

From a fruit left to rot on the ground, a new tree can still emerge. From this tree, hundreds of new fruit.

But even if the poem is a fruit, the poet is not a tree. He is asking you to take his words and eat them right away. For he cannot produce his fruit all by himself. There must be two to make a poem. The one who speaks is the father, the one who listens is the mother, the poem is their child. The poem that is not listened to is lost seed. Or: the one who speaks is the mother, the poem is the egg, and the one who listens is the fertilizer of the egg. The poem that is not listened to becomes a rotten egg.

This is what a poet sentenced to death was thinking about, in his prison. It was in a little country that had just been invaded by a conqueror's armies. The poet had been arrested because, in a song he sang on the road, he had compared the sadness that was eating away the flesh of his body down to the bone to the deadly fires that had burned the land of his village down to the bedrock.

But they granted him one favor: before he died, he could recite one last poem to the people. He said to himself in his cell: Until now I have only written songs to amuse. This will be my first and last poem.

I will tell them

Take these words, so that they won't be lost grain! Incubate them, make them grow, make them talk! But then what will I say to them? I have only one word to say, a word simple as lightning. A word that swells up my heart, a word that rises to my throat, a word that spins in circles in my head like a lion in his cage. It is not a word of peace. It is not a word that is easy to hear. But it must lead to peace, it must make everything easy to hear, provided you take it the way the earth receives grain and nourishes it by killing it. When I have rotted, in a few days, may a word tree emerge from my rot. Not words of peace, not words easy to hear, but words of truth.

I have only one word to say, a word as real as the rope that will hang me. A word that makes me itch, a word that is devouring me, a word that even the executioner will be able to understand. I will open my mouth I will say the word I will close my mouth and that will be all. As soon as I have opened my mouth, you will see ghosts and vampires go back under the earth and all the thieves, the tricksters at the game of

life, the speculators of death: the ones who hold séances, the ones who dangle pendulums,

the ones who search the stars for reasons to do nothing.

The daydreamers, the suicides,

the mystery maniacs, the pleasure maniacs,

the imaginary travelers, cartographers of thought,

the fine art maniacs who don't know why they sing, dance, paint or build.

The maniacs of the beyond

who do not know how to be here below.

The maniacs of the past, the maniacs of the future,

conjurers of eternity.

You will see them go back under the earth as soon as I open my mouth.

As soon as I have uttered the word, the eyes of survivors will turn back in their sockets and each of those men and each of those women will look directly at the depths of their fate. Abyss of light! Suffering darkness! As soon as I have closed my mouth, their eyes will turn back to the world, charged with the central light, and they will see that the outside is like the inside. They will be kings, they will be queens, they will see each other, each one all alone just as the sun is alone, but each of them illumined by the fire of his own individual solitude inside, outside by the fire of an individual sun.

But I am dreaming and giving in to easy hopes.

Probably they will say instead: That madman, it's time he was hanged. That useless mouth, it's time it was closed. Or maybe they'll say:

His words are not words of peace, they are not easy words to hear. They are a demon's words. It's about time he was hanged. And in any case I will be hanged. Well, I will say to them:

You don't have much longer to live than I.

I am dying today, you die next week.

And our misery is the same and our greatness is the same.

But they will think they're words of hate. Those unfortunates are so sure of being immortal!

And in any case I will be hanged.

I will say to them: Wake up! But I won't be able to tell them how and they will say: But we are not asleep. Hang, hang this impostor and let us see him spit out his tongue!

And I will, in any case, be hanged.

And the poet, in his prison, will pound his head against the walls. The muffled drumbeat, the funereal tom-tom of his head against the wall was his next-to-last song.

All night he tried to tear the unutterable word out of his heart. But the word grew in his chest and stifled him and rose up to his throat and kept spinning around in his head like a caged lion.

He repeated to himself:

In any case I will be hanged at dawn.

And he began again the muffled tom-tom of his head against the wall. Then he tried again: There is only one word to say. But that would be too simple. They would say we know already. Hang, hang that fool.

Or they would say:

He wants to tear us away from the peace of our hearts, our only refuge in these unfortunate times. He wants to put destroying doubt in our heads, when the invader's whip is already ripping apart our skin. Those are not words of peace, those are not easy words to hear. Hang, hang that evildoer! And in any case I will be hanged.

What will I say to them?

The sun rose with the noise of boots. He was led, teeth clenched, to the gallows.
In front of him his brothers, behind him his executioners.

He said to himself:

So here is my first and my last poem. One word to say, simple as opening your eyes. But this word is devouring me from my belly to my head, I want to open myself up from belly to head and show them the word I am holding in. But if I have to make it come out of my mouth, how will it pass that narrow orifice, this word that fills me?

He was silent a first time: his mouth kept silence. A second time he was silent: his heart closed up. A third time he was silent: his entire body became like a silent rock. (He was like a white rock, like the statue of a ram before a herd of sleeping sheep; and behind him the wolves were already snickering.)

The noise of bayonets and spurs sounded. The extra time granted came to an end. On his neck the poet felt the tickle of hemp and in the pit of his stomach the clawed paw of death. And then, at the last instant, the word burst out of his mouth, screaming:

To arms! To your pitchforks, to your knives,
To your stones, to your hammers,
there are a thousand of you, you are strong,
free yourselves, free me!
I want to live, live with me!
Kill with scythes, kill with rocks!
Let me live and I, I will let you find speech again!

But that was his first and last poem. The people were already much too terrorized. And because he swayed back and forth too much during his life, the poet still is swaying after death. For it is often the fate, or the fault, of poets, to speak too late, or too soon.