

Ivan Štrpka

Translated by John Minahane

Sketch of a (First) Elegy

Are you my angel? No, only your tiresome detective
constantly spying on our brief gunshot, my cold
smile and someone's eternal bone. Naked flash. Episode
in an empty second. Empires and states? Pacts? Unions? Bare
Phantasmagorias! Each individual is his own goal
of all that swarming and banding of human beings
in the world, each is a massing of many and
at the same time his own decision, each alone
by himself in himself is that unwearying
song (of the grass leaves) full of hermaphroditic seeds
of the splintering voices (Declaration) of oneself.
But where is it actually going (to what) (and who should
we be) what can be (what wishes to be, what moulds and
what actually does it become) just what can be (and right
NOW) (the purpose, the ultimate) meaning of that (act-
ual) laughably moving kingdom of one's

self?

I would weep amid sudden darkness

in that film full of fine comedians.

Up to his ankles (ever) in the muddy and stagnant

water of birth, each alone (at the doldrums' limit)

pushes his own paper barge, till it's smashed

in the first gust from the nearby shore

of his own thought. We are wrecked in the dry ironic

breeze (from mental sodomy and bare bliss) of a pure

platonic thought, which here in the sand (before

us and after us) leaves behind only (twinges, only naked

nerves of hollow signs without body, only) a virtual trace

of the shadow of things, without descendants or forebears. Did it want

this for its image? Is this the image desired by that image

made from the image YOU in a world of live imagelessness?

And where is the awakening, animation and ecstasy,

our daily bread from ourselves, from oneself alone?

Let us bake ourselves! Let's smile like a grain! Let us tremble by the fire

of oneself, (because) that "we" (in us and round us) is practically

all “I”, and that “I” is quite limitlessly “we” without depth
and without seafloor.

Let us push our empty barge further on into the sea of dunes.

Let’s step over ourselves. Sceptic doubt is the Ouroboros eternally

devouring its tail, Leviathan, ring of creation

containing the deliriously changeable sea

of delusions that cut you off blindly from the world. And who

are you? Am I then the planet? Best have a few drinks!

Tune in to B 666! What you’re going to eat, squeeze it out

of yourself. Pass me the bowl! D’you hear moaning? Pour

me drink! Toss it down! What’s your price? Speak! Just don’t

stop. Speak. Speak alone to yourself.

The gospel of truth holds you up

neck above water, and thanks to life

death vanishes, like darkness thanks to light.

Are you my angel? The image

coils up in a bowl of milk.

The medium bursts. Someone’s slapping on paint.

Analysts vanish in the middle of a word

from the screen. The spies look obtusely
before them. The hunt masters blanch, the dusky greyhounds
lose their way on a fresh trail. Blood
gushes out onto paper. Wipers erase
from victims' and bystanders' brows the fiery kiss
of reality. Filters cleanse. (Bye-bye,
the determiner's full of an aura of uncontrollable short-circuits.)
In an electronic half-light full of divine
messages and gestures the eavesdroppers by day –
by night (mutely and) constantly stand by the walls.
Till reason turns rigid in the bends of straight
dusk. Are you my angel? Is that you?
And the child still loyally follows
the glittering milk at his kingdom's heart,
the medium hazily bubbles, in the darkness
the snake coils. Let's go and play!

And the mind all summer long burns a book
like a lamp. And the long summer burns
a lamp like a book. And a book reads
the mind like a lamp: the text dissolves
and the dance goes on further, always awakening again

at the same line, which the long summer
decodes in the strong light always there around.
Shadow entirely vanishes, and even fear
turns pale. Thirst plunges within itself.
Scream fades. Defiance is only smoke. Radiant
mockery blooms on the bier. And each
morning anew the mind concentrates
on a garden of cold light right
under the window. Day nakedly flows. In the midst a dark
house on a height of grand emptiness.
Void: you, vanishing echo
(in a blink you dissect every language).
Are you my angel?

The scorching wind lightly ruffles
glossy leaves on the trees
in an uninscribable language
of midday gloom.
(Its stains dumbly grow
on the harpoon's blade.) Sweat
idles. Temples are bare, the smooth
forehead shines, the tension of the hollow

skin mounts. Stink weighs leaden.

The marksmen are silent. The surveyors

constantly stand by the walls:

a naked dolphin flickers

in a mind without thought.

(Are you? You? My angel?)

Bright shadow without a sailor

flickers in a bare mind.

Transparent dolphin flickers uncontrolled

in the seething laugh of a glimmering silhouette.

The creature sailing in mind without a thought

of silvery whoop-for-joy: the text

dissolves and the wet dance

goes on further. Burning divine track

of the First Child, shine for me from bright

abysses amid day without depth and without seafloor,

thrust out your flash to meet the dark thunderbolt,

lay bare that nakedness, shoot towards us!

Blank spaces

We forgot our own language abroad
and we didn't learn the foreign tongue. Shops
are full of words, but they do not sell speech.

We push ahead without coaxing a pure sound
or setting a course. We stop. We get moving.
Thirsty and silent. Only blank spaces
amidst the blank spaces.

The Armies of the Night

It's raining heavily in the dark outside.
All night through soaking courtyards
the enemy armies' footsteps squelch.
A massacre goes on in the shrubs till morning.
With screaming breath I launch my counterattack.
My forehead burns. Clear sky, courtyards
completely empty – no one anywhere. The bright
and dry silence is bottomless.

Sixth Elegy (The Angel's Back)

{Extract}

And in the pit of things our commitment lies.
You read only what is traced by the silent eye
next to objects and shadows, on the back of walls and just

past the edge of words. Inaudibly
it sings. But what can arrest that song
and not itself blaze up and burn away,
how much can he gulp down, the lion by your legs,
sunk in the shallow gold of slowing wakefulness,
pure incarnation of our memory?
After long embrace and love-making full
of cries and sighing, in unmoving sleep
you lie on a bare sheet rippled with the silence
of countless folds: hand filled with fire
(young desperation quietly moulding an ancient
pearl), relaxed in the slender shoulders'
swimming gesture, and sorrowfully
close-cropped head full of golden tones,
and dolphin's back, and girlishly smooth-carven
nook where snowwhite roundnesses are cleft
lightly by a damp hollow, which again
connects all in the moments of fulfilling
vertigo. From your half-open mouth a divine gleam
of mutely dreaming spittles leaks. Skin
alabaster. Not a trace of the arrow's piercing.
All night you slumber almost angel-deep,
and outside in the pure air there is almost
no motion, and the darkly glittering snow unnoticed
melts. That is no water nor plumes of god.
(*Ah, lovers and beloved.*) In the transparent
breath of night all winter long one snow
unceasingly turns slowly molten,
and a second, scarcely visible, congeals
silvery in it, simultaneously.
Everywhere now the breathing skin

of all-concealing nakedness
gently hallucinates. Plunged deep
in sleep, you cannot comprehend it
unconditionally. You feel no weight, only being stripped
of bonds. Night's movements, hardly visible,
and the light-footed winter animals touch.

Ivan Štrpka (1944, Hlohovec) was a pioneer of poetry expressing an uncompromising personal vision in hyper-politicised former Czechoslovakia (and blacklisted in 1970s). His finest writing (post-1989): *Psychopolis: Thin Ice* (2009), *Fragment of a Knight's Forest* (2016) retain the personal symbolism but engage uniquely with the extra-personal world.