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## A NIGHTMARE OR REALITY? Excerpts From Lithuanian Underground Literature

XY

### *Introduction*

A contemporary Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert has put together a poem about the nature of "Our Fear":

Our fear does not wear a night shirt  
does not have an owl's eyes  
does not lift a casket lid  
does not extinguish a candle  
does not have a dead man's face either.  
(trans. by Czeslaw Milosz)

One is impressed about the coincidence of feelings among the intellectuals under soviet regimes, be they Poles, Russians, Slovaks or Lithuanians. This "fear" that the Polish poet attempted to express through poetic means was recently depicted in another genre by a young Lithuanian author, whom, after the Daniel-Sinyavsky trial, we will call "XY". We present excerpts from a longer underground work of "XY", which was recently smuggled to the West.

Literary works, similar to that presented in the following pages, have been appearing frequently in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and other socialist countries of Eastern Europe. It has been noted that contemporary Polish art runs instinctively to allegory. At the same time among the Czechoslovak intellectuals and writers there is a revived interest in Kafka that approaches the proportions of a cult. Choosing the allegory or a fable as means of expression, the East European writers are able to deal with politically risqué subjects and attitudes without drawing upon themselves the wrath of party bureaucracies. But what is more important, the newer forms of expression make it possible for them to dispense with the hated and limiting dogma of socialist realism to which the various Communist Parties still pay lip service.

So far literature comparable to that of Eastern European countries has been rare in Soviet Russia and practically nonexistent in the formerly independent Baltic states. Up to the present time literature in Lithuania has followed the straight and narrow path of social realist fiction. Although in subject matter there have been a few deviations, producing party condemnation, in matters of form the writers still have to adhere to the statistical presentation of reality, the positive hero, didactic preaching, and other well known devices prescribed by the official dogma. That, if nothing else, shows how much more the cultural life of the Baltic countries is restricted, as compared with their East European neighbors and even Soviet Russia itself.

Underground literature reaching the West reveals that there is an undercurrent of protest among the young writers of Lithuania. It finds its outlet in new experimental writings, circulated in private circles. The excerpts presented here are ample proof of this subterranean ferment and protest. The work by "XY" is interesting in that, unlike the other protest and critical works written in the Soviet Union and published in the West, it is written not within the framework of socialist realism, but rather in surrealistic and spontaneous style. We grant that the excerpts presented here are not a great literature. The narrative is often contrived for melodramatic effects and its author is eager to pile up the horrors. Perhaps his message is overstressed and an understatement should have been the rule. Yet at the same time one cannot help but be impressed by a note of outrage, helplessness, and protest expressed in the story. Perhaps artistically not always too well, yet always in moving terms, the young Lithuanian author is trying to tell us something of importance.

## ***On a Trail Along the Ravine***

Under my feet — a narrow trail along the brink. On one side — a rocky cliff, on the other — the sky, and far below — blue water. But I'd better not look there: my head would start spinning!

I place my whole weight on the foot which is away from the brink. The one walking behind me will see that I'm afraid. But what if suddenly I would sway or my foot would stumble, or a strong wind would rise?! I would lose my balance, and then — the end. I have to be careful! Ahead of me I catch a glimpse of feet: there are many of us marching.

"Don't go any farther!", somebody yells from above.

I lift my head — on the cliff stands a young guy: his pants slung low, his shirt hanging out, his cap pushed back. Look who's giving us orders! He bends down, picks up a stone, winds up and throws it at us. That's really too much! The stone falls short on the cliff and looses a slide — stones roll underneath our feet. Good thing that they're small.

The cocky brat has vanished. We stop. It's too dangerous to follow such a trail and be showered with stones. "We have to get him off", I say, "who'll come with me?"

"I'll do it alone", a voice says up front.

A young man is already climbing the cliff — he's the one who volunteered.

I wanted to go with a buddy, but this one takes it on himself. Maybe he thinks there is no need of two for such a job. That was a bit humiliating for me before the others. But he's doing it, confident in himself, for our sake. Well, it's nothing! Fine — now I don't have to go! And I had been all ready to yell and threaten. Maybe I would even have had to chase that brat and rough him up a bit. Not a very pleasant duty. I'm glad that such a noble soul turned up!

He's climbing the cliff sideways, and he tests each foothold so as not to loosen the stones. He climbs cautiously, but he's quickly getting to the top. If only that kid wouldn't suddenly poke his head! But nothing moves at the top. He's more than halfway up. The distance to the top is shrinking—the climber is nearing his goal. Soon we'll see his head against the sky. If that kid showed up now, our friend would be only two paces away from him — he would have no choice but to run! Now! At last our man is at the top! I wonder what he sees? He braces himself on a rock, jumps over the top and disappears. There must be a dip in the ground.

I could have gone too...

We stand and wait.

The brat, having seen him, will probably start running, but, if taken by surprise, then our man, who's young and rash, will give him one or two in the face, the usual thing in such circumstances, will turn him around, grasp him by the shoulders, and give him a kick in the rear. For his cockiness! He delayed us so long! One of us even had to climb up to chase him away.

The brat should be gone by now, and the young man could show himself and let us know, that we may now continue our march unhindered, while he keeps a look-out above. What's taking him so long?

Suddenly there's something big and dark flying from the other side over the cliff. The thing hits the ground and then starts rolling down. It's a huge hunk of meat with shreds of clothing sticking to it. Legs only as far as the knees — no further — they're cut off.. .arms only to the elbows.. .a few slim tendons still hold the head to the body! Oh horror!. .It's the body of our friend! Mutilated in such a way! It's rolling down towards us. The head bounces from stone to stone.. .now it's ahead of the body, now it lags behind.. .the tendons become twined together.... the stretch — jerk the head — the head is rolling alongside the body... It's gastly! What pain he must be in! The body is almost here... Lips partly open.. .They're moving! A sound of some kind.. .He moaned! Yes, I really heard a soft, agonized sigh. But the head is already going down separately. It rolls, crossing the trail just in front of me, bounces up at the edge and falls into the ravine. The headless body follows. When he moaned, his head had already been severed from the body! His eyes had been closed. If suddenly he had opened them and happened to look at me, doubtless I would have leapt back and.. .plunged into the ravine.

I had offered to go first, only he had been quicker. And if it hadn't been he, this would have been my body rolling! How horrid the pain would have been, how inconceivably horrid! But already I wasn't feeling anything.. .for all time. How necessary it is to be careful in life every step along the way!

Who could have done it! The brat wouldn't have been able to win out over that strong young man. Well, of course, all kinds of things do happen. Maybe, by stealth he had thrown a stone at his head and killed him on the spot. But to mutilate him so horribly! And in such a short while! No! There must be something else there!

At the top of the cliff the rocks loom as before, nothing moves — no living thing in sight. While the body had flown out high above those rocks. It had been flung by a tremendous, inhuman strength.

There's something powerful and evil there, and the slovenly rude brat is sent out on purpose to confuse passers-by and make them perish.

"Let's run forward!" prompts a voice behind me.

I wonder, if many will be willing! But the one in front of me starts to run. That means, all the ones up front are running! I won't. Now I have to let the ones behind me pass! I step aside onto the cliff. Past me runs one, then a second one, a third one. I'm a coward! All right, I'll be a coward! The last one runs by. I'm left alone. I should have gone with the rest! But it can't be, that those who were so cruel would permit anyone to disobey them. Meanwhile, all our men are running, and nothing happens. If they keep going unhindered just another while, I'll try to catch up with them. No! From behind the mountain stones are flying at them! What luck, that I hadn't run! More and more stones appear in the air! Soon one of them will find its mark! There! One has struck a runner in the head! The man coils up and quickly extends his arms upward, but he's hanging too far out to regain his balance, and tumbles over the edge. A stone flies past me — it has even found its way here! I must turn and run back! I run. The trail leads down along the edge of the cliff. The surface of the water is not so far anymore — I have come down a long way. Running downhill is easy, and I dash with terrific speed! Everything around me is flying — receding backward. The wind blows against my face, gets in my hair, whistles in my ears. The wind formed because of the running. When my foot touches ground, everything in my chest leaps up, and it's a matter of placing the other foot down soon enough! If only I wouldn't fall! I must slow down. The trail is not steep at all now, I'm running only from inertia. Where could I rest?! The shoreline soon makes a turn — there's an inlet. Stones jut out from the water. One of them is large and flat. It's close to the shore and would be just an easy drop from the trail. How good it would be to sit on it for a while! I'll get down carefully. But I'm still running, while it's already here below to my side. There it is! I leap!

I hang my legs down from the stone. My shoes are just above the water. I'll rest here quietly. The trail up the hill, where I had been running down just now, is deserted — there's no one in pursuit of me. But how are the others there?! On the cliff nothing is moving — not a living soul to be seen. But past the mountain, in the distance, there rises another gentle green slope. Down its center winds a safe trail. If some of them might have succeeded in coming down from that wretched peak, they should soon appear on that slope. I'll wait and see.

I sit. .Time passes.. .In the distance no moving dark spot is to be seen, neither on the trail nor on the grass. Even if they ran at a slow pace, by this time it should have been possible to go down the cliff on that side and without any hurry to climb the green slope to the very top! They all perished. I'm the only one left of all those who walked. I remain, because I didn't dare go on, when that bloody body rolled past me. . .the body of one of us. No one was able to see it as closely as I did. Maybe that's why they all ran ahead, and only I was left standing?!

What shall I do now?! There's no place and no reason for me to go anywhere. I'm sitting here as though fixed to the spot. I'm so alone, utterly alone!

What's to be done?!

The even surface of the water suddenly moves — out of the water emerges a man, and stands up. The water is up to his waist. He's naked. It's a man. He's looking at me! But his hair is long and he has a woman's face. Maybe it's a woman, only her breasts are undeveloped.

Now there's a whole swarm of these creatures: they form a circle around me. Like them, I stand up to the waist in water. Their eyes are all looking straight at me. Maybe they're seeing a human being for the first time?! I feel uneasy. Their faces are without expression. Impossible to know what they're thinking. If only they wouldn't plan something evil! I must do something. I ought to say something.

"Take me into your group! . .Don't do anything wrong to me! Be so kind!.." — at times my voice sounded unusually gentle and emotional.. Well, that's all right.

"How could we be anything but kind to such a good-looking boy, as you!", says the one directly in front of me and gives me a gracious feminine smile.

But that smile ends only in some kind of rude, unfeeling grimace. And he has already turned aside from me. These water people are strange!

"But I can't swim!.."

And these people can stay under water so long.

"That's nothing: you'll learn! What's important is to know how to swim. After that you'll be able to swim for days at a time without getting tired."

That will be fun. Even more pleasant than on the earth.

One after another, the creatures silently sink straight down, and apparently stooping, begin to disperse... So, I've, been accepted into the community of water people!

Bending over the water, I raise one arm and lower the other one: up — down, up — down. I keep on waving the arms, while to the side stands a water creature and watches my movements — that's my instructor.

I want to learn to swim perfectly. The water people don't know the reason why...

Far, far from here, high on a mountain, over the treetops glimmers a palace. Some day, when I'll be able to swim really well, I'll swim over to that shore and start for the palace.

But I'm not telling this to the water creatures. They might not want to let me go, and then I wouldn't be able to get away.

We swim and swim and swim. My arms have grown tired. Two of the water people are swimming with me. They're just ahead — only the tops of their heads are visible. They can't see me now, and I can glance up at the palace.

Over there! Over there men are living! Soon I'll be on the way there! When none of these creatures will be beside me! They didn't notice my glance, did they? I have been looking too long. No! But I must be careful! If they had turned back, they could have read the secret desire written on my face.

The water is black, and above a dark blue sky: night. . . Only farther on the surface of the water gleams a silvery island of light. Moonlight. Into it from the darkness there emerges a rowboat. Someone is sitting in the boat. There seem to be two. It's hard to see them more clearly. They're humans! Lovers most likely...

Why did I suddenly become so sad? I feel like crying. What has come over me?

I want to look at the two from up close. I swim. It's been such a long time since I have seen men!..

### ***In Search of a Way***

A fir tree, pines.. .a fir, a beech.. .The path turns, leading into a patch of green grass. Past that another grove. I simply don't know in which direction to go, on which side the palace might be.

Between trees a board glides by slowly just above the ground. It hangs suspended on ropes. It's a swing. It sways back and forth slowly. Apparently, someone has just been swinging on it. The ropes are very long, tied high to a thick pine branch. I'll swing myself on it so high, that past the treetops I'll be able to see the palace.

I swing.. .I rise higher and higher. I seem to be hearing chimes of some kind. As though someone were singing in the heights. Wonderful music! The sounds grow louder, come closer... Women's voices... Those are fairies. ... They hover about in the air without being seen. I can imagine, how beautiful it all must be! With long, flowing hair, slender, graceful and light, they soar in the sky, their transparent veils wave and unfurl. Perhaps, one of them is even standing before me here on the swing. I move back to give her room.. .There! Above the treetops emerge the towers and roofs of the palace. Now I just have to make sure which side it lies on.

### ***On Stage a Stupid Comedy, in the Hall a Ghastly One***

I open the door — people are sitting in rows, with their backs toward me, past them, in the front, there's a lighted stage. It's a playhouse; I've come in from the back, through a side door. I'll just look in for a while and leave right away.. .I close the door part of the way. It's a comfortable way to stand, leaning on the door-knob that I clutch in my hand, and therefore I won't let it go.

In the center of the stage there stands a huge white statue of a naked man; an old, decrepid body, short legs, protruding belly, bald head.. .Before the statue there's a long, red table, with fat men sitting on both sides. Those facing the statue hold their hands folded in prayer. All the chairs — some are empty — rotate slowly around the table. Suddenly they stop. A man leaps up from a chair that is now in the row facing the audience. Very rapidly, as though in a speeded-up movie, he gestures with his arms and chirps something unintelligible. He sits down quickly, then jumps up again — squeals, sits down once more, and suddenly.. .flies into the air, ejected from his chair. Plop — he comes down somewhere behind the table.. .As though by a given sign, all the ones who are sitting raise their arms and point their finger at him as at a criminal, at the same time rapidly in chorus and with a choppy voice speaking something vengeful. The table begins to rotate again, and the story is repeated. Every chair is provided with a catapult. All these installations are joined to a complex system of intricate devices, which leads to the sides of the stage. Here, on each side, stands a large container of translucent glass, half filled with a red liquid, resembling blood. Inside the contained is a siphcfti, from the top of the siphon there extends into the hall a mesh of diverging, thin, glimmering threads. They disperse, one for each spectator, and end at the spectators' heads. Oh horror!.. .On the head of each spec-taror sits a gigantic mosquito!.. .How can it be that I didn't see them before?! No, they weren't there before. The thread goes into the tail of the mosquito. The mosquito's sting is stuck into the man's

neck just below the head. The sting is transparent. From time to time a column of blood rises and runs through it! It's horrible! In the hall there's silence and nobody budges. Only the blood that is being sucked flows...

On the stage a splashing sound — from the siphon a spurt of blood falls into the bottle, one of the fatties around the table flies up from his chair.. .And silence again...

From the hands and the feet of the audience still other threads rise to the ceiling. They lead to the center arc of the ceiling. And there lurks a big black spider with bulging round eyes. It looks straight at me and seems to be smiling! But what's that I see! Slender threads rise from my feet and my free arm, too! And the mosquito?! I jerk my head up — it's getting ready to land! Run!. .But.. .I can't lift my feet.. .and my arm doesn't move! But with my other hand I'm still clutching the door-knob. My luck! I'll pull myself to it. The arm muscles contract, the elbow bends, I crawl toward the door. I'm half-way out! . The spider's threads snap from my feet and my hands, I jump up and slam the door! Ah!.. My forehead is cold and clammy — I wipe off the sweat. Now, to keep running...

I run up some stairs. I open the door — a smoke-filled room. That's the balcony. From the balcony — the same stage, seen from above. The people up here are portly and stroll around freely.. .many of them with cigars in the mouth. They seem to be deliberating.

"First of all", one of them is speaking, "we must formulate clearly the first item on the agenda. I move, that it should be 'The right of occupancy of the center chair, first row, center box, and duties of the occupant'."

"I categorically protest!" another one jumps up, goes to the first one and sits down opposite him on the arm of an easy-chair. "The center chair in the first row is organically related to the entire first row, therefore it would not be proper in debate to isolate it in principle and dissociate it from the rest of the row."

"Come in! Come in, young fellow!.." — a pleasant voice beside me...

It's a well-built middle-aged man, gray at the temples He looks at me with a friendly smile.. .The most natural smile. No, there's no deceit here! I let go of the door knob and approach the others. My movements are not smooth, I'm all tensed up, and I probably look pathetically fearful. On the stage — the same scene. Only when I was below, I didn't see there was a circle of supplicants kneeling around the statue. Just now one of them gets up and goes to take an empty place at the red table.

"Cigar" — in the hand extended toward me — a box of expensive cigars.

"People!" my voice shakes — "Don't you see what's going on below?!"

Those sitting and standing around me turn.

"I hear trumpets..." — there's mockery in the voice.

A finger arrogantly taps a cigar — ashes flutter down If that's the way, then I'll spill everything at them, without any "not to hurt anyone's feelings."

"Are human sentiments to be limited by territory?! In other words, if you sit here in the balcony, the fate of those on the main floor does not concern you at all?!"

"You see, young fellow, if the audience do not like it, then it boos the performance off the stage. Or, even more simply, get up and leave. But those people sit there!. .Moreover, we have no juridical basis to cut the performance short. All problems ought to be settled peacefully!"

"But with the murderers here, in your own balcony, you live peacefully?! No, it can't be that you would let this nightmare go on! You're strong and healthy! Over there, people are being tortured. Let's go rescue them!"

"The last act of the tragedy is beginning! .." — someone is mocking me again.

Faces with rude and scornful smiles look at me with curiosity. There are some who are serious, but only from self-respect, and not in one do I see any encouragement. From one who is sitting in the corner of the box, near the railing of the balcony, the spider's threads extend upwards, while the big mosquito is already settling on his head. On the ceiling of the balcony more mosquitoes are buzzing around, only the cigar smoke keeps them away.

"Stop smoking! That will improve your health!"

"Ah! That's the way to talk! "—one jumps up gaily. "This item I demanded to be included in the agenda of the last meeting. Now you are talking sensibly!"

I slam the door behind me...

## ***The Man of Stone***

I've entered a dark place. Farther on there's a lighted stage. I'm in a playhouse. On the stage actors are walking and singing: the performance has already begun: I'm late. Quietly I close the door. I can make out the audience: my eyes have gotten used to the dark. All seats are taken. I'll stand. It's nothing. Now the stage is empty. The setting represents a magnificent hall. Through the arches you can see hanging gardens, behind them in the distance rises a huge, high tower. A young princess runs onto the stage. She trembles from emotion. Her song is about a ruler, who persecutes her, trying to make her his paramour. She glances around fearfully: is there not someone there among the pillars, someone who would hear, someone who has followed her. She sings: "I love you and not a while longer can I stay here!" Her eyes are large and beautiful. She sings with such meaning! But her eyes have been directed at me for a long time now. Why at me? No, this is not acting! She actually needs help! I start going along the wall toward the stage. Probably now many are watching me and getting aggravated: "Why is he shuffling around here?!" I won't turn my head, but I'll peek at them from the side.. .No. All are gazing at the other side of the stage. She's singing there now. Very good.

I stand by the side of the stage, close to the set. We'll see what happens.. .She glances at me, goes on playing her role and comes closer. She's almost here...

"Wait for me, you know where! . .I'll be right there..", she whispers softly, so that no one but I would hear.

She looks around quickly and runs to the center of the stage. I stand. She doesn't turn around: she told me all, now I must act. I must leave without being noticed. I'll wait a little yet, so that no one will suspect anything. But when she goes out, she'll run straight to that place, where I should already be waiting for her. Now no one is looking at me. I'll go.

I walk through a long, dark corridor. The corridor is narrow: two people side by side would hardly fit. Not very far in the side wall gleams a passageway, on the opposite side is another one, a dark hollow. It's an intersection. I come nearer. On the dark side I can't see anything, in the lighter one quite far there's a sharp turn. From around the corner falls the clear light of day. It bounces off the rough-hewn greenish stone walls and much weaker and dimmer penetrates to here. From far off she is to reach this spot. I'll wait. I can stroll around. I'll study the way which we'll have to run, so that later on we wouldn't have to fumble. I walk on. One more intersection. Only here both passageways are dark. I pass them. A cold breeze. Complete darkness. I feel uneasy. I walk by quickly. It gets lighter. Maybe I've gone on too far? I just can't miss her! I turn around. The corridor is empty. No! She'll certainly see me, and besides, it's so quiet here that I'll hear her steps for sure.. .I come upon a roomy, light spot. On one side there's wide stairway going down, past the railing — a luminous space. Where does the stairway lead? I lean against the railing: opposite the stairway there's a small platform, from there the stairs descend under the floor, upon which I'm standing. From that spot daylight is streaming in. That must be the vestibule. There we'll surely find an exit. Now I can go back. But where is she all this time?! .Did something hold her back? I hurry. Most likely someone has detained her on some matter. She'll take care of it and will soon be here...

Here is the first intersection again. I go past it. Now there is something bright in one of the corridors. What is it?! .Large, angular, and it moves. It's a man of stone! He's coming.. .He moves slowly and awkwardly. He places his foot down — thump — a dull sound of stone striking stone... Thump.. .thump.. .thump... The walk is slow. But he's large and takes up the whole corridor: it won't be possible to get past him. In his lowered hand gleams a long sabre. If he uses a sabre, then maybe his hands are more agile than his feet... Thump.. .thump.. .thump — the stony executioner is coming. . .But were is she?! Why isn't she here? I run to the next intersection. The light corridor along which she should come, is empty. I'll wait a while... If she should appear from around the corner now, we would still make it. But she doesn't.. .And the stone man is getting closer! But why should he come, when she isn't here yet?! Maybe our plot has been revealed? Maybe the ruler caught her running away, and forced to it she confessed? Or maybe it was all just a snare for me?!

But she had been so open! No, that's not possible! I must run and see, if the stone man is near. I run there. Yes, now he's much closer!. .To run to the other intersection and back I would still have time, but I can't wait for her any longer. I'll have to save myself now. Somehow that's not very noble.. .It means, I'm leaving her. But she didn't come! Perhaps she left me? Perhaps she changed her mind? After all, that was all on the stage. She was only singing her role! And to whisper, that I should wait for her, maybe that was just part of her role, too? I'm justifying myself.. .But if I'm alive and free, then perhaps I'll be able to find her and, if need be, help her. That will be much better and more certain, than to walk down a narrow, dark corridor, which might end against a wall, and to hear behind me the approaching steps of the stony executioner.

## ***The Wall***

I run. I fly with all my strength. I must run as fast as possible. Faster! Even faster!

A wall — with no end in sight! It extends and extends, even there where the sky meets the earth, —even to such distance! How could I reach it!—even there the wall rises up.. .My knees go weak. Maybe it doesn't end anywhere?

Rising high, it stands straight and even, and there is no opening in it — no gate, or door, or even a window — through which I could crawl. Wretched me...

I know, he looked around, and saw I wasn't there, and now he's coming after me: he's running after me... taking big steps. He's so tall, that the wall will reach only to his chest.

I run with all my might. But my step«! Can they be compared with his? I must run even faster! Faster! Faster!

A sound — I hear it already.. .All is finished.. .I hear the ground trembling beneath his feet! I'm lost!

I run — I fly! When my foot touches ground, it strikes so that my whole body shakes. It wouldn't be possible to run any faster ...

His steps thunder more and more loudly . Now I can hear them distinctly. Nearer and nearer... He's catching up to me!

What shall I do? Hide! Where? Around me only level ground — dry, gray lumps of earth.

Ah! Above the wall the black top of a head can already be seen, with black, pointed, long ears. The forehead emerges. Soon the eyes will appear. All finished! I must hide now. Where? Here is a small dip in the ground. I jump — fall into it, lie close and don't move. Maybe he won't see me. But is it possible not to see a man lying on the earth on an even plain?! Whatever will be, that!

I've closed my eyes tightly. My fingers burrow in the ground. The coldness of the earth penetrates my face. Oh, if I could dig myself into the earth, to sink into it, to disappear, to vanish!..

The steps are here. .. I wake up...

I wake up? No! The wall still stands, I get up, I run and fell again, and the eyes of the black one will soon look into mine... From this dream I will never wake up...