into the world of new adventures
as if her small room had no windows
to the far away galaxies
All she knew was not enough
to preserve the time from dying
someone had to close the door
from the other side –
to find the key for unlocking the dreams
Going places
changing places
friends of no distinction
to be left behind
like the laughter
of distant thunder
just before it rains
Leaving for tomorrow –
we all have to search
for the meaning of shadows
that will follow our thoughts
and will grow in our memories
like the dust on the bookshelves
in the little room we left
She wished to be a river
wanting to take her world along
to knock on strangers' doors
and bow and vow and promise
another victory in tomorrow

THESE ARE THE DAYS

These are the days of hurt
sun with sad face
morning in gloom
thought's empty pain
past time – in vain

These are the days of good
words upon words
hopes built on hopes
promises of trust
for our sake – we must

Keep on going through dust
and rains and storms
on serpentine roads
arrivals too late
misunderstanding's fate

These are the days of choice
to win the best of all crossroads
to get where victory of all victories meet
in snow and mud and sleet

These are the days of memories
left as dust on the shelves
among other fine memories
past is past
not to be returned
feelings will live on
to be burnt

MOCKING MOON

out there you might have listened
through the turmoil of my hands
when the words were falling down
along the dusty roads
- you could not turn away
nor toward the sun
green hopes were screaming
the colors of the rainbow
as we dimmed into the night
charring the outcome
nights are for lovers – you said
trees are for shadows -
I whispered calm down my dear
and let's play again
the nocturne of the mocking moon

YESTERDAY

Yesterday we had nothing more to say
gloomy silence stared at us like a surprise
from behind the table
You travelled in time
picking up the crumbs here and there
good times bad times
parks and drive-ins
walks in downtown neons
in smoke – you said –
everything goes up in smoke
vanishing like the air we breathe
Dinner was over waitress –
she wished us well as if she knew
You travelled in time like an eagle –
lonely – among the clouds
wishing for the moments to be gone
before they come
there was no sense in asking
Indifference hesitated in the candles' flames
like a string on a guitar we once played
You traveled in time
of lost illusions
and I closed the door
from the other side!

TRANSFORMATION

We changed the tones
into tender and sublime
and let the surprise take over
we played the melancholies on each other
at dusk and late at night
while the wind decanted
expecting the divine
The house – elegant arena
we were building for years
with fireplace where one could hang the dreams to dry
nocturnal jazz
sonatas of perplexed emotions
obsession took us apart and put us back together
mixing parts - now you have my eyes and I have yours
We had rooms full of antiques
sophisticated life
yet we searched for further bliss of madness
when passing by the grief-stricken
we mixed our caprices with their tragic passions
and comic pratfalls –
house or no house
We changed our worlds in night clubs
toasting the second-rate piano players
and their cocktail music
we – the attractive against their unconditional lives
like the sadness in the blues
we changed our subtle transformation
into a different run
as we dropped the facade of pretenses
and camouflage

SHE

she could almost be like a cloud
on the night when the moon comes out
when the wind whispers secrets in the trees
she could almost be like a star
hung in the sky
so bright yet lonely
admired envied
longing to be held
and touched
or loved
she could almost talk like a stranger
make days smile
nights fold into shelter
or hands clutch stronger
hold tighter
she could almost walk away or vanish
yet leave behind some charm and joy
that you would never thought her gone
she could almost be the words you say
as a rose in a vase
as a romance
yet far and distant like the edge of time
a dream
a wish
you'd like to possess at dawn
when the mist is touching leaves of grass
and sun is wedging in through curtains



ON A CAROUSEL

A little boy on a carousel
holding tight flying
flying through the air
higher and higher into the sky
where the angels play
spinning around above the crowd
he soars into heaven
His mother watches
trembles in heart
the sun just blinded her eyes
she stepped aside
someone moved into the space
that was left empty behind
hold on son — she seemed to whisper
don't worry an angel said
I'll take him to the heaven's gate
where flowers smell like cotton candy
and where we play a happier game
I'll show him stars
and let him play among the fountains of the sky -
Then carousel slows down and stops
the airplane comes to a sudden halt
the boy still smiling waves
reaches out his tiny hands
his mother picks him up
looks back
the angel isn't there
a shadow hangs in her smile —
the stranger walked away



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