

Poems by Heiner Mueller
Translation: Dennis Redmond © 2001

[1950s]

Notes: Becher refers to GDR writer Johannes Becher.

TWO LETTERS

1

I see you sweating at the typewriter
Producing corruptible verse
On death by asphyxiation in the network
Of necessary laws. The masons, you write
Would soon be needed as mortar
For the building of the Great Wall, and ever
And anon Great Walls are built. Nothing new
Under the sun, you write. You write nothing new.
You have learned to beg questions.
The applause, which deafens you, is it none at all?
The quickest effects are not the newest.
A meeting on the evening after our talk:
Two republicans on the way to bed
Discussing democracy
Finethat'stheforbutwhere'sthecontent
They count the years according to wage-increases
The months after the appearance of the *Magazine*
Each wise in the way of Keuner
Not a thought which doesn't go through the belly
And as in Buechner no fear before priestly garb
They have small horizons, but are right
When they say, reading your verse:
What's this Somebody actually saying to us?
Doesn't he understand the role of the land reform?

2

What can a rhyme do against the knuckleheads
You ask. Nothing, say some, others: little.
Shakespeare wrote Hamlet, a tragedy
History of a man who threw his knowledge away
Yielded to a stupid custom.
He did not stamp out the stupidity.
Did he want to write nothing more than a form letter?
Hamlet the Dane Prince and grist for worms stumbling
Dully from hole to hole to the last hole
In back the spectre which made him

*Green like Ophelias flesh in the cradle
The horizon of the armaments lasts longer
And shortly before the third crowing of the cock
A fool tore the jesters' bells of the philosopher
Crawled a white-bellied bloodhound into the tank.*
Or the misunderstood Bertolt Brecht
With great tenacity and a bit of hope
He too could no more than bend the bow
How many knuckleheads survived him.
All his life he sought the possibility
Of not killing the next-door-neighbor. Towards the end
He saw them coming from far off
Half-hidden in a blood-drenched mist.
Becher sweated writing his sonnets
For the concourse of the Volga and Neckar.
Will the Jura farmers have read
the Sonnettwerk, if Communism takes
the ground off their shoulders?
For us the span is between Nothingness and Little.

BRECHT

Truly, he lived in gloomy times.
The times have become lighter.
The times have become gloomier.
When the light says, I am the gloom
It has spoken the truth.
When the gloom says, I am
The light, it does not lie.

THE FATHER

1

A dead father would perhaps
Have been a better father. Best of all
Is a stillborn father.
Grass grows ever anew over the border.
The grass must be torn up
Again and again which grows over the border.

2

I wished my father were a shark
Which had ripped apart forty whalers
(And I had learned to swim in their blood)

My mother a blue-whale my name Lautreamont
Died in Paris
1871 unknown

OLD POEM

Night while swimming across the sea the moment
Which put you in question There is no one else
Finally the truth That you are only a citation
Out of a book you have not written
Against which you can write at length on your
Fading ink-ribbon The text breaks through

THE LUCKLESS ANGEL Behind him swims the past, shaking thunder from wing and shoulder, with a noise like buried drums, while before him the future jams up, his eyes pressed in, the eyeballs explode like a star, the word wound up into a vibrating mouth-gag, strangling him with his breath. For a long time one still sees his wings beating, hears in the roaring the hail of stones fall down before over behind him, the louder the more violent the movement in vain, scattered, when they become slower. Then the moment closes over him: on the quickly rubble-filled standing place the luckless angel comes to rest, waiting for History in the petrification of flight breath glance. Till the renewed roaring of mighty wing-beats reproduces itself in waves through the stone and indicates his flight.

PICTURES

Pictures signify everything in the beginning. Are keepable. Roomy.
But the dreams congeal, become form and disillusionment.
Already the sky holds no more pictures. The clouds, seen from an
airplane: steam which takes away the view. The crane only a bird.
Even Communism, the final picture, which is always refreshed
Because washed with blood again and again, the everyday
Pays it out with small coins, unshiny, blind with sweat
Ruins, the great poems, like bodies, long loved and
No longer needed now, on the way to the much-used final species.
Between the lines a wailing

on bones the stone-bearer happy

For the Beautiful signifies the possible end of Horror.

[1980s]

CULTURAL POLITICS ACCORDING TO BORIS DYACENKO

Boris Dyacenko said to me After the ban
On my novel HEART AND ASHES Part two
Which described for the first time
The terrors of the liberation of the RED ARMY
My censor invited me to a private discussion
And the official reader proudly showed me the forbidden
Typescript bound in costly leather THUS
I LOVE YOUR BOOK WHICH I HAD TO FORBID
IN THE INTEREST YOU REALIZE OF OUR COMMON AFFAIR
In the future said Boris Dyacenko
The forbidden books will be bound
IN THE INTEREST YOU REALIZE OF OUR COMMON AFFAIR
In leather gouged from the skins of the authors
Let's keep our skins intact said Boris Djacenko
So that our books will outlast the epoch
of the official readers in a more durable edition.

NIGHTTRAIN BERLINFRIECHRICHSTRASSE FRANKFURTMAIN

After the journey through the lightless homeland the hatred of lamps.
Such a colorful corpse! I AM DEATH COME FROM ASIA

ALONE WITH THESE BODIES

States utopias
Grass grows
On the rail-tracks
The words decay
On the paper
The eyes of women
Grow colder
Farewell to tomorrow
STATUS QUO

TOOTH DECAY IN PARIS

Something eats at me

I smoke too much

I drink too much

I die too slowly

[Untitled]

During the passage past the Charlottenburg Castle Park suddenly the sorrow
GREEN IS THE COLOR OF CALAMITY The trees belong to the dead

SOMETIMES WHEN I ENJOY MY PRIVILEGES

For example on the airplane whiskey from Frankfurt to (West)Berlin

I'm overcome by what the idiots at the SPIEGEL call

My raging love for my country

Wild like the embrace of someone believed dead

Queen of Hearts on Judgement Day

[1990s]

Notes: The first stanza, outlined by a rectangle, is in English in the original; the poem was written in 1990.

TELEVISION

Margarita says my father Was Howard Hughes a member Of the next/last Generation Which doesnt move its ass From the tv-chair because Outside lives man the beast On the screen at least It is flat and doesnt watch you

1 GEOGRAPHY

Opposite the Hall of the People

The monument to dead Indians

On the PLACE OF HEAVENLY PEACE [Tiananmen Square]

Tank-tracks

2 DAILY NEWS [in English] AFTER BRECHT 1989

The torn-out nails of Janos Kadar

Who called for the tanks against his people when his comrades
Started to hang torturers up by the feet
His death as the betrayed Imre Nagy
Was dug up or the rest of him
BONES AND SHOES [in English] the television was there
Frozen with the face in the earth 1956

WE WHO WISHED TO PREPARE THE GROUND
FOR FRIENDLINESS

How much earth will we have to devour
With the blood-taste of our victims
On the way into a better future
Or into none if we spit it out
3 SELF-CRITIQUE

My publishers rummage in old texts
Sometimes when I read them they leave me cold Have
I written that IN POSSESSION OF THE TRUTH
Sixty years before my presumed death
On the TV screen I see my fellow citizens
Voting with hands and feet against the truth
Which was my possession over forty years ago
What grave [Grab: grave, trench] will protect me from my youth
4 FOR GUNTER RAMBOW 1990

On TV the arrest of Erich Honecker after the cancer-operation at the door of the Charite.
An old man, marked by sixty years of power, which overwhelmed his reason and ground
his character, hollowed out by ten years of detention in a Brandenburg prison-house, to
pieces, sorrowful confirmation of Juenger's thesis of the growing disproportion between
the format of the actors and their action-radius in recent history, now delivered by his
creatures as a scapegoat for the people's scorn. (In the meantime the church has taken
him in, an old power, which grasps only for souls and no longer after bodies). I see the
pictures and think of Rambow's theater advertisements in Frankfurt, capital city of
banking and prostitution and, for a brief time, political theater in the Federal Republic.
ANTIGONE: Hoelderlin's republican chair, burning on the rack and ruin of the
restoration. GUNDLING: the ripped-apart figure of the double-gendered falling Icarus
LessingKleistFredericktheGreat, above left the NEW GERMANY flapping, a newspaper
without readers, top-gallant sail of the socialist stillbirth. HAMLETMACHINE: the
Hamlet-actor without a face in back a wall, his face a prison-wall. Pictures, which no
actual performance could possibly match. Path-finders through the swamp, which had
already begun to close over the provisional grave of utopia, which will perhaps reappear,
when the phantom of the market economy, which dispelled the spectre of communism,
shows its new customers its cold shoulder, showing to the emancipated the iron face of its
freedom.

SOFT RAINDROPS ON DUST

The pasture by the inn
Will become green, by and bye
But you Sir should drink wine before your departure
For you will find no friends
When you come to the Gates of Go
(for Erich Honecker after Ezra Pound and Rihaku)

[Untitled]

in the mirror my sliced-open body
separated in the middle by the operation
which saved my life what for
for a child a woman a late work
learning to live with the half machine
breathing eating forbidden the question what for
which falls too lightly from the lips death
is what's simple any idiot can die
28.10.1994

[Untitled]

surfacing in the isolation chamber
out of the black hole on the operation table
the rendezvous with death took place
no trace in the memory colorless
lightning in the darkness silent thunder
under the knife the categories disintegrate
in the drop the philosophemes
couple
Hegel and Kant Marx kisses Nietzsche
October 1994