To those born later

I
Truly I live in dark times!
Frank speech is naïve. A smooth forehead
Suggests insensitivity. The man who laughs
Has simply not yet heard
The terrible news.

What kind of times are these, when
To talk about trees is almost a crime
Because it implies silence about so many horrors?
When the man over there calmly crossing the street
Is already perhaps beyond the reach of his friends
Who are in need?

It’s true that I still earn my daily bread
But, believe me, that’s only an accident. Nothing
I do gives me the right to eat my fill.
By chance I’ve been spared. (If my luck breaks, I’m lost.)

They say to me: Eat and drink! Be glad you have it!
But how can I eat and drink if I snatch what I eat
From the starving
And my glass of water belongs to someone dying of thirst?
And yet I eat and drink.

I would also like to be wise.
In the old books it says what wisdom is:
To shun the strife of the world and to live out
Your brief time without fear
Also to get along without violence
To return good for evil
Not to fulfill your desires but to forget them
Is accounted wise.
All this I cannot do.
Truly, I live in dark times.

II
I came to the cities in a time of disorder
When hunger reigned.
I came among men in a time of revolt
And I rebelled with them.
So passed my time
Given me to on earth.

I ate my food between battles
I lay down to sleep among murderers
I practiced love carelessly
And I had little patience for nature’s beauty.
So passed my time
Given to me on earth.

All roads led into the mire in my time.
My tongue betrayed me to the butchers.
There was little I could do. But those is power
Sat safer without me: that was my hope.
So passed my time
Given to me on earth.

Our forces were slight. Our goal
Lay far in the distance
Clearly visible, though I myself
Was unlikely to reach it.
So passed my time
Given to me on earth.

III
You who will emerge from the flood
In which we have gone under
Bring to mind
When you speak of our failings
Bring to mind also the dark times
That you have escaped.

Changing countries more often than our shoes,
We went through the class wars, despairing
When there was only injustice, no outrage.

And yet we realized:
Hatred, even of meanness
Contorts the features.
Anger, even against injustice
Makes the voice hoarse. O,
We who wanted to prepare the ground for friendship
Could not ourselves be friendly.

But you, when the time comes at last
When man is helper to man
Think of us
With forbearance.

[1940]