

Dimitris LYACOS
Excerpts from POENA DAMNI

From Z213: *EXIT*

these names and that's how they found me. And as soon as they brought me I stayed for a while and then they took me it was a building of four wards large yards and rooms the rest of the people were there four wards separate not far from the sea. And we would eat together sometimes and in the middle a log with cut branches on top over it an opening for the smoke, and ashes spread out on the floor black stains and ashes. And from the pores in the walls a little water would come and sometimes you could ask go upstairs and visit somebody else and when sometimes in the evening the power was out and we were sitting silent in the dark but the wards which weren't connected three four five among us fond of each other yet most of us there would die at some point all of us me too and then those who believed used to cry out others did not that right we had and we were in all those wards about a thousand and each day a man from personnel would come with a list and stand in the doorway right there in the entrance the main door to go in standing and shouting to them to come out and they would call them then take them from there and remained ten somewhere else fifteen depending on ward and they would take them to a special place from the evening of the day before and next day in the morning they would come and take them from there and you could hear at that time they were going in and calling their names hear those now saying goodbye to us we were about two thousand. And they were saying goodbye to us now I with all the others saying goodbye to us and the place sounding with their goodbyes. And after they came out they were going into a car and were going round the back there was the sea and they were going. And as soon as they would come out you could hear now people shouting and from that place in a car from the back to the sea it was not very far it was from the back where they dug pits and sometimes the water would reach there and the town was woken by this noise. And they would lower them down into the pit. This is what comes to my mind most of the time. And to hear them cry as far as the last houses of the town where the wall was and everybody understood. And some used to get close to the pits and go back again and it wasn't a secret it was under our feet but nobody. A whole town just about. And that moment indescribable moment when I went down past midnight and saw bringing them in that truck down to the sea.

If I could, only from where he told me about that gallery which leads behind the wall to the abandoned fort and the tunnel through the mountain. Because the other roads were all guarded to prevent anyone getting through. The lamps broken in the gallery apart from one at the far end. And then that skylight an open hole in the dark. Going in that way you miss out the city, the passage which narrows and narrows, you go up, hear sudden flutterings. Hear like a river flowing somewhere around. Soon you make out the end, light, you come up trees drizzle, leaves spilled at your feet. Voices and footsteps draw near then away. Then you start going down as fast as possible, before it grows light. More would die tomorrow. And some will know about you. Night cut in two by the yellow strip running through it. And he had told you to wait for the time they come and the way out is easier. And about fetching and separating them, two ranks – two ranks mingling again as they were pushing them forward. And many were falling into the sea or stumbling and the rest trampling on them. And I as he had told me wore the cross and passed by the side of the tower and came out on the road for the station. From there you could leave. If I could take a train from there. But I sat down then to recover for I was in pain.

I got up, wandered about quite a while, then walked to the first platform on the other side. A soldier beside a niche in the wall laid on his side, eyes, a blanket over his feet, a pile of clothes beside him – uniforms – a kit-bag behind his back. I went, pulled out a pair of trousers and a jacket, eyes closed, a little blood under his nose, he raised his head gently, wiped it off with his sleeve. I returned to the toilets to change, came back left my clothes on the heap. Eyes closed, a drop of blood under his nose. I looked for a pair of boots from the kit-bag and put them on there, sat down beside him. Bent double, his side on the half-empty sleeve. A red beam held us inside it for a while and went away again. It must have been already past six. Cold, keeping my hands under my armpits, something hard, the little Bible in the pocket, I open the pages white here and there a few notes, somewhere else parts written clumped together, could not make them out. It had almost got dark. I sat down for a little more waiting for what – stood up, walked again, to the clock, the time-table, evening service 21.13. In one and a half hours.

Even if it didn't make a great difference in the compartment, at least to some extent. Turned off the light, pulled the curtain, passed a strap hanging there two or three times as tightly as I could around the door handle in case someone came. Sat for a little, no one, went out again walked up and down the corridor, no one, lit a cigarette, it would be nearly time. Went in again tied up waited inside, a jolt in the dark, another one then in about five minutes when we set off, one more cigarette, laid down, better now. As if I were awake and as if I were sleeping, suddenly something beside me, inside me, awake, asleep, dark changing landscape, it dawns, you turn your back to the light. We stopped, it was daybreak, a little water from the tap in the toilet, then outside. Blue, and around the slopes of the hills. Old border post. Someone came out told us to get on again, same man came up to do the check, the papers were fine. I got off again and got a sandwich - bread and beef - from a roadside vendor. Frozen hard. The first light that opens your lungs, all around and above, and from here onwards the strong smell of the landscape goes with you all along.

A few hours more, station, deserted, a dirt road for into the town, mud, mud, blankets outside, mouldering houses of tin, the shattered pylon further behind, not even a car, rubbish, two children setting fire to a heap, two or three other fires on the horizon, houses, the smell even more acid, asphalt pieces and pieces, cement block houses, few people, half-open doors, half-light, the mattress as if it were soaked, that milk, the cramp in the stomach and dizziness, when I awoke, I hurried to make it before it got dark, a little by chance and from what I remembered, asked questions, the other side, back to the bridge, the murmur of water, the trees blackening but I could still see, it was in front of me almost as soon as I entered. What are you doing here, sit for a while beside you, if you could also back then, if someone bent down, heard you while still you were heard, your eyes that were gleaming the eyes growing dim, the pain growing dim, with how many more did they bring you, the bell, silence as they lowered you down, stifled song and a pause, the murmur of water. I am cold, I leave among other names, photos that look at you and yet they cannot, the sun now again at its end. On the road back, on the plain, a tepid, breath, like the last, and a gleam, the river falling behind, the town mute as before, with some wine on the end of a table, the Bible being erased, between its pages the words of a stranger, between him I write wherever I find a no-man's land.

As long as a match stays alight. As much as you have time to see in the room that flares and fizzles out. The images holding, briefly, then fall. Some lines you manage, they are gone, another match, again. Pieces missing, empty pages, match, again. Comes across an unknown word and sticks in your mind. And where are the dwelling places of the wicked. Ask those who pass by beside you. Match, some smudged parts again like those of the testament, then some of his pieces, then mine. The light so brief that you don't have time to write, in the dark you can't see if the page is blank. You write, a match, words falling on top of each other, another page, write, again a match, page blank, continue, another half-written page, read, the matches almost gone. You turn the pages by feel, finger them. Where you find written patches, you add your own beneath, you write in between. A match, read, your own together with the stranger's, more again. As if you were speaking with someone. Match, pull on the cigarette try to read under the glow. No. Match, anguish that the objects go away again. As when I went away. Paths were all being guarded so that no one can get through. And thrown out now on the roads I open I shall be bound by them. Others escaped before dawn too. Without bond or limit, witnesses precious. A special subdivision of the Peregrini is constituted by the stateless. (Peregrini Dediticii) Who although considered free

If I go out on the road I might be able to find
as belonging to no country.

Last match.

Full Moon

 Hung on the tree dry
the light at the window

 sorts out
the forest to the west

our laughter – the best medicine

 to arm the last hands that
 drunk

Of the high tide

the shadows

 Suddenly drums bursting out
pick up and go don't know to where

and silence
before them

humbles me

the early

tombs

- you tell me I send you because
to dig

at the funerals

here they bury them at night

and you wait for me to grow old at

within a day
at the fringes of the fire

you met many

who plunged

their breast
we found
butter eggs in the bread honey and later

were giving their daughters in marriage that day

and then were falling with a crash into

stalks that we cut and were eating just raw

of the ash

and in the a glow of twilight around it and fire
flashing like lightning

mouths

Aesk – heyl – hopa (The hope of salvation is found in the wood, the demons
rush out from the wood, or something like that)

I didn't find and came back. I don't remember how long nor from where.
Dawn broke again.

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WITH THE PEOPLE FROM THE BRIDGE (excerpt).

Night had already fallen when I passed over to the other side of the station and came out on to the road. It was still raining, a little. Closed arches below the bridge, I went to the light, took the hand-out outside that they gave me, and went in like the other two in front of me. Large space, dark in its depths, around me, on the dirt floor, no more than ten, some of them with dogs. On the left the wall knocked down. Two coming from there. Three. High up opposite blue, on the right a green light and white lamps hanging, five or six, from the ceiling above where we were sitting, lit except one. In front of the stage the women, in black, funny somehow, one younger. Three around a cut-off oil drum. The other carries newspapers, puts them inside, lights a fire, the fire goes out. Another, a man, passes before them naked to the waist with a broken brick or stone? in his hand. A line going down from his neck to his chest. He digs, a bit further he raises two make-shift crosses. Hammers them into the mud beside two glasses. In the shallow dip further back, a car body missing a door. On the bonnet a cassette-player and a television, the wind-screen covered by a sheet of iron. A woman is sitting inside. Her face all grey, and the hair, mouth darker. Pulls a wooden cover in front. Drags it shut but can't altogether do it. And other bits of iron around, old machine-parts. And somebody walking about and coming to us,

haggard, torn pullover, a Bible in hand and some papers inside. The hand-out they gave me. Four names. Narrator. He went to the cassette-player. A hum. Narrator. Chorus. The women. LG, NCTV, the other and her in the car. NCTV. The language of the others. I saw it written in the station too. Nyctovo. No. Nyctivo. Nichtovo. No. Another hum, louder, continuous from the time I came in. Cassette-player. Narrator. He turns on and off, goes away, comes again opens his papers and waits. He waits. With his back turned, almost. The entire wall on the right, pages glued one next to the other and to the one side and to the other crosses sprayed on to the cement. He goes to read from there. The lights above dimmed.

And always, night
 and day in the tombs
 and in the mountains he was crying
 and cutting himself with stones.
 But when he saw Jesus afar
 off he ran
 and worshipped him,
 and cried with a loud voice,
 and said; what have I to do with you, Jesus,
 son of the most high God?
 I adjure thee by God,
 that thou torment me not.
 For he said unto him; come out thou
 unclean spirit from the
 man, and he asked him;
 what is thy name? and he answered
 saying; my name is legion
 for we are many.

He turns and signals the women to start. They start all together.

It's some time since you've been out. You sit inside and
 wait. Sometimes as if heard
 Or so you think. It seemed this way,
 when you went outside and went to the door.
 Nothing. You live with it though. Like that every day

They stop, look at each other and round about

several times more so.
 like voices somehow, more or less. It is inside you
 that. Afterwards, though, the day comes when they go outside
 you wait for them in the house. The same day every time.
 Sometimes in the morning when you wake up it is as if you prise yourself
 off them. You want to stay a little more
 you don't want to get up. You turn you look right left
 in case they came. No.
 They haven't come. But get up
 I it's today.

Today. Get up.
Another year gone by and we will

They stop suddenly, for a few seconds, again, who is this?

be all together.
A few hours. Then we will sleep wake up
we will wait again.

All together. The Narrator wipes his hands on his pullover, signals them, they stop, they would continue. He reads.

accounting that He
was able to raise them up

Is he smiling? As if he smiled. The one near the crosses, him also with papers, reading from there. Bent over then leans on his elbow as he reads he stretches out on his side.

with such thrusts better a little
more on the side, going
inwards. Like that. Then
the mind stops
stops

He stops, wonders

I remember
the last time. After that I left.
After some time I thought I heard something. After that
every now and then he would come, behind me all of a sudden. Telling me
go. She is there. Waiting for you. I would turn my
head. Nothing. Then again. Then
every so often, many times it would not stop at all.
I wouldn't believe it. Then it was starting again. Like a
needle inside my ear
Here.

stutters

and steps.
then nothing. I sweat. I wipe myself
The hands are not mine, I don't feel

He stops, thinks about it. Starts again suddenly, as if in a hurry.

I put my head inside for a little, to see.
It hurts. Wait a bit until it goes.

Sometimes she is heard clearly, now
the others cover her. One on top of the other.
You hear her. Like a wave you wouldn't expect.
And it's like as if I am sitting above her
and her pushing below. Like a shell
opening. And like a bag that you open
rubble and soil
and you take it with you and go. But why.

I was going the seagulls were diving to
bite me on the legs. Tangled together
biting. I was falling down.
I was waiting. Getting up again
to go. I remember that I was going
as much as I could. I remember a noise as well
starting, stopping and again, like coughing
but I don't know from where. Go.

He gets up to leave, the other makes him a sign, sits down again, continues

I had found a blanket
and covered myself and went to sleep on the side of the road.
Then I arrived here. Since then I am here.
Every time I wake up
to between here
a bag on my face and they
throw water on me from above
I am drowning. They take it off. I breathe.
Then again. They leave the others come.
The evening a large shadow standing
over me and looking at me.
And beside like shades, darker. Digging
stopping. Again
A little way beyond

He holds with his hand one of the crosses.

they were hammering on top. They were putting down.
One cried out suddenly. Fear.

The other signals him to stop, stops for an instant and then continues

Pain. You want to cry. Don't let it come out.
Then they left and didn't come back and I slept
a bit. Silence. Sometimes only
as if dragging her feet and then again
silence.

The Narrator comes and stops him. Train above, you hear as it passes and presses down above, we wait, then the women, in their turn or nearly so.

A dog went up and was sitting outside the door.
And from time to time taps the window The window turns white
it is still early. On the road there isn't
anyone yet. Close it. We go in. Fire.
They like it. They will say nothing. As they sit at the table
every time. As they eat huddled over their plates, silent.
Last year he had brought a stone some papers he was wiping
his lips was wiping he had something on the lips
 what is he saying

Water. Corn. And a little pomegranate. They can't
sit comfortably The body is hard
and doesn't soften. The arm-pits closed.
They can't hug you.
And the eyes cast down. They will go afterwards
to that corner over there and will stay for a while and
t hen out in the garden standing at the same spot.
Still, for a moment you think they want to
say something, that something rises in the throat, but not a thing.
It has boiled. A table-cloth. I will spread it myself.
Flour. Right. Mix. A bit more.
Corn. Sugar. Some wine.
Turn on turn on
Chairs. They will sit
where they used to

Barking. Someone comes in and sits beside me. We go on, LG, down on his face now. Gets up puts his hand inside his trousers, sits down again. Takes off one shoe.

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2012 (first publication)

The First Death. (excerpts)

[...]

VIII

Final concept harbour which has
broken there where it crumpled our faces
there where ikons soaking and dissolving
scoured the rusty beds
with haven sleep and holy candle fading
keeling over amid the wailings
the friendly hug which turned to stone for ever
in a vein where death drips
dispirited nods and flesh-consuming intercourse
and embraces on the slighted
shape of the saint who is baptised in fever
and empties our bodies' skins
and discharges black ruins of the tissues
entrails
the fir tree's primary jewellery then
as we were nestling below the turf
of the dream noiselessly
in the root of the sickness which was opening
a road and a door leaning tilting into the darkness, light
sure prophesies, whirlpools drowning the promontories
and the place was becoming wrinkled without pathways
and we were casting anchor in our innards
and chains were harvesting the senses
and the affections are shattering
and the forefathers used to navigate in the expanse of madness
close-bound bundles being pressed together into
the pattern of condemnation indescribable
shadows and rent apart
and the mercy which was granted them of asphyxiation
while the pulley-wheel of memories spins red-hot
the un-nailing of my boyhood years
and the funerary gifts which uncover the frenzy
crumb from the stars
coffins under the rain
forests inclining into pubic hair
lonely orgasms crippled lovers
and the unique desolation of their lustful mouths

X

Because you can no longer stay
because your vision allows the idols to writhe
until the lake congeals, until your hand ceases
to poke among the gizzards and the burning coals
seeking a useless axe
and let the sea scratch the dried blood;
Dismissal.

Because you are looking for the mountain and the nails beneath the stars
black crosses leaning towards the triumph
and once more you crawl and
scramble on the earth's wounds
spitting sulphur which cauterizes your limbs
panting as once upon the whores,
watering the lustful sandbanks
and the croaking of the birds of prey accompanies
the defilement; ecstatic on the mountain.
And the moist stings of the scorpions
show the way
and the mind a map dipped in wine
and the soul within its muzzle
suckling
the further horizon of pain.

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Translated from the Greek by Shorsha Sullivan