

Seven Poems by Elżbieta Cichla-Czarniawska
translated from the Polish by Barbara Kaskosz and Nancy Abeshaus
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In this installment, we're happy to share with you seven new beautiful poems by the award-winning Polish poet Elżbieta Cichla-Czarniawska, translated in English for the first time by Barbara Kaskosz and Nancy Abeshaus. Fresh and lyrical, these poems are meditations on love, loss, and loneliness, the small blood sacrifices the soul makes on the altar of every day life. We hope you like them as much as we did.

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

a banal subject

do not touch my loneliness
it is inflamed it hurts

and you stay away from mine
it ruffled its feathers like a wounded
carnivorous bird
it will be nasty if you come close

and my loneliness is a grande dame
I lifted her high above humiliation
what use can one make
of something as strange
as isolation in a crowd

I have cursed mine
it made itself at home inside me
it showed me magic tricks
but finally it slashed both of our wrists

mine doesn't cry doesn't complain
it doesn't blackmail with a midnight suicide
only sometimes crazed it grabs my shoulders
and throws me down onto the sand
of that huge arena under the tent of darkness

and the one that is tamed that eats from your hand?

that one opens another reality
in which the head of the earth becomes more beautiful
surrounded by the aureole of the horizon

beautiful it floats away into the eternal dream
about happiness
and there it vanishes

from literary theory III

the first poem
is almost always about love

afterwards things happen
we swear off love or poems
so many matters that are more important
sit at the tip of our pen
nag at our conscience
or so it seems to us

we prefer fixing the world
or breaking it
that toy gives unlimited possibilities
to adult children

we prefer to watch
how the nerves of continents pulsate
how smoking swamps sag
filled with unfathomable human ideas
how hope sinks into them

then poems wane
blood is showing through broken skin

still the last poem is always about love
even if it is about death

in a different language

it may well happen
that you will search
for your beautiful love
until you do not find it

no one promised you
the promised land here

you merely reside
in the land of exile

in the drawers of time
the past neatly arranged –
longing that smells of lavender

what was – dried into a sliver
what is – is just passing
what will be –
may as well not be

yet you track fiercely
what cannot be tracked down

behind you
gates of moments close
but you remain empty-handed

still ignorant
try to write your autobiography
in a different language
perhaps in esperanto of silence

futile sacrifice

last night again
ruins as far as the horizon and deformed phantasms
impotent hours carved into stones
petrified nocturne of emptiness inside
the gods' casual indifference

you love the world with an imperfect love

seemingly your poem
needs a sacrifice of fresh blood
but the much awaited word
whose throat you slashed too eagerly
is exhaling its last breath
with a piercing ostentatious
whistle in the dark

returns from the glacier

forgive me spirits
for clinging to your satiating
past words and gestures
and even to that which never expressed
barely glowed inside you long ago

I return from the glacier smuggling under my skin
embers of hope
my head held high

barren gravel
cuts as it crunches under my feet
wind lashes my face
heroes and gods go blind
the corrupt world tribunal
issues sentences
the executioner keeps lowering the lever
of secret trapdoors

still
once again I walk down from the glacier
I change within myself the order of events
turn you back from your path

this is what lets me
taste life again and again
frosty phantoms run away

the shadows of your hands warm
my every hair one by one
my every tissue one after another
my every breath minute by minute
my every thought fiber by fiber

who?

on a beach almost unreal
where time stopped to catch a breath
yesterday perhaps a thousand years ago
a slender woman
rests her sandal-clad foot
on a glacial boulder
I or not I?
shortness of breath
the same questions fear and hope
a random wave washes off a footprint
whose is it?
ask the boulder

**the fractured world
whose half flew away
into silent space
(an attempt at description)**

we were children
we walked
holding hands
one side wasn't there
there was only the other side
there was fear
and the crackling heath
where fire burned
warriors threw stones at each other
a night bird cried in the thicket

we walked

a remote market tempted
there on the cracked ground
strange things were sold
whips made of snakeskin
balls rolled up by dung beetles
pea-shooting popguns
a book written with the blood of a tree frog
magnetic pins
gaudy color prints covered with dust
also for sale were lofty ideas
in rustproof cans

everything was on one side
of consciousness
perhaps
a dream and not a dream?

farther up – a forgotten village
(right? left side of the street?)
on black gravel
awkward youngsters played soccer
a shaggy dog ran toward us
it was panting
as it ran through sharp grass
the night was steely and flat
we walked glancing
always to one side

we kept walking
growing up all too quickly
(that nervous grasp of intertwined fingers)

a man on the road
– how far is it to town H? – you asked
he replied
– miles away –
we realized that by walking
at an ordinary pace
we would never get there

vast empty land
distant power lines
showing faintly on the horizon
– there are no trains from here
to town H – the man added
– they haven't passed through here for a long time

it was incalculably far
to the nearest stop
(H stood for Hope)
the world was happening only
on one side
there was nothing on the other side
across the fields ran fears and fantasies
fatigue poured
through the moldering riddle of imagination

we walked
dusted with ash that grew denser
the night shined dully with diffused steel
of the lifeless full moon

we suspected there was no e x i t
from this situation
probably in the past
we had become entrapped
through the act of e n t e r i n g

were we on a journey from nowhere to nowhere?

meanwhile
the road was quickly
sinking into a dream
the bird at last became silent
under the rocks lizards shed
their shiny scales

everything was one-sided
imposing surfaces opened into blind paths

we walked
lumbering
marked with a deep imprint of doubt

yet we walked
faithful to our destiny

we still walk



Elżbieta Cichla-Czarniawska is an award-winning writer whose body of work spans many genres. She has published twenty books of poetry, as well as eight novels, a collection of short stories, and a memoir. Her poetry has been translated into German, Bulgarian, and Lithuanian - and now for the first time into English. For her work she has received several awards, among them the Jozef Czechowicz Award and the Boleslaw Prus Award. Elżbieta Cichla-Czarniawska lives and works in Lublin, Poland.





Barbara Kaskosz was born and educated in Poland. She received her Ph.D. in Mathematics from the Institute of Mathematics of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. She emigrated to the USA more than 30 years ago and took a position at the University of Rhode Island. She has worked there ever since as a Professor of Mathematics. Her lifelong interest and second love after mathematics has always been literature, especially poetry.



Nancy Abeshaus was born and educated in the USA. She holds a Bachelor's degree in English and a Master's degree in English Education from the University of Rhode Island. She is a published writer.