

STUDY || ROSA

TAZM Silence of light

Text: Grzegorz Ziółkowski
based on Tahar Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light*

Silence | Zero | Suicide: PHI... PHI... PHI...-LO-SOPHY | Deformation of the body | Down-On your feet | N-I-G-H-T | Hatred: dignitaries' bodies | A cell was small | A puzzle | A letter 'P' day | Collapse | Scorpions | Putting out | TAZMAMART | Astrolabe

1. SILENCE

When you go through an ordeal,
the simplest things seem to be the peak of dreams...

Silence!
Silence... envelops me,
Alighting like a calming hand upon my shoulders...

Silence...
A mirror reflecting the soul.
Silence – it never weighs on me.
I become silence myself.
My breathing, my heartbeat, my inner nakedness...
My secret... Secret.

OF THE HEAD-A BULLET-IN THE BACK!!!

The silence.
The silence of night; a necessity.
The silence of the companions who were slowly leaving.
The silence: a sign of mourning.
The silence of blood circulating sluggishly.
The silence that told you where the scorpions are.
The silence-oppression.
The silence of images which ran and reran through the minds.
The silence of the guards that expressed weariness and routine.
The silence of the shadow of memories burnt to ashes.

The silence of a leaden sky from which no sign could reach us.
The silence of absence, the blinding absence of light.

If I stop hearing your stories, I will waste away.
I know you haven't got much strength left,
that your voice is hoarse from the cold,
that you've lost another tooth this week,
but I'm begging you,
come back to work...

Silence...
Silence...
Silence...
Silence... of light.

2. ZERO

SALIM: 0, 0, 0, 0..., 0..., 0...

3. SUICIDE: PHI... PHI... PHI-LO-SOPHY

TEBEBT: Suicide...
SALIM: is not a solution.
TEBEBT: An ordeal...
SALIM: is a challenge.
TEBEBT: Hell...
SALIM: an ability to resist.
TEBEBT: Resistance...
SALIM: a duty.
TEBEBT: Hope...
SALIM: an insane habit.
TEBEBT: Mind...
SALIM: the only weapon.
TEBEBT: One must...
SALIM: preserve dignity. To be a man, never a wretch...
TEBEBT: A dishrag...
SALIM: A zero...
TEBEBT: 0...!
SALIM: 1.
TEBEBT: 0!...
SALIM: 1, comma...
TEBEBT: 0!...

SALIM: 1, comma, 6...

TEBEBT: 0!!...

SALIM: 1, comma, 61...

TEBEBT: 0!!!

SALIM: 1, comma, 618...

TEBEBT: 0!!!

Palm, palm measure, fingers, elbow...

Palm, palm measure, fingers, elbow...

SALIM: 1, comma, 6180...

TEBEBT (*joins*): ...0339887...

SALIM and TEBEBT: Phi-Phi-Phi... Phi-Phi... PHI-LO-SO-PHY...! Phi-Phi-Phi... PHI-LO-SOPHY...! PHILO-SOPHY...!!!

4. DEFORMATION OF THE BODY

SALIM: 1. The sun... beat almost straight down on the sand.

6. And I started walking...

1. The sun... beat almost straight down on the sand.

8. The sea panted on the sand with all the rapid, muffled breathing of its leaping waves.

0!

3. The sun was now hammering down. 3

9. I walked slowly toward the rocks.

8. 8

7. There was the same red...

SALIM and TEBEBT: Explosion!

SALIM and TEBEBT:

2. The glare from the water was unbearable.

4. It shattered to pieces on the sand and the sea.

5. After a moment, I went back to the beach.

9. I walked slowly toward the rocks...

10. ...and felt my head swelling in the sunlight.

10. And felt my head swelling in the sunlight.

10! 10!!! And felt... 10!!! My head... 10!!! ...swelling in the sunlight!!! 10!!!...

10!!!...

5. DOWN-ON YOUR FEET

SALIM:

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6!!!...

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6!!!...

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6!!!...

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6!!!...

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6!!!...

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6!!!...

1-6-1-8-0-3-3-9-8-8-7...

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6!!!...

1-6-1-8-0-3-3-9-8-8-7...

6. N-I-G-H-T

SALIM:

N-I-... N-I-G... N-I-G-H-T...

Night will be my companion, world and cemetery.

Night. A blanket of frozen dust, a stand of black trees.

Night. A queen of sufferings. It does not fall here – it is all the time.

Night is no longer a night, since there are no more stars, no more moon, no more sky.

Night – a bottomless well, a tunnel bored in hope for a ray of light.

Night – my body is made of it, my breathing, and heartbeats, and hands fumbling on the walls.

Night – dank, sticky, dirty, clammy, smelling of urine.

Night. It arrives on a grey horse...

Night! Followed by a pack of mad dogs.

Night! It throws a heavy cloak of wet sand on my face.

Night! My fingers are rubbed raw when I touch it.

10, 10...

On the night of July 10, 1971, I became ageless.

7. HATRED: DIGNITARIES' BODIES

TEBEBT: Hatred...

SALIM: Diminishes you. It eats you from within...

TEBEBT: Hatred...

SALIM: An incurable disease.

TEBEBT: Hatred...

SALIM: A destructive impulse.

TEBEBT: Hatred...

SALIM: The poison that ravages the heart and liver.

SALIM: Dignitaries' bodies, diplomats', government officials'...

TEBEBT: Everything is spinning around

SALIM: the people, the tables, the guns, the blood

TEBEBT: in the water of the swimming pool,
SALIM: the stars in the morning sky,
TEBEBT: and above all the sun –
SALIM: the main persecutor.
TEBEBT: I cannot remember anymore
SALIM: whether we surrendered to the royal guard,
TEBEBT: or whether we were arrested and disarmed
SALIM: by officers,
TEBEBT: who had switched sides
SALIM: when the tide turned.
TEBEBT: We were pawns, bodies,
SALIM: that were cold in the heat of the summer.
TEBEBT: Hands tied behind our backs
SALIM: we were pitched into trucks
TEBEBT: heaped with the dead and the wounded.

SALIM: My head was jammed
TEBEBT: between two dead soldiers.
SALIM: It was hot. Shit and urine
TEBEBT: were oozing from both bodies.
SALIM: Their blood was...
TEBEBT: ...trickling into my eyes.
SALIM: What does a man think of when
the blood of another man runs down his face?

SALIM: A rifle butt slamming into my shins woke me up.
The living had not yet been sorted from the dead.
Some of the wounded were moaning, others were banging their heads against the
wall, cursing fate, religion, the army, and – above all – the sun.
TEBEBT: They were saying the coup d'état had failed because of too bright light.

8. A CELL WAS SMALL

SALIM and TEBEBT: A cell was small – just under 10 feet long and half as wide; I could not stand up. A hole for pissing and crapping, less than 4 inches in diameter, became an extension of the body. The damp cement forced me to change positions. I would lie prone, face pressed against the floor, preferring an aching belly to aching hands. We had no beds, not even a bundle of hay to sleep on. Each of us received two old blankets bearing the printed number 1-9-3-6. The blankets had a nasty hospital smell. I folded one to make a very narrow mattress. I slept on my side. When I wanted to change sides, I got up so as not to undo the folds. And like clockwork, especially at the beginning, I hit my head against the ceiling.

SALIM and TEBEBT: We were allowed 5 quarts of water a day. I would pour it into a plastic jug and let it sit for a whole day. I used almost all of it to clean myself. I never wiped myself off, simply waiting for the water drops to dry so as not to get dirty again.

SALIM and TEBEBT: Bread. Yes, we were entitled to bread as white as quicklime. Some dunk their bread ration in the morning liquid, others broke it into small chunks and poured the daily plate of starch over them.

SALIM and TEBEBT: My companion, my visitor, my unwanted custom, my survival, my personal abomination, my worn-out burned-up tossed-aside love...

SALIM and TEBEBT: My love... my sorrow, my obsession, a ration of calories – s-t-a-r-c-h-e-s! Star-ches!

TEBEBT: And darkness...

SALIM and TEBEBT: Darkness. Starches and darkness. Darkness all the time. And so, for 18 years, or more precisely, for 6,663 days. 18 years, or 6,663 days. 6,663 days. 6,663 days. 6,663 days. 6,663 days. 6,663... 6,663...

9. A PUZZLE

TEBEBT: 4, 9, 2...

SALIM: 15.

TEBEBT: 3, 5, 7...

SALIM: 15.

TEBEBT: 8, 1, 6...

SALIM: 15.

TEBEBT: 4, 3, 8...

SALIM: 15.

TEBEBT: 9, 5, 1...

SALIM: 15.

TEBEBT: 2, 7, 6...

SALIM: 15.

TEBEBT: 4, 5, 6...

SALIM: 15.

TEBEBT: 2, 5, 8...

SALIM: 15...

10. A LETTER 'P' DAY

SALIM: In Block 'B'...

TEBEBT: In Block 'P'!

SALIM: In Block 'B'...!

TEBEBT: In Plock 'P'!!

SALIM: In Block 'B'...!!! ...there were 23 of us, each in a separate cell. We had no names anymore and had kept only our skins and our heads.

SALIM and TEBEBT: But not all of us had...

TEBEBT: Number 12 was the first to lose his reason. He quickly became apathetic and started to talk to himself, nonstop. Even asleep, he kept jabbering incomprehensible words. During that day it was impossible to make him be quiet. He stared at the ceiling while he talked. Now and then we would recognize a word: panther; pot and pothered; possible; poplin; pushcart; pickness; pery pick; pie of punger and pirst...

A letter 'P' day. He needed to spout all words. It was his way of leaving us, of summoning Peath. In the end he bashed his head against the wall and gave a long cry; then his voice and Preath were forever still.

A Puneral became for a us the opportunity to get out and see daylight. For one short hour, I kept my eyes and even my mouth wide open, intending to swallow as much light as Possible!!! To Preathe in brightness, stockpile it inside, keep it as a refuge...

...and remember it whenever darkness weighed too heavily on my eyelids. I stripped to the waist so that my skin could absorb and hoard brightness...

This was the way Number 12 offered us a blast of light.

11. COLLAPSE

SALIM: 10, 10, 10..., 0, 15, 15, 15...

12. SCORPIONS

TEBEBT: Sleep no more, sleep no more, my brothers, pay attention.

It's summertime, July 3, 1978, 5:36 A.M. – it's scorpion time.

SALIM: The one who screamed was Number 15 – obsessed by time. He could tell what time it was to within a minute, day or night. This was the first summer the scorpions appeared. And not by chance. The NCO had brought them into the hole.

TEBEBT: We could not see the scorpions in the darkness. We had to be quiet, absolutely quiet, to locate them.

SALIM: Number 8 was screaming. In his agony he kept getting up and then collapsing back onto the cement. The pain was growing worse. It was the middle of the night. We could not call the guards to let in our venom-sucking specialist. Awakened by the cries, Number 15 told us the time:

TEBEBT: It's 3:16 in the morning, Thursday, April 25, 1979.

SALIM: Number 8 wept and yelled. We told him to hold on until the guards brought our morning water. He did his best but in the end he lost consciousness. After some time he gave a loud cry – then nothing more. In the morning I was allowed to go to cell 8. I staggered back in revulsion. The scorpions swarmed on the decomposing body.

13. PUTTING OUT

TEBEBT: In the evening we heard the sound of a struggling body. 6 was the only one who managed to hang himself. He had tied his clothes together to make a rope and wrapped it around his neck. He was completely naked.

SALIM: 9 tried to tell me something, a number, perhaps. I thought it was the number 40. Death, it seems, takes 40 days to occupy the entire body. In his case, it carried him off quicker.

13 perforated his rectum. There was no bowel movement, only blood. In the end he howled one last great cry, and collapsed. Exhausted by so much effort, he must have passed out. He died the following day. Death relaxed his sphincter...

Death has a smell... A mixture of brackish water, vinegar, and pus...

14 could not pee anymore. He no longer spoke, but muttered, stammered, shouted, kicked the door, and then, after a long night... silence...

TEBEBT: One day, taking advantage of a thin shaft of light in the corridor, number 10... asked me...

SALIM: ...if his face was still in the right place...

14. TAZMAMART

TEBEBT: In the summer of 1991 in Block... 'B' there were only 5 of us still alive. At the beginning of July, for the first time in 17 years we were treated to some meat. Poor 11 gobbled down the fatty meat and wound up with indigestion and a high fever. He spent an entire week vomiting, still with a high fever. He died at the end of July.

TEBEBT: 3?...

SALIM: Achar.

TEBEBT: 21?...

SALIM: Wakrine.

TEBEBT: 18...?

SALIM: Omar.

TEBEBT: And 7. 7 stations. 7 prayers. You, Salim...

SALIM: I was defeated by my toothaches...

TEBEBT: What can be worse than the experience of horror?

SALIM: To see that it is being denied.

TEBEBT: Tazmamart...

SALIM: ...never existed!!...

15. ASTROLABE

My garden is humble.

A few orange trees,

one or two lemon trees,
a well of cool water in the centre,
lush grass,
and a room in which to sleep
when it's cold or rainy.
The room is empty,
just a mat,
a pillow, and a blanket.
The walls have been limewashed in blue.
When the daylight fades, I light a candle and read.
In the evening, I eat vegetables from the garden;
an old woman from a nearby village
brings me bread every day at the same hour.

I'm a murmur
a murmur
a murmur fire
a murmur fire word...
FIRE-WORD
I dwell in thoughts that hurt
I am
TRANS-
PARENCY!!!

Text: Grzegorz Ziółkowski
based on Tahar Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light*
(translation into Polish by Małgorzata Szczurek).
In translating the adaptation into English
Linda Coverdale's translation of the book was consulted
(Penguin Books, 2005).
The performance text was to a large extent
elaborated during rehearsals
of STUDY || ROSA (www.grzeg-rosa.home.amu.edu.pl).