

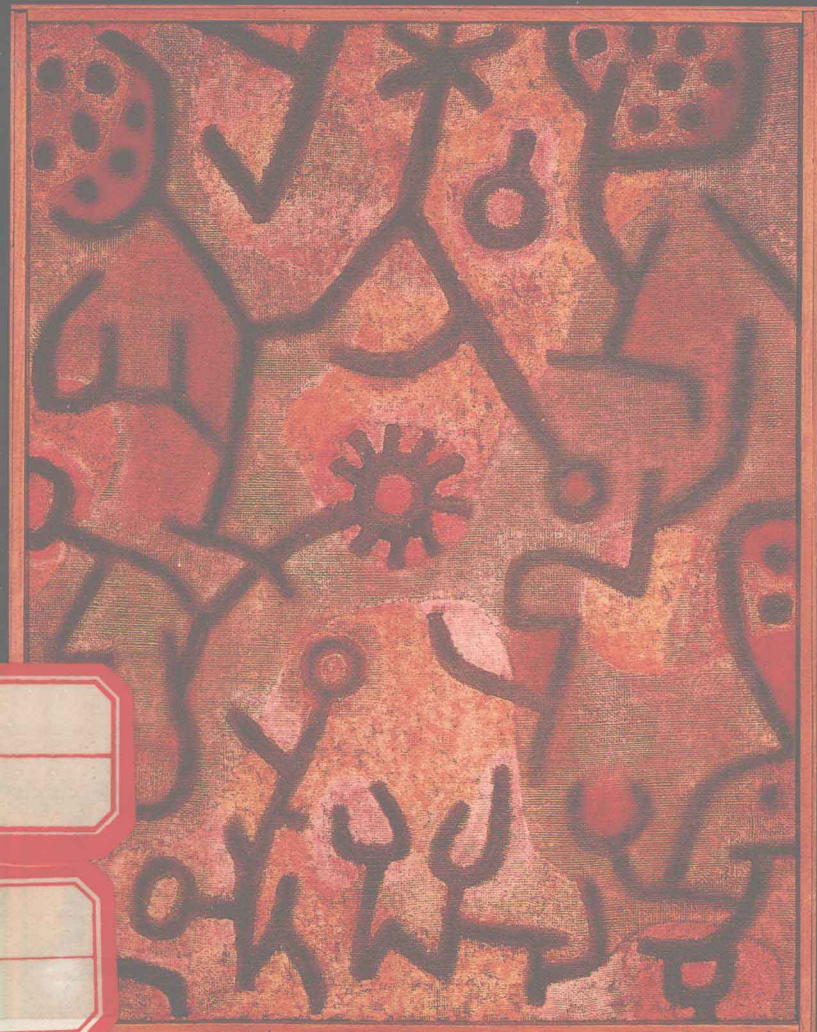
OSLAV HOLUB

VANISHING LUNG SYNDROME

TRANSLATED BY DAVID YOUNG

and DANA HÁBOVÁ

FIELD TRANSLATION SERIES 16



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Miroslav Holub

VANISHING LUNG
SYNDROME

Translated by David Young
and Dana Hábová

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SYNCOPE

(Syncope: Episodic interruption of the stream of consciousness induced by lack of oxygen in the brain.)

1751

That year Diderot began to publish his Encyclopedia, and the first insane asylum was founded in London.

So the counting out began, to separate the sane, who veil themselves in words, from the insane, who rip off feathers from their bodies.

Poets had to learn tightrope-walking.

And just to make sure, officious dimwits began to publish instructions on how to be normal.

WHAT ELSE

What else to do
but drive a small dog
out of yourself
with a stick?

Scruff bristling with fright
he huddles against the wall,
crawls in the domestic zodiac,
limps,
bleeding from the muzzle.

He would eat out of your hand
but that's no use.

What else
is poetry
but killing that small dog
in yourself?

And all around the barking, barking,
the hysterical barking
of cats.

YOGA

All poetry is about
five hundred degrees centigrade.

Poets, though,
differ in combustibility.
Those soaked in spirits
catch fire first.

What would they be without their disease.
The disease is their health.

They burn, straw dummies,
they don't read Nietzsche,
what doesn't kill you
tempers you.

They smolder.
They sizzle.
And yet, only a bad yogi
burns his feet
on hot coals.

GREAT ANCESTORS

At night
their silhouettes are outlined
against the empty sky
like a squadron of Trojan horses.
Their whispers rise from wells
of apparently living water.

But when day breaks
the way an egg cracks
and full-grown men with truncheons are born,
and mothers bleed profoundly,

they turn into butterflies
with cabbage leaves for wings,
to jelly condensed from fog
in fading, babyish outlines,

their barely discernible hands
shake,

they forget to breathe,
and are afraid to speak a single
intelligible word.

Anyway,
we've picked up more genes from viruses
than from them.

They have no strength.
And we must be the strength of those
who have no strength.

NOT FOR SALE

And how much for
the brain of a pocket mouse,
and how much for
the hump of a humpback whale?

A white sale
in a one-price rag shop,
a sale
of Oshkosh blue jeans
and Collected Works
on crinkled paper.

And how much for a soul?

And how much for
a tub of blood
that yields so little amber serum,
so few antibodies
against the red Shylocks?

How much for us
before we became
priceless?

GARDENERS

There's been a bumper crop of gardeners this year. Some, sprouted in greenhouses, were set out in their beds by the third full moon. Even the late gardeners have ripened, and having assumed the poses of statues, they're thrashing out the philosophy of compost. The long-day gardeners travel from one cats-tail grass to another and wrangle with demented dogs-tail grass. They dream about black daisies and blue-red strawberries. They trim boxwood into the shape of a unicorn.

Oh yes, they reply to Hamlet, who is passing by, there's another garden deep underneath this one, and that is the question. Certainly, they reply to the gloomy Antigone, ashes from grave-mounds work wonders for Cyprian magnolias. And you can't leave our play either, although the fence stops stray dogs of misfortune from getting in.

A huge inflatable balloon of the sun rocks above the garden, and its pink glow makes it impossible to see that even in the egg a tiny artery is bursting and the yolk is tainted with blood.

NIGHT CALAMITIES

The storm
went crazy in the darkness.
Prison cells opened.

The sentenced innocents
stamp on the jumping tower. The next routine
is the triple screw dive while
the tiny infantile Decalogue
drowns by a bank where
tunnel waters
thunderously wash away
flowers from a grave.

Our heel caught in the travertine,
we stare into the runaway dark,
but only the permanently invisible ones
can see us.