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**R. K.**

Tomas Venclova

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WINNER  
HARPUR PALATE/TRIP/CRIT  
TRANSLATION CONTEST

Tomas Venclova  
**R. K.**

Translated from the Lithuanian by Laima Sruoginis

All I know is this, that it has passed (or is passing)—  
this century of blackness, maybe not any blacker  
than a few others, but on an incredible scale.  
It was consistent. It turned bodies into numbers,  
and crumbled souls into sawdust and naught,  
so it'd seemed as though the mind had won. A precipice  
pretending to be hope—I'd say, somewhat successfully.

Conceit's evil designs were loyally executed by furnaces,  
and in the next ring was solid ice  
under a stony star. Choking freight trains  
labored towards nothingness, to the West and to the North.  
But everything is temporary. Monuments to the Empire—  
in the mud between tenacious thistles and burrs.  
The megaphones grew quiet and the granite weathered.

We were born in that land. Now, as we leave it behind,  
we don't even dare turn around, like Orpheus.  
What did we have with us? Irony, patience,  
and very rarely—courage. Often it was the undefined feeling  
that you'd done far less than you could have  
(a sinking realization of guilt—or sin—that your children  
would not forgive you even if God did.)

That is all we chose. And even so we knew how  
to accept the bitter truth as though it were a gift.  
We did not worship death. Above the tracks and the cement  
we watched the angels. We loved them. We lit the lamp  
in the library. We called evil by its name  
and good, knowing how hard it was to tell them apart.  
We carry the lamp into the darkness and that is probably  
enough.

*"R. K." originally appeared in Rinktine (Collected Works), Baltos Lankos.*