

Free Interpretation Expiring Services**Czesław Dziekanowski**

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EXPIRING SERVICES

From early morning Areta had been in a spin of foreboding. She was listening out frantically, anxious to determine from which side the furious thunderbolt might strike our family home.

But as for me, I have to confess that lately, my situation has been pretty good, not counting the odd biographical gaffe or occasional setback regarding my health. I manage, as it were, to endlessly visualise a significant moment of this kind, trying to create the impression that I really do appreciate it. I spare no efforts in fanning the flames of its existence in order to take delight in it. I'm considered to be something of a local diplomat, not raising my voice unnecessarily, steadfastly remaining quietly at home, and time and time again turning with a prophylactic smile to the Almighty, or at the very least not complaining, certain that it is possible to come to some kind of arrangement with Him, in the firm conviction that the world which He created, has so far, turned out to be reasonably OK, though it is plain to see that it is far from being ideal.

Nonetheless Areta – filled with a sense of bad omen – was not prepared to give up. While I, somewhat in slow motion, was getting dressed in order to go out, she at considerably greater speed, repeatedly reminded me to take my straw hat, which by throwing out a dense refreshing shadow, would shade me from the sun. In her opinion, this rather ordinary head covering would fulfil the role of an amulet. She warned me fervently to beware of the rays from the sky, of the raging glare of the sun, during my walk. In just a moment I would find myself under pressure from the entire cosmos. The infernal fireball would stress me, but I should not submit to its provocations. I was to remain calm, not attempting to outrun anyone, least of all, my own thoughts. Not to charge ahead, but to spare my legs in this heat wave. To rest every few steps. Straighten the toes of my right foot, massage it, adjust it, restore its function as an organ of forward motion. It should be constantly adjusted for walking. Should complications arise, I was to return immediately – my home would be waiting for me. Now however, it was important that I should take up the challenge. There was a difficult task ahead of me.

– You’ll get on the bus and travel one stop – she said. – You’ll be alright. If not, it doesn’t matter, nothing will happen, you’ll just be back to square one.

And if I were to feel more confident and manage to retain my equilibrium in my hot sandals, then I shouldn’t get too excited or panic, but head towards the neighbouring estate at a slow pace, choosing a convenient short-cut, and there make a beneficial purchase in the “Butterfly”.

Areta had in mind a bottle of Chilean wine. So, just in case, I took a corkscrew with me. On the return journey, if the sun were still shining mercilessly, I’d open the bottle and pour the beverage over my head. Visualising this event, I suddenly experienced my own hair through the fragrant echoes of South America. Suddenly, I saw myself as if in a picture painted by the shower of wine. And this entire, strange happening of mental extravagance pleased me beyond measure in all of its aspects.

It hit me that in this fantasy I had behaved boldly, confidently. In it I had acted audaciously. Yes, in this fantasy, in the wanderings of my imagination my existence was more interesting, much more original than in the rawness of reality.

It had been forecast for some time now. I however, did not believe in the announcement. Then suddenly I was dumbfounded. In just a few hours, as it were, from one day to the next, the mighty heat wave appeared on the entire continent and immediately took control. People of the north, among whom I readily count myself, are stuck in thermal shock. It’s true that the more cautious among them have life insurance, as a matter of course, but on their own initiative they also carry huge containers of water on their backs. It’s true that prominent figures are accompanied by fabulous, colourful water carts, while popular members of the government are even followed every step of the way by fire engines diverted for the purpose. But even this is not a solution to the problem. In short, a complicated reality has emerged, the rules of which are completely unknown. Meanwhile, things are happening on the surface, which appear, in a sense, to be quite straightforward, yet alarming, and cannot be stopped despite the will to do so. Meanwhile, time and time again, haphazardly of course, selected citizens – as if chosen by someone – fall like flies, there, wherever they happen to have been standing at a given time, in whatever situation they may have been in. And so, ambulances are engaged to and fro, all the time, their hands full of work. The Minister of Health has instructed scientists to take samples of the aura and compare it with past experience. The necessary steps were taken immediately. It turns out, that not even the oldest people, nobody at all, can remember an attack of the sun, of this kind before.

And now, returning to me, I would like to emphasize just how great is my discomfort.

I feel not only spiritually and mentally confused, but also physically cut up, wounded.

I have never before been afraid of the world, but now I have fears, I have qualms about the prosaic act of leaving home to buy a bottle of the cheapest wine. In my head I design various forms of behaviour, I create subtle outlines of explanations for the benefit of friends. If someone were suddenly, and thus brutally, to ask me why I was unable to maintain the vertical, but rock back and forth like a duck, albeit managing to move forward, but asymmetrically, clumsily even, my answer would be as follows.

My dear passer-by, don't be surprised, I wasn't born yesterday, on the contrary, it was long ago and so I am as old as the intervening years, and they in turn, as old again, so that their summation gives rise to a serious matter, which as you may imagine, has its own exceptional rules.

This morning, Areta again sensibly suggested that I should avoid taking any unnecessary risks and that I should catch the bus and get off at the next stop. And if I am able to stand erect in my choking shoes, that step by step, at a slow pace, I should try to reach the neighbouring estate, where I should make a small purchase.

She had in mind, of course, as usual, the dry, red Chilean wine.

And so I left home, though I had the impression that it did not leave me. Again and again I stopped, giving myself a rest, and my foot, the opportunity to organize itself. Some passers-by were concerned about me. They asked what was the matter, why it was that I would take two or three steps and then stop, and even retreat a little in pain. They suspected all kinds of difficulties. That my heart was not up to it. That my lungs were beyond repair. What's more, they guessed clumsily, predicting my imminent demise, and so I reassured them that it was only a difficulty with my leg, or rather with my foot, and its toes, that were jamming together uncontrollably. Perhaps it was simply a matter of corn that was gradually breaking through. An expert would certainly be able to tell, or perhaps even an amateur, if he were to take up permanent residence in my lower right extremity.

Hurrying towards the "Butterfly" – a cheap supermarket – I thought about many of them, in particular one young passer-by, who had promised the entire world, that he would not allow me – a slow person – to perish like a dog on this busy street.

I thought about home as well. Home, yes, home - it only sounds ostensibly cosy. There are even those who believe that its intimacy and cordiality are indelibly written into the bricks and mortar.

Before entering the supermarket I notice a sign: SHOE REPAIRS. It's the first time I've noticed it, it wasn't here before. Perfect. My big toe is swollen. In the circumstances, my right shoe needs to be less tight, so that it doesn't squeeze, doesn't rub. The wretched

sandal is giving me hell. I can barely walk. In fact, I'm not walking, I'm hobbling along. I'm having to stop every few small steps, because it cannot be said they are normal footsteps. It plagues me mercilessly. THE SHOEMAKER IS BENEATH THE BUTTERFLY, so the sign announces. And so I circle the building resembling the shape of the insect. Here, in the basement. I pass the tailoring services, today they seem to me to be insignificant. The only ones that count are the shoe repairs. I press the door handle, open the door and enter the small workshop. Please don't shut the door, I hear the shoemaker's voice from behind a screen. He is young, well-built, weighs at least a hundred and thirty kilograms. My attention is drawn to the piles of shoes stacked up on shelves. I don't have the strength to stand, and so without waiting for an invitation from my host, I fall upon something akin to a sofa. It ripples and sags squeakily under my weight.

– Could you remove the fire from my right sandal?

– It's chafing you – he holds it in the palm of his hand and bends the sole. – Oh, you see, it's rubber. And rubber leaves its mark on feet. The shoe is tight, I could drive it onto the last and stretch it. But it's not worth it. In any case I haven't got a last.

– You haven't got a shoemaker's last? – I ask, surprised.

– I got rid of it ten years ago, in 93 to be precise, when we were invaded by the Italians and the Chinese. Those foreign shoes are made for one season. Poland went crazy over cheap, transitional shoes. Even I was tempted. I allowed my feet to get a taste of Chinese comfort and soon enough they were grilled as if on a spit.

– And you, a specialist, were taken in.

– And so I was. I came a huge cropper. The Poles are not careful enough. We need to be protected at a global level. Foreign rubber is murderous, it's aggressive. Our feet are not resilient. Predatory shoes lie in wait for us. I wept, but I put them on. I couldn't think normally, sensibly. You should know that a tight, chafing shoe had a terrible effect on my mind. I felt the victim of an alien shoe-making industry. My foot in chronic danger. This easily eradicated threat constantly absorbed my attention. I thought I would go mad. It's a miracle, that at present I am perfectly sane.

I looked at the shoemaker with sympathy. He told me the story of his shoes, while I drifted into an impasse. Into indecision. To leave, or not to leave. There was no way in which I could just leave him, but neither could I befriend him, even though I adore people engaged in physical work. A modern shoemaker, but how degraded he had become. In 93, long ago, he had got rid of his shoemaker's last. There was little work, few orders. Now – without this basic tool of his trade – he was just a ruin of a tradesman. Sure enough, he provided repair services, but ones that were shallow and of little honour.

– Now I understand the Poles – He spoke casually, in a melancholy, yet, at the same time, brusque tone of voice. – They are extremely hot-headed. Madcaps, impatient. Why? Because their shoes are too tight.

– The Poles can't afford leather shoes – I interrupted. – I myself, wear imitation leather shoes all the time, be it an ordinary day or special occasion.

– Calf-skin would be the best, because, as you know, it's the most delicate. And it shapes to fit the feet most easily. Even so, even a leather shoe is no good, if it is too tight.

– Fitting is the main problem, if someone wants to understand the new psychology of shoes – I interrupted again, this time as a means of taking my leave.

We parted in an atmosphere of frustration, without shaking hands. And there, I had been thinking that I would receive a marvelous cure. That he would offer me a decidedly helping hand.

And so, he remained in his basement, and I came up to the surface, where the sun tyrannized all around. But strange, very strange. Not alone, I emerged with renewed hope. Yes, with hope, although the shoemaker had not provided me with any evident service. How could it be, that such hope had appeared? I didn't know why exactly. Nonetheless, there could be no doubt that at the moment of my meeting with the shoemaker, a completely different view of my foot had taken hold. During my visit to his workshop an alternative position had materialized, a safe counterbalance. It's not after all, a terrible illness gnawing away at my limb from the heel. Days passed, time was getting the better of me. The longer you leave it, the worse it will be for your body. I was close to caving in. A few steps away from panic. Just, just – and that, everyday – on the verge of going to the doctor, but in the meanwhile I happened upon the shoemaker, who without hesitation provided a simpler, and thus let's hope, more fortunate diagnosis. I fell into an excellent mood and in a jiffy, with the eyes of the whole world upon me, I uncorked the bottle and started to sing in dry tones of the deepest red. I danced on the potholed street, or at least, that's how I imagined myself at that moment. And I reached – to my mind – the convenient conclusion, or rather insight, that on this wave of fantasy in its vivid flow, I am in much better health than in the field of hard reality, which is allegedly supposed to teach someone like me common sense.

FREE INTERPRETATION

I am sitting completely still and in total silence. I stare greedily at the screen of my laptop, on which I have "Expiring services". At a given moment, there reverberates a call for an open calculation. I tune in statistically and slowly start to count. It turns out, that "Expiring services" is a story, which consists of thirty paragraphs.

I check. It's correct. There are thirty indentations in the text. Thirty shifts at the beginning of lines of text.

At this moment I become aware of a consoling doubt in my mind. What if this isn't simple prose, but camouflaged poetry? And every opening line of each paragraph, a separate and at the same time, curious poem? I'd thus have thirty of them! Thirty poems, enough for a slender volume. A slender volume of poetry, of course.

Much easier – I spread out in the armchair. Maybe that's how it really is. After all, numbers can't lie, they can only spell out the truth.

So let's stop at this point, in order to think more deeply about what they are telling us, what is the significance of thirty paragraphs entitled "Expiring services".

Luckily, I don't have to wait long for an answer. My intuition tells me, that first and foremost the significance is poetic.

In the first paragraph we meet Areta, a female figure, who is, each day, filled with foreboding. She vacillates in the heat of uncertainty, not knowing from which angle to expect the might of an enemy attack on our house, which will wipe it off the face of the earth. She is not concerned for herself, but for the narrator, for the family home, for our ineffectual state, our country – for that green island of ours, for the effects of global warming.

In the second paragraph, the narrator presents himself as a person of measured appetites. He is happy with his gift of being able to visualise significant moments. He does not complain about the world, in the belief that it is in a virtually ideal state.

In the third, Areta - a caring mother - reminds the narrator of the need to take his straw hat, which will protect him. Against what? Against the fierce, raging sun, which symbolises here an angry father, and his destructive, even murderous energy.

In the fourth and fifth, Areta gives the appropriate instructions. By the by, Areta is not a complicated figure. On the face of it, she seems to be characteristically defeatist, a prophet of doom. In reality she is a careful optimist. This is apparent in her relationship with the narrator. She tries to inspire him with a moderate amount of faith in the success of the initiated enterprise. Subconsciously, it is her desire that he should stand up to her catastrophic fears.

In the sixth, Areta makes the task a concrete one: the narrator is to purchase a bottle of Chilean wine in the "Butterfly". He takes a corkscrew with him, just in case the expediency should arise. It is mercilessly hot, and so he opens the bottle, and pours the wine over his head (at least, that is how he visualises the scene).

In the seventh, the narrator is amazed at the thought, that in his fantasy, in his imagined wanderings, his existence appeared more original than in everyday life.

In the eighth, we learn that as a result of the relentless heat-wave, a complex reality has emerged, one in which the precise rules are no longer evident. Simple, and at the same time alarming things occur: people are falling like flies wherever they happen to be standing at a given moment. Even the oldest people do not remember an attack of the sun of this kind before.

In the ninth, tenth and eleventh, the narrator emphasises his discomfort - his resistance to embarking upon the journey in the direction of the bottle of cheap wine. As a result of his advancing years, he cannot maintain an upright position, and those years have their own years (their summation creates a serious problem, which has its own exceptional rules).

In the twelfth and thirteenth, we have the next, of that same morning, when Areta again offered some sensible advice, that the narrator should not take any risks, that he should take the bus to the neighbouring estate, getting off at the next stop in order to buy the dry, red Chilean wine.

In the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth, the narrator, on leaving home, took a few steps and had to stop, sometimes even retreating a little as a result of pain. Passersby were concerned for him, so he reassured them as best he could, blaming his foot for his incapacity (or at least, his pinched toes). A young passerby proclaimed to the world, that he would not allow such a slow-moving person to perish like a dog on the busy street. The narrator also thought about home, in a way that others don't.

In the seventeenth, thanks to an unexpected sign, he ends up at the shoemaker's workshop (in the basement beneath the "Butterfly").

In the eighteenth he asks the shoemaker, if he could remove the fire from his right sandal.

In the nineteenth, through the twentieth, right up to the twenty-ninth chapter, the narrator talks to the shoemaker – a ruin of a tradesman. The shoemaker doesn't even have a last. The proverb about the shoemaker's children being ill-shod is right - perhaps uncomfortably shod, at least. The Poles can't afford leather ones. Nonetheless, the shoemaker was worth a visit, so as to understand the new psychology of the shoe.

In the thirtieth paragraph the narrator reveals his delight at the visit to the shoemaker. It's true that the shoemaker did not provide him with any evident service, nonetheless, from the moment of meeting him, there appeared another point of view concerning the narrator's foot.

What then is the significance of this? Let's take a closer look.

It is not beneficial with regard to me. What's more, it's compromising. And there's nothing I can do about it. Writing, and at the same time reading the text, these were my exact

impressions.

I'll put it in a straightforward manner - I do not accept antecence. Antecence in myself. I refuse to countenance it. But I should, because it is starting to be something significant. A simple fact, and (allegedly) it is not possible to challenge facts. But, with regard to myself, on the contrary, I fully intend to challenge them.

Please look around you. Look at human beings. They are developing all the time, but the opposite is also true - they are constantly retracting, closing down, that is, continually growing older. It's as if, while striding through life, at the same time one is swimming against the tide of life. Now one tires more easily and quickly. I've notice that up to a certain day before yesterday, I was evolving as a human being, and from some symbolic yesterday, my body has begun to protest. My legs are resistant, my feet protest. I'm changing into a silent, bloodless revolution. And this bodily, physical uprising is beginning to have an effect on my creativity. At first, I recognised with utter shock that this rebellion had drawn a negative shadow across the process of my creative struggle, limiting it (me). But this kind of limitation, of itself, need not be a bad thing. My body is deteriorating, my life is falling into ruin, I'm sinking into a minor panic, becoming not so much totally, but episodically unhappy, but explaining to myself that this is an exceptional opportunity to get to know myself better. Up until now, I have seen life as something joyful, in a sense enticing. Now I have to reformulate the concept from being something sweet to something bitter. Old age is settling in on me. Good-bye, happy world! In essence it is the taste of death insidiously overwhelming me. Let's agree, that as of today, I am in a state of war, that is being played out peacefully. No-one is attacking me with weapons. It is time that has raised its hand to strike out at me. The war is being played out within me - at the level of biology. In a cultural sense, so to speak, I am still sound. Looking at myself through a cultural prism, I have to confess that not much has changed. I even speak at the same rate as before, though I move more slowly. Biology is, slowly and by small amounts, placing a blockade on me. In literary or artistic terms I am sensitive to even the smallest losses in biology. Up until now, true enough, I have, on occasion, prepared to take my leave of this world, mostly in jest. Without any real conviction. There was irony, a pseudo-departure, a make-believe parting. Today, out of bare necessity - it is more serious. I don't believe, yet at the same time I grow ever more convinced, that the goodbye will be a real one, not relative, but final. This finality is an admonition of solemnity. It wants to be treated with understanding, perhaps even with affection. It begs me not to frolic, not to joke, not to mock myself. A little more dignity, my friend. And so I have to become acquainted with a certain dose of resignation, which demands that I cease the race against

time. Yesterday I was in a hurry, but today a slower pace suits me better. A lighter being, more easy-going. And free interpretation. Of what? The world of creativity in relation to a declining existence. It would be wonderful, if I could superficially recognize old age as the next, in effect, final stage of the illness that is life.

"Expiring services" is a story about advancing age. About the rapid, quite simply lightning speed with which biology reaches its twilight. At this stage of life, I am characterized by a stumbling gait. A listless sinking into my own home for hours on end, as if it were in some way, a curative armchair. Thus it is, and so somewhat prosaically, that I make my debut in old age.

What else will it do with me? Old age brings chaos and confusion into my life, anxiety that my legs will fail me and will decline to cooperate any further. Taking a look at myself, I see that the distance that remains to be conquered is becoming ever shorter. The world is shrinking. It is sometimes the case, that my path is reduced to little more than just a few steps. A moment ago, I embarked on a journey, but now, unfortunately, I have to interrupt it.

I turn back. Yes, I retreat with the thought that the excursion in search of the bottle of wine was in fact, a belated expression of longing. Longing for what? A longing for a view of southern countries, where vineyards grow.

And now, a prisoner of my own body, remaining at home, I eagerly visualise the ceremony of buying a bottle of Chilean wine. And storing it in the cellar of my imagination.

It's true that I don't travel anymore, but I'm not giving in. Quite the contrary – I write. You may therefore expect a report from me, a hands on account of the fight I have undertaken against old age.

Because old age is an everyday struggle. So far, I'm not afraid of a solitary old age. Solitude with advancing age is something of an exaggeration. The very essence of old age is solitude. You cannot be old and not alone. Anyone looking for solitude is most likely to find it in their own seniority. In their own withdrawal, in departure. That's just it, precisely. First there is becoming and being, and at the end we have a gradual departure and final parting. Departure. The opposite of becoming. It is the narcotic poetry of twilight, leaving, fading away, dissolving into nothingness. The wonderful, miraculous space of non-existence. In nothingness I cannot be found, in any case, no-one intends to seek me out there. It would be utter nonsense, common, and at once, abject absurdity. I hide, cautiously, in the abyss created by language - meanwhile someone - some joker! - recklessly imagines, that he can find me without any trouble, and reveal my disguise. Not so, I do not create or rather slip into this metaphorical chasm, so that now someone might have

straightforward and direct access to me. I am, with premeditation, lost in language, I, amusingly sprinkled with the greying effects of time, am happy at the very thought of my own withdrawal. I hope, that thanks to my seclusion as a writer, there will come a time when I eventually attain the desired state of solitude.

The easiest thing to say about someone like me, is that my illness is one of excessive years. And that is an accurate diagnosis, it's true. But then my intention is not to reduce those years. My aim is to maintain my fitness, to remain efficient despite my many years. I can be 140, so long as I can preserve a spring in my step, a radiant smile, a fully aware, and better still, penetrating mind. In any case, I have the feeling that at this moment in time I am approaching a certain paradox. At any rate I am close on its trail. It seems to me that it might be stated as follows: man, for example, someone like myself, feels youngest in old age, in a state of constant, everlasting departure.

At times, I think that I am expecting too much. Because I am right at the beginning, and yet I would like to impart my experience of growing older with some kind of sense. Moreover, I don't at all believe that old age is a tragic event, but I know too, that of its very nature, it is unavoidable. Since old age is unavoidable, why treat it as if it were, at the same time, a tragic event?

One thing is certain. No-one can give us a conclusive answer about how to live and how to be creative. Filled with trepidation we dwell in a fluid world. And as a result of the constantly changing circumstances, the lives of each and every one of us have become a constant confrontation with unexpected and fickle challenges.

In a word, life requires relentless bravery, but a sensitive person, growing older, feels this bravery slipping away with every passing day, naturally and at the same time unnaturally, there is less and less of it. Meanwhile, the challenges remain the same: being human, paradoxically, they are challenges that remain imperturbable.

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