

**Krystyna Dąbrowska**

### **Collective struggles and individual toothache**

I travel a lot, but I consider Poland my home. Unfortunately, this home has become very difficult to live in. In healthy democracies, it is normal to have disagreements and conflicts. However, in my country, the nationalistic and populist government has been destroying democracy for seven years now. The tensions have turned into a nightmare. Every time our ruling party violates the constitution, I tell myself: now we've hit rock bottom, things can't get worse. Still, things do get worse.

For instance, when the Law and Justice party (what an ironic name) dismantled the independent Supreme Court and Constitutional Tribunal. Then, during the pandemic of spring 2020, just before the presidential elections, a hideous campaign was launched by supporters of a right-wing candidate, involving hate speech against the LGBT+ community. This candidate, president Duda, was reelected, thanks to the propaganda of the public media run by the regime. I felt ashamed. On top, new troubles arose in October of that year: during a raging pandemic, the abortion ban was enforced. Conscious of the danger to catch Covid, thousands of people protested on the streets regardless. As if this had not been enough already, the following fall we witnessed the tragedy of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and other countries, who were imprisoned in a no-man's-land between Poland and Belarus, pushed back from one border to another. Our government refused any kind of humanitarian help, leaving them dying in the forest from hunger, the cold, and untreated diseases.

After Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, all these problems became overshadowed by war and a huge influx of Ukrainian refugees (who were very welcome by our authorities). How do I write in this situation? When your own country is heading straight into disaster and the war is suddenly so close? When you read news about women being raped by Russian soldiers or about volunteers in the Kharkiv Ecopark who got shot while feeding animals?

I'm a poet, not a journalist. When the war erupted, I felt paralyzed. Everything I had written so far seemed irrelevant. But what should I do? Stop writing at all? Or use my writing to respond to this overwhelming catastrophe? How? I had no language for what was going on.

According to a popular cliché, a poet is someone sitting on a cloud high above the ground. Well, that's not entirely true. In Poland we have a long tradition of socially engaged poetry: for example, authors of the New Wave, a poetry movement founded in the late sixties, exposed the absurd of communist propaganda and its linguistic manipulations. And before them, the great classics: Czesław Miłosz, Tadeusz Różewicz, Wisława Szymborska and Zbigniew Herbert were all responding in their works to the experience of the Second World War. None of them lived in an ivory tower. Yet at the turn of the eighties and nineties, along the democratic transition, a new tone found its way into Polish poetry: the need for more personal writing, not necessarily concerned with huge collective struggles, but giving more room to individual voices instead. Poets were tired of having to serve some noble cause, they wanted to be able to write as they wished. As Marcin Świetlicki put it: "I have a toothache, I'm hungry, I'm lonely".

This intimate tone is, I think, important. It can also be a form of rebellion. Poems with ethical missions responding directly to political conflicts and war crimes are sometimes, though rarely, remarkable works of art. But often this kind of poetry, full of good intentions, is merely another kind of journalism and quickly gets old. That said, I must admit that when the first shock passed and words started slowly coming back to me, I wrote a poem influenced by the war in Ukraine. And then another one. I was surprised, I thought I would remain speechless in the face of these events. I was writing on impulse, not out of obligation; for me, the only obligation for a poet is to be free in what they create.

The goal of authoritarian regimes such as Kaczyński's (the leader of the ruling party in Poland) and Putin's terror is to limit us by forcing us to think about our entrapment only. To narrow our horizons, all our energy is spent on frustration and fear. Free poetry – that protects the individual. An intimate voice that creates space for imagination and experimentation, allows us to breathe. It can be like a door in the wall that we thought was blind.