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Writing Sample

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ON THE PREEMINENCE OF THE WORKING CLASS

don’t you think I haven’t seen those crowds of men
at the beginning of each shift turning into
colorless ETs in work boots, casually
punching their time cards, tipping
their hardhats before oleographs of St. Barbara
in the elevator shafts. those cars full of coal on TV
are just for show (the real purpose of mines
is never mentioned) underground most of them
simply form lines, facing west,
they patiently walk in place in three shifts
(a hamster turns the wheel by running in place)
so stop asking me how the earth rotates.
VIRTUAL REALITY

I walk & marvel at how realistic it is
I feel the pressure on my shoe exactly
where the sole of my foot meets the sidewalk
tilt my head slightly and I see a little different
fragment of the picture. a red truck
roaring on the left, louder
in the middle, on the right.

dust, whisking—very
realistic. but what’s that? oomp-oomp-oomp
like a thresher or a punk band. or is it blood
in my ears? behind the city hall tower
the same hippies with drums as last spring
even the rhythm is the same. maybe it is blood—
and the helpful processor serves instant

images: drums, hair, girls’ filmy
dresses, so that the sensations make
sense. a boy circulates among the audience
collecting money in his drum. I give him two thousand,
he looks and mumbles, fanks. fanks? what’s fanks?
they should have added Polish dialogue. oh well,
who cares, it’s probably a pirated copy anyway.
the most dangerous of all is air, scientists warn
100% of addicts started out inhaling air.
eight to twelve times a minute, twenty four
hours a day. even a few inhaled doses can lead
to permanent addiction. the first cry,
a sudden short choke—and you can’t
live without it. pills, opiates, ideas, cars, feelings
of superiority, of being hurt—just a matter of time.
the gate has opened. there’s no return.

some of the addicts featured in our program
are already dead. a chinook blew all night.
some older air addicts will die of a heart condition.
no return. not everybody needs to have AIDS
and beg: a spoon over a gas burner—a fancy
business dinner in a hotel—a nice afternoon
with the family in front of the tv—a hot
dry wind blows October leaves
down the alley—
pass me a tubajfor, creampuff
hey you’re soft as water,
like melting butter, a total softie
I was ripping out sajing for these eyetalians
when you were still in diapers back in Poland
have you ever seen a house made of tubajfors, creampuff?
pass me a twentypound hammer
we need to move this corner over by an incz
not one angle is straight here
have you ever seen a szitrok wall?
have you ever rubbed in džoint kompound, creampuff?
have you poured boiling tar on rufing?
modernity swirled below the surface
and punctured the Earth’s skin
with all these skyscrapers
like it or not
but don’t cough on me like that, creampuff
you can cough all the fiberglass out after work
go to dankin donats after midnight they’ll give you
yesterday’s donats six for a dollar
ccoat your throat with them, it’ll help
you’re a total softie but don’t worry
you’ll learn fast. life is very simple
simpler than you think
you’ll get a gray beard, a kar from the junkyard
and you’ll be giving creampuffs just like you
rides to work.
I am a night that doesn't want to end
so hot and dry my throat sticks
the soft walls coated by mucus by dust

I am the giant letters ŁAWA Główna
the ashen glow of sodium lamps
the loud buzz of a fluorescent tube in the corridor

I am the mumbling of a hippie demanding
three thousand zlotys for a cup of tea
because the pigs only just let him go

I am the pigs on the platform hunched in the wind
eyes red from lack of sleep
chins tucked in the collars of their uniforms

I am the iron-gray river under the bridge
I am the clatter of a train on the bridge's grid
I am a mercury vapor rising above the fields

I am the broken window a trip without a moral
I am the broken window that lets the fog
seep in, I am the clatter, the travel, the night.
smears from insects are pure light full of power.
remains of smashed insects on the windshield are pure light.
the river bubbling with potholes rolling under the bridge of our truck’s axle is pure light.
the front and rear axles floating over the solid asphalt river are pure light.
the big ploughed field white with storks gathering for flight is pure light.
the pilgrimage walking alongside the road, the nun with a bullhorn stuck on a stick are pure light.
pilgrims in sideways ribbons of rain, the nun with a bullhorn stuck on a stick are pure light.
storks wading in the brown field, stubble turned face down is pure light.
children selling dusty plums on the roadside are pure light.
the plums’ taut skin in the ribbons of rain, the children clinging to the tree trunk under its thick crown are pure light.
the dyke above the road, the pond pinpricked with rain is pure light.
the slit of red sky between the rain and horizon,
two rows of lindens leading wet sand to the horizon,
the red glow on the wires alongside the road.
SPRING

I deal in guns, my belt sewn inside with gold pinches me, my leg rots bit by bit. this dream goes on for nearly twenty years. after waking up, my friend G. comes, he jerks his head robotically. silently he picks up small objects from the table and tries to leave. Pharaoh’s spirit seizes him, makes him lewd. autumn with its scent of burning leaves or long bare branches in early spring are not good for swallow’s sons. I don’t want him to have to watch the walls in the room bending apart and the sizzling hell next door with its devils. is this a trick of chemistry in the head. or reality that one must accept. is the current prime minister, who starts to get it, mad less or more, or is the one less mad who takes the world’s centrifuge word for word.
1999

two thousand zero zero party over, oops out of time
so tonight I'm gonna party like it's nineteen ninety-nine

Prince, 1999

today it is as if every day had already happened
and was happening for the first time.
looking into the sun now with open eyes, then closed,
the delta of small veins under the orange peel
of eyelids, then the dance of shapes and feelings
before the open eyes
in the corner of the backyard where dust rises.
what could I have lost
if I still have my watch, wallet and sense of identity?
listening to a cassette found in the basement
surprised that hits to which I once kissed you sound so ancient?
surprised that hits I forgot
now run through me like electricity?

the old tape jams in the machine
the new day breaks off and rolls in
the new day starts full of surprise
the old tape ends without reprise.
A POEM FOR ANN FRENKEL

Yes, I played in a band, until the bandonist’s thumb got overdeveloped. He practiced too much.
It’s hard to flick thoughts from the world of sparkle without scratches. My names have scattered in all directions in a lively anagrammento.

Now I approach the piano like a dusty slumbering animal. My fingers itch sometimes, just a bit, when I touch a feather duster. Where is the wind that would spin gray dandelion clocks back into golden locks, in a blink—
THE MUSIC HOUR HOSTESS
ON AL-JAZEERA THROWS A FIT

bon soir, she always said politely
and bye-bye. in between, shukran habibi. and ana mabsuta
but it wasn’t that she was upset. quite the opposite.
Bedouin dreams of luxury, whizzing Lexuses,
water gurgling everywhere. girls belly
dancing at the very edge of the cognitive horizon
of this likable man with moustache and belly.
everything in its place. sweet ornaments
waving their hips just right. he sings, sings with he
roic tenor, a very powerful man. giving so much. and she?
suddenly a vampire, suddenly mabsuta
brazenly and wildly, legs all over the place.
at least the remote is safely stored
in the sofa. she? should know better.
she gets up, goes, clicks, off—

Translated from the Polish by Frank L. Vigoda