

Ten Poems from a Reader
for Those who Live in Cities

I

Part from your friends at the station
Enter the city in the morning with your coat buttoned up
Look for a room, and when your friend knocks:
Do not, o do not, open the door
But
Cover your tracks.

If you meet your parents in Hamburg or elsewhere
Pass them like strangers, turn the corner, don't recognise
them
Pull the hat they gave you over your face, and
Do not, o do not, show your face
But
Cover your tracks.

Eat the meat that's there. Don't stint yourself.
Go into any house when it rains and sit on any chair that's
in it
But don't sit long. And don't forget your hat.
I tell you:
Cover your tracks.

Whatever you say, don't say it twice
If you find your ideas in anyone else, disown them.
The man who hasn't signed anything, who has left no picture
Who was not there, who said nothing:
How can they catch him?
Cover your tracks.

See when you come to think of dying
That no gravestone stands and betrays where you lie
With a clear inscription to denounce you
And the year of your death to give you away.
Once again:
Cover your tracks.

(That is what they taught me.)

2

We are with you in the hour when you realise
That you are the fifth wheel
And your hope goes from you.
But we
Do not yet realise it.

We note
That you drive the conversation faster
You seek the word which will let you
Make your exit
For it's a point with you
Not to attract attention.

You rise in mid-sentence
You say crossly you want to go
We say: stay! and we realise
That you're the fifth wheel.
But you sit down.

And so you sit on with us in the hour
When we realise that you are the fifth wheel
But you
No longer realise it.

You have got to be told: you are
The fifth wheel
Do not think that I who tell you
Am a villain
Don't reach for a chopper, reach
For a glass of water.

I know you no longer hear
But
Do not say loudly that the world is bad
Say it softly.

For the four wheels are not too many
But the fifth is
And the world is not bad
But
Full.

(That is something you've already heard.)

3

We do not want to leave your house
We do not want to smash the stove
We want to put the pot on the stove.
House, stove and pot can stay
And you must vanish like smoke in the sky
Which no one holds back.

If you want to cling to us we'll go away
If your woman weeps we'll pull our hats over our faces
But when they come for you we shall point
And shall say: That must be him.

We don't know what's to come, and have nothing better
But we want no more of you.
Until you've gone
Let us draw the curtains to shut out tomorrow.

The cities are allowed to change
But you are not allowed to change.
We shall argue with the stones
But you we shall kill
You must not live.
Whatever lies we are forced to believe
You must not have been.

(That is how we speak to our fathers.)

4

I know what I need.
I simply look in the glass
And see that I must
Sleep more; the man
I have is doing me no good.

If I hear myself sing, I say:
I'm gay today; that's good for
The complexion.

I take trouble to stay
Fresh and firm, but
I shan't exert myself: that
Makes wrinkles.

I've nothing to give away, but
Make do with my bit.
I eat carefully; I live

Slowly; I'm
For moderation.

(That is how I've seen people exerting themselves.)

5

I'm dirt. From myself
I can demand nothing but
Weakness, treachery and degradation
Then one day I notice
It's getting better; the wind
Fills my sail; my time has come, I can
Become better than dirt –
I began at once.

Because I was dirt I noticed
When I'm drunk I simply
Lie down and have no idea
Who is messing me about; now I don't drink any more –
I gave it up at once.

Unfortunately
Just in order to keep alive, I had to do
Much that harmed me; I've
Wolfed down poison enough
To kill four carthorses, but
What else could I do
To stay alive? So at times I sniffed snow
Till I looked
Like a boneless bedspread.
Then I saw myself in the glass –
And stopped it at once.

Of course they tried to hang a dose
Of syphilis on me, but that

Was something they couldn't manage; they could only poison
me

With arsenic: I had
Tubes in my side with
Pus flowing night and day. Who
Would have thought that a woman like me
Would ever make men crazy again? -
I began again at once.

I have never taken a man who did not do
Something for me, and had every man
I needed. By now I'm
Almost without feeling, almost gone dry
But
I'm beginning to fill up again, I have ups and downs, but
On the whole more ups.

I still notice myself calling my enemy
An old cow, and knowing her for my enemy because
A man looks at her.
But in a year
I'll have got over it -
I've already begun to.

I'm dirt; but everything
Must serve my purpose, I'm
Coming up, I'm
Inevitable, the race of the future
Soon not dirt any more, but
The hard mortar with which
Cities are built.

(That's something I've heard a woman say.)

6

He strode down the street with his hat tipped back!
He looked each man in the eye and nodded
He paused in front of every shop window
(And everyone knows he is lost).

You ought to have heard him explain that he'd still
Got a word or two to say to his enemy
That the landlord's tone was not to his liking
That the street had not been properly swept
(His friends have already given him up).

All the same he still intends to build a house
All the same he still intends to sleep on it
All the same he still doesn't intend to rush his decision
(Oh, he's lost already, there's nothing behind him).

(That's something I've heard people say before now.)

7

Don't talk about danger!
You can't drive a tank through a man-hole:
You'll have to get out.
Better abandon your primus
You've got to see that you yourself come through.

Of course you need money
I'm not asking where you get it from
But unless you've got money you needn't bother to go.
And you can't stay here, man.
Here they know you.
If I've got you right
You want to eat a steak or two
Before you give up the race.

Leave the woman where she is.
She has two arms of her own
And two legs for that matter
(Which, sir, are no longer any affair of yours).
See that you yourself come through.

If you've got anything more to say
Say it to me, I'll forget it.
You needn't keep up appearances any longer:
There's no one here any longer to observe you.
If you come through
You'll have done more
Than anyone's obliged to.

Don't mention it.

8

Give up your dream that they will make
An exception in your case.
What your mothers told you
Binds no one.

Keep your contracts in your pockets
They will not be honoured here.

Give up your hopes that you are all destined
To finish up Chairman.
Get on with your work.
You will need to pull yourselves together
If you are to be tolerated in the kitchen.

You still have to learn the ABC.
The ABC says:
They will get you down.

Do not think about what you have to say:
You will not be asked.
There are plenty of mouths for the meal
What's needed here is mincemeat.

(Not that anyone should be discouraged by that.)

9

FOUR INVITATIONS TO A MAN
AT DIFFERENT TIMES FROM
DIFFERENT QUARTERS

There's a home for you here
There's a room for your things.
Move the furniture about to suit yourself
Tell us what you need
Here is the key
Stay here.

There's a parlour for us all
And for you a room with a bed
You can work with us in the yard
You have your own plate
Stay with us.

Here's where you're to sleep
The sheets are still clean
They've only been slept in once.
If you're fussy
Rinse your tin spoon in the bucket there
It'll be as good as new
You're welcome to stay with us.

That's the room
Hurry up, or you can also stay

The night, but that costs extra.
I shan't disturb you
By the way, I'm not ill.
You'll be as well off here as anywhere else
So you might as well stay.

IO

When I speak to you
Coldly and impersonally
Using the driest words
Without looking at you
(I seemingly fail to recognise you
In your particular nature and difficulty)

I speak to you merely
Like reality itself
(Sober, not to be bribed by your particular nature
Tired of your difficulty)
Which in my view you seem not to recognise.

TO THOSE BORN LATER

I

Truly, I live in dark times!
The guileless word is folly. A smooth forehead
Suggests insensitivity. The man who laughs
Has simply not yet had
The terrible news.

What kind of times are they, when
A talk about trees is almost a crime
Because it implies silence about so many horrors?
That man there calmly crossing the street
Is already perhaps beyond the reach of his friends
Who are in need?

It is true I still earn my keep
But, believe me, that is only an accident. Nothing
I do gives me the right to eat my fill.
By chance I've been spared. (If my luck breaks, I am lost.)

They say to me: Eat and drink! Be glad you have it!
But how can I eat and drink if I snatch what I eat
From the starving, and
My glass of water belongs to one dying of thirst?
And yet I eat and drink.

I would also like to be wise.
In the old books it says what wisdom is:
To shun the strife of the world and to live out
Your brief time without fear
Also to get along without violence
To return good for evil
Not to fulfil your desires but to forget them
Is accounted wise.
All this I cannot do:
Truly, I live in dark times.

II

I came to the cities in a time of disorder
When hunger reigned there.
I came among men in a time of revolt
And I rebelled with them.
So passed my time
Which had been given to me on earth.

My food I ate between battles
To sleep I lay down among murderers
Love I practised carelessly
And nature I looked at without patience.
So passed my time
Which had been given to me on earth.

All roads led into the mire in my time.
My tongue betrayed me to the butchers.
There was little I could do. But those in power
Sat safer without me: that was my hope.
So passed my time
Which had been given to me on earth.

Our forces were slight. Our goal
Lay far in the distance
It was clearly visible, though I myself
Was unlikely to reach it.
So passed my time
Which had been given to me on earth.

III

You who will emerge from the flood
In which we have gone under
Remember
When you speak of our failings
The dark time too
Which you have escaped.

For we went, changing countries oftener than our shoes
Through the wars of the classes, despairing
When there was injustice only, and no rebellion.

And yet we know:
Hatred, even of meanness
Contorts the features.
Anger, even against injustice
Makes the voice hoarse. Oh, we
Who wanted to prepare the ground for friendliness
Could not ourselves be friendly.

But you, when the time comes at last
And man is a helper to man
Think of us
With forbearance.

MOTTO TO THE SVENDBORG POEMS

Refuged beneath this Danish thatched roof, friends
I follow your struggle. I send to you now
As from time to time in the past, my poems, frightened into
existence
By deadly visions across Sound and foliage.
Use cautiously those that reach you.
Yellowed books, fragmentary reports
Are my sources. If we see one another again
I will gladly go back to learning with you.

MOTTO
In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing
About the dark times.