

IMANTS ZIEDONIS

From *EPIPHANIES*

Translated by Bitite Vinklers

"It's Very Early"

It's very early. The sun hasn't opened its eyes. Mother hasn't started to rock my cradle, and Father hasn't gone out to care for the horses. The boots by the door are still asleep; thresholds and footpaths are asleep.

Yesterday still lies between the floorboards. A sigh remains in the dishtowel, a swearword smolders in the ashes in the stove. But nighttime sleep has turned into morning sleep, and at cockcrow the hat on the table wakes up. It is early, but the hats on their pegs are greeting me, and now I must go.

I don't even exist yet. I have never walked, reached for a door latch, gone singing through dew on the grass. I have never seen the sun. They said it rises around the third cockcrow, and the hour is near, for the men have stopped snoring and the curtains are growing red.

I step across my first doorsill, from nonbeing and the unremembered into the morning mist: my childhood.

There is no sun, the air is cool, damp, and the footpath leads into fog. In the whiteness I can make out the well. So the first path leads from the doorsill to the well. I'll remember: a linden to the right, a rowan to the left, green grass beside the hard-packed earth. It's the only path I know; I'll remember it.

I lean over the rim of the well: somewhere far down gleams water. I call down "Aaah!" and my voice resounds like a song from a choir. Above the well, a pail rocking, like a cradle from a bough. Who dips it into the well if no one is here? Who needs this water so far down?

Then the door swings open, and Mother comes out and says, "Soon it will be day.
And soon you'll be my son."

"Each Day Catches Fire"

Each day catches fire. If you have walked all day and not seen it, wait. Don't
blink; it might happen that instant.

One morning there was dew on the grass. But no sunlight, and the dew was red-gray, the
rose didn't speak. The next day there was dew and sun, but the rose had shed its petals.

There must be a triad. A flower and myself are not enough, there must be sun. A birch and
myself are not enough; the birch needs wind, or a thrush, or frost.

At night the matthiolas were fragrant, but I had a cold.

I had wood and a fireplace but no matches.

The clock ticked, but it had no hands.

A day is darkness in which a dial must light up.

A stone must skip across the water before it sinks; tonight it sank without skipping.

As if someone had been in the garden and picked everything.

If the day hasn't caught fire I can't fall asleep.

At the end of a blind day I sat, without hope, in front of the TV, in a foreign country, in a
small resort in Czechoslovakia.

About eleven o'clock, minnesingers began to sing.

They sang in autumn fog, under bare trees.

They were young, they walked along the autumn roads, they sang in front of byres and flower
beds, they sang with steins of foaming beer, and together with small fish. They were happy and
sad, like their countrymen, and as befits us all. From the clock a jet of water shot out and
extinguished time. And the earth rocked gently, holding Prague, Bauska, and Valdemarpils.

I tossed a stone across the water: it skipped again and again, and didn't want to sink.

It was past eleven.

The day had caught fire.

"Along with the Moths Tonight"

Along with the moths tonight, love runs into the windowpane.

("Turn off the light or we'll have no peace.")

No, not love, a mere inkling; love itself is beyond reach. Far away, deep in the river fish lie sleeping tonight. Across the river the waves run the opposite way.

We are far from each other. Like north and south branches of a birch. What wind must come to bring us together?

We are the doors at the opposite ends of a barn. And through the barn a draft courses.

Love lies unreachable beneath your house. To reach it, the whole house must be razed. Will you leave this to others or do it yourself?

It seemed simple: along with the moths, love at the window. Simple and near. As if we were birds and sang in the treetops.

But love is in roots, and deep in the river where fish lie sleeping.

Like an inkling a petal flies past.

"A New Night Is Coming"

A new night is coming. It will be fresher and blacker. The old one was already pale: fires were burning there. (Fire feeds on night like mold.)

A new night is coming, black as the depths of a chimney. Once again my cellar is dark, and the darkness in my pocket is fresh.

New money lies in the safe, in darkness, and doesn't decay. In the beehive a new darkness grows. In the dark depths of genesis our grandchildren lie.

A new night is coming! The old one had become so familiar my eyes saw lights flaring there. (Light decays the dark.)

This new night! Black as unburned coal.

"Sing, I Tell You!"

Sing, I tell you! Sing when all is well, but even more when you confront absurdity. Sing into the eyes of those who curse you, and when they beat you, rejoice that you are superior.

I still remember it: I was a young boy and through our window I saw the neighbor beating her son. But he laughed and sang; he stood by a corner of the granary and sang. She beat him with a switch or a broomstick, and he continued to sing. When she grew tired and lowered her arms, he rubbed his sore shoulders and walked away singing.

Sing in overcrowded trolleys (go ahead, sing off your anger!). And if they make you pay for your singing, then pay.

Sing when you drink. You drink out of sorrow, out of boredom. You can drink half a pitcher, but can you sing as much?

Why are you silent at the grave? Sing! Not for him. He can't hear you. For yourselves, because you remain. Sing not of the spruce boughs on the grave, but of that leaf in the treetop.

When you awake at night, you hear nightingales. Even at night there is song. Do you sing only in the morning, only songs filled with sun? Where are your songs of anger, despair, attack? Yes, where are your songs of attack?

Are you already the victor, singing only in the morning, or the vanquished who doesn't sing at all?

"They Drove the Donkey Out of Me"

They drove the donkey out of me. No longer can I block doorways, legs braced against the posts and spoiling for a fight.

No longer can I sprawl in the street, blocking traffic, until they drag me away by the tail.

They drove the donkey out of me, and now I cower from a poke in the ribs.

Oh, donkey days! When my heart had long ears, when stubbornness, like a large key, locked me in place: --Here I stand. I will stand my ground. Beat me to death!

Let my bones become fenceposts! My tail be caught fast in the door of a safe! Let my feet be harpoons, barbed, piercing the bones of the earth!

Oh, donkey soul, come back to me, now obedient and tamed. And when you drop dead across the threshold, don't let them cart you off. Make them step over you. May thistles and nettles grow through you (those who need to, will understand why you exist, oh, donkey soul).

Your skeleton at the threshold is an anchor, and the cable, floating around us, ties itself to the donkey. The anchor is for you, smiling yacht; you, black trawler; you, submarine, not sure which current to obey. The donkey skeleton is the anchor at our threshold: for ships, nightingales, goats that climb roofs, and young horses afraid of the whip.

"A Full Glass That Spills"

A full glass that spills, a pitcher foaming over. Can they be set on a gentleman's table?

I was yeast, and so were you when we met, but we didn't know what to do. We needed flour. I knew that no one eats yeast by itself; people drink beer and eat bread. I had to dissolve in water and blend with flour. Only then. But at first I was foolish, I wanted to be eaten pure. To be gulped down at once, wrapper and all. So did you.

There is always too much: the embarrassment of fullness, fulsomeness, excess.

The sea is too big. If it were the size it should be, it wouldn't rage and tear at its shores.

Mountains are too big; that's why loneliness is born in them. Glaciers and landslides are a sign that mountains want to be smaller.

I walk through towns and the countryside, I watch people who have been given more than they need. Oh, overflowing anger, you don't know how to master yourself! Your fist wants too much, your tongue is poisonous as a snake's. The world enjoys the fruits of anger, but it doesn't like your eyes.

And overflowing love? Why does it knock on doors that won't open? Why does it take roses to those who don't want them? But it does.

A man walks down the street with a storm inside. Waves keep rushing but never arrive. For there is no rock, no shore to break against. How long can a storm rage, how long can someone remain a sea?

A mountain walks down the street. It contains gold, gemstones, minerals. Hot springs. Which plain will invite it to stay? Dynamite my summit, level me to a valley, the mountain asks. Release the hot springs, it silently asks.

A mountain walks down the street, and no one knows that suddenly flames and lava can erupt. A woman falls to her knees and you'll say she's lost her pride. A man brings roses that are rejected and he drinks, rages, acts like a fool.

The sea, the mountain are desperately big. But it takes so little to end the despair: a scoop of flour for yeast, a spade and pickax for the mountain, one rock against which a wave can break.

"Don't Promise Me Anything Big"

Don't promise me anything big. I don't need it.

This is the small matchbox I live in. Why not get your belongings and move over here? When the grand world denies us, we'll ask Adam and Eve not to bring us into the world.

This is the small ring I live in. I set it on a rock and sit down in the middle. Why not get your binoculars and live over here? Sit down beside me and look around you! Those two names written on the horizon—aren't they ours?

But before you come, promise you won't bring anything big. Leave those big shoes that rub. Leave the planet outside our ring. There's no room.

And these are the things I think about: I think about the speck of dust I must breathe life into. I think about a small life within a small ring.

"Walk Around It"

Walk around it. Whether it's a blossom or the sea makes no difference. A blossom is as large as the sea. But don't plunge headlong into the sea, wade into a blossom, or step into someone's soul. Walk alongside, remain near.

In daytime the sea is full of light given by the sky. At night it's full of warmth, left by the day. On summer nights I walk along the sea, my arms spread like wings: one in the midnight mist over the land, the other above the sea. That is what I call nearness. That is it.

On stormy nights the breakers crash, still invisible. Then on the shoal a white line, like a row of laughing teeth. It gleams and dims. Again immense darkness without shore or distance, endless rows of laughing white teeth. The nearness of the sea.

Have you looked for a haystack at night? You walk into the dark meadow, spread your arms, and listen for the source of warmth. You take a few steps and, as in a childhood game of hide-and-seek, someone says, "Warm...hot...hot..." You reach to the left and there is the warmth, big as a haystack. But before I enter this warmth I walk around the haystack along its invisible boundary, its sacred nimbus, the boundary where its radiance begins.

A cook walks along the rim of a kettle, the rim of a plate. For him, food is not just a bowl filled to the brim or a spoon in a hungry mouth, but the aroma drifting above the bowl, the tiny typhoons of aroma in kitchen skies.

I can not enter an unknown house; I must first walk around it. Each house has its own radiance. It may be small, just around a window or the door. But sometimes it flows across fences, down country lanes, coming a kilometer to meet you.

Houses with bees radiate far. As far as the paths of their bees. Those are the places of great, benevolent radiance--places I would take children for their noonday nap.

As I come closer, I hear a hen clucking. She has laid an egg, and I understand her completely: she can't conceal her pride, for the egg is fresh and brown with small dark speckles, and the yolk within is bright as an orange.

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I still don't enter the house, I go into the woodshed. Here the radiance of the forest still reigns, but the fragrance of sawdust is the tree's last song. From the chimney sacrificial smoke already rises.

The nearness of thrushes in a birch, storks in the crown of an oak, swallows under the eaves, and peonies beneath a window. The house becomes familiar and now I go inside.

The child has not been born, but he is near.

You are near, and soon you'll be in sight.