

**Michal Habaj**

Translated by John Minahane

**Freedom**

Night's echo

covers everything

that breathes.

We're beyond the horizon,

and now the wheels

are turning only in heads.

The pilgrims squeezed the bones

that moan in the wind

into a grain of rice.

From the sand dunes

freedom blows.

It has the face of a worm

that eats up everything

in the name of profit.

The skeletons of states

blow in the wind,

hung on a cross

as a windbreak.

Mary,

you're asking the way,

but in your heart

the snake

goes sinuously in time

backwards.

The stairways have been moved.

The pilgrims have been carted

off to execution.

While they were dreaming,

someone screwed off their heads,

filled them with sand

and sold them to museums.

We browse in memory's offprints,  
we're the first who're going nowhere.

Shot by firing-squad at dawn,  
we testify to the shadow's length  
in puddles of blood.

Dogs bark.

Beyond the horizon of days  
shining white tents,  
phantoms of onetime  
expectations.

Continents on pilgrimage  
through the looking-glass.

Freedom is only a word  
that the wind  
gnawed into your heart.

## **Letter to a developer**

dear investor,

as you have just learned,

this envelope

contains a letter,

not a cartridge.

since I am not the holder

of an arms certificate,

any such gestures

would have only symbolic force.

I do however favour

action, direct where possible,

precisely like you,

who are making life bitter

for me, my fellow citizens, our city.

I call on you therefore

to halt forthwith

the construction works

on Koliba Hillside Residence

on Panorama Koliba

on Uptown Koliba

on Belaria Koliba

on Areal Koliba.

in the opposite event

expect the worst:

mild shifts in the understanding

of quite specific

concepts and realities:

peace, pain, life, death.

my poetic project

will announce itself one day at dawn  
with the song of the first birds,  
before the cranes are stirring  
or hammers strike, or drills and iron-cutters snarl.

google, please, these names:

Villon, Byron, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont,  
Whitman, Marinetti, Majakovskij, Tzara, Breton,

Habaj

now you know what I mean when I speak  
of the relativity  
of good and evil  
love and hatred  
life and death

I'd like to see your eyes  
widened by knowledge of truth.  
it's just a moment, but an eternal one.

that's the advantage of poetry:

unlike your precast concrete

it never loses concentration,

it lurks like a bird of prey

till it catches its kill.

you will never be safe

from the poem

that's written for you.

you won't survive this poem,

your building won't survive this poem,

your name will crumble in dust.

this poem will find you

dead or alive,

in the Bahamas or Cyprus,

bankrupt or not.

but have no fear,

the time of judgment and prophecy will be fulfilled

long after

the cranes for the last time turn their scraggy necks,

the cutters sing their requiem,

the hammers drive the last nail into the coffin.

here am I playing with keyboards

while you're hard at work.

in the beginning was the word: whoreson,

in the end a poem,

thank you for the inspiration,

O investor, O developer, muse.

inscrutable are the ways of God,

I have told you:

good and evil are relative.

and this poem?

it is only an expression of divine awareness,

of universal wisdom,

of the central intelligence in the cosmos;

today it lays the path for my anger,

tomorrow for your humility, when in the morning



you'll rise, distribute your wealth, enter  
a monastery with a prayer upon your lips,  
joyfully communing with eternity.

now you know that I wanted to warn you:

you're the same Buddha as me.

so you see:

you're an investor,

you're a muse,

you're a buddha.

and all this you owe to my poem.

but now you are dead

and it remains for you

to be born again.

I accompany you as a bard of despair,

beware of images

of residences, beautiful women,  
expensive alcohol, and instead focus  
your attention on this poem.

its doors are open wide to you,  
you need only go in  
and jump from the highest storey.

come,  
I'll cover you with a white sheet,  
a white leaf of paper,  
with the poem  
that has brought you thus far.

it was a bloody investment,  
worthy of redemption.

**Michal Habaj** (1974, Bratislava) belongs to the late 1990s generation of non-conforming Slovak poets. *The Roots of Heaven. Poems from the Last Century* (2000) is a lament — or a mockery of lamentation, or both — for culture and human beings, overwhelmed by an absurd technology. Habaj is also a literary scholar, specialising in early 20th century Slovak prose.

