

Dan Pagis

Four Poems

The Last Ones

I am already quite scarce. For years
I have appeared only here and there
at the edges of this jungle. My graceless body
is well camouflaged among the reeds and clings
to the damp shadow around it.
Had I been civilised,
I would never have been able to hold out.
I am tired. Only the great fires
still drive me from hiding-place to hiding-place.

And what now? My fame is only in the rumours
that from time to time
and even from hour to hour
I wane.
But it is certain that at this moment
someone is tracking me. Cautiously
I prick all my ears and wait. The steps
already rustle the dead leaves. Very close. Here.
Is this it?

Am I it? I am.
There is no time to explain.

The Readiness

I too, like all the apes in the neighbourhood,
grumble from branch to branch:
the past age, which was filled with sun, has passed.
Now it's cold. The nuts are too hard.
The carnivores are getting more and more supple.

This is it, I'm emigrating. Good-bye.

Hey, what's happening,
my tongue's tied in knots,
my shoulders, where are my shoulders,
suddenly I've got stature,
erectness,
suddenly I'm threatened with
what, a high brow!
Bulbs, flickering bulbs!

How good this silence is. Gradually
I pick out an attractive suit,
get dressed,
light up a cigarette,
and sit down with the stop-watch, my only friend,
beside the table, in perfect readiness
for the invention of chess.

The Cave Man Is Not About To Talk

At time's tail-end my great-grandchildren's great-
Grandchildren pause,
My skull in hand, and try to calculate
The centuries I ground between my jaws.

And what news of the mammoth will they wrest
From my laconic mouth? I've got time:
I'm not about to talk. They haven't guessed
My profile, even. Fine,

Let them enjoy the bones that I bequeath
In a clump of dust. But if they looked beneath:
Here I am,

Still in my cave, complexion like a baby's,
Pink and soft and wonderfully at ease,
Never expelled from the warmth of Mama's womb.

A Lesson in Observation

Pay close attention: the world that appears now
at zero-point-zero-one degrees
was, as far as is known,
the only one
that burst out of the silence.

It hovered within a blue bubble, fairly large;
and sometimes there were clouds, sea breezes,
sometimes a house, perhaps a kite, children,
and here and there an angel,
or a garden, or a town.
Beneath these were the dead, beneath them
rock, beneath this the fiery prison.

Is that clear? I will repeat: outside there were
clouds, screams, air-to-air missiles,
fire in the fields, memory.
Far beneath these, there were houses, children.
What else.

The little dot on the side? It seems to be
the only moon of that world.
It was silent even before this.

*Translated from the Hebrew by
Stephen Mitchell*

Politicals

They do not rot in prison,
Nowadays.
They get to see the papers,
If not today's then last week's copies.
Educated men or women,
They continue with their education—
Blest be external degrees of London!
Prison's the most peaceful of universities.
But they had best behave, or else
They'll lose their pencil and their privilege,
Their books go missing in transmission.
Mostly they study law,
Law is a popular subject in prison.

Parents or wives can visit them
At times prescribed and monthly.
They ask for news of the ruling party
And its recentest wrongdoing.
But their visitors talk of the neighbours,
The old dying, the young wooing,
And the new blocks of flats,
And rapes and murders.

Some are allowed to go,
Return to a world rebuilt in their absence.
Some of them fly to their childhood foe,
Fly to Britain
And continue their studies at Lincoln's Inn.
Some of them find permitted employment,

Like selling insurance
Or helping to stage Ionesco—
Non-sensitive activities.
Some give their wives new babies.
You can count the prison years
By the gaps in their families.

Some are impenitent
Or proud beyond reason,
And wait in gaol for the coup
That may never come.
Wait in gaol to put their enemies in prison.

The successful grow arrogant and cruel.
The failures lie in gaol
And rot, metaphorically.
Waiting for fortune's wheel to turn
And raise them to arrogance and cruelty.

The common people turn away their faces,
Fearing parties, fearing a choice of parties,
Turn to plantations and factories.
Traders and diplomats, rapt as gamblers,
Study the wheel as it jerks and quivers.

It seems we've become too many.
What can be done with all these energies?

D. J. Enright

The Embassies

The embassies of tiny or obscure
Republics, kingdoms, duchies should convey
A proper sense of diplomatic play,
And teach the others to be less secure.

Imagine what takes place behind their walls,
Shaded, subtle, solemn and detached:
Carefully-worded messages dispatched
By cable or by courier; urgent calls

To ministers in Luxembourg or Denmark;
The Government's considered Official View
From Zomba, Fort Lamy, Ouagadougou
Of some new course on which the Powers embark.

And coming from a wild or exquisite place
Which doesn't think too much about defeat,
The Secretary, an expert, is discreet,
With just a *little* irony on his face.

James Cole