PRAISE FOR

WRETCHEDNESS

'What can a survivor do with their history? Can you be loyal to the friends you left behind? Andrzej Tichý turns this wretched reality into something poignant. His polyphonic novel has a rough, rhythmic melody and a ferocious rage.'

August Prize Judges

'Post-political, that's what I want to call Andrzej Tichý's arrestingly acute writing. [. . .] A terrifying and hard story that doesn't forget to occasionally burst out into something gripping and beautiful.'

Jonas Thente, *Dagens Nyheter*

'Tichý writes a delirious, detailed prose, studded with Malmö slang and contemporary verve. The language pours forth over the pages like a contaminated river, full of filth, despair and anxiety, an associative flow of long, disjointed, almost endless sentences.'

Eva Johansson, *Svenska Dagbladet*

'In virtuosically rendered language; full of the poetry of spoken word, the innovation of contemporary slang, and the philosophical verve of great literature, Tichý gives a voice to the lost "brothers" of his youth. To follow this frantic, mournful, bamboozling, pleading, smart, childish, would-be hard, bragging, desperate and despairing collective memory is to "hear" a whole forsaken generation. Despite the embracing of darkness, despite the absence of hope and faith, it is a magnificent elegy, teeming with life.'

Pia Bergström, *Aftonbladet*

‘In terms of ambition, few contemporary Swedish authors can compete with Tichý. The same goes for linguistic intensity. His prose rushes forward, roaring with, if you will, dark poetry, hurling its rage at an indifferent present. *Wretchedness* is a furious novel.’

Ann Lingebrandt, *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*

‘Authors like Tichý are needed to keep our literature alive. He is drilling frenetically, refusing to neglect the suffering and succeeds in lighting a spark with a linguistic tinder.’

Nils Schwartz, *Expressen*

‘In spite of its slimness, this is a huge novel Tichý has written.’

Viktor Malm, *Expressen*

‘Andrzej Tichý is an author who, time after time, in language that sings, says something important about contemporary Sweden. Read him.’

Stefan Eklund, *Borås Tidning*

‘This is literature. Powerful and moving. And a lament for people with few opportunities to escape “that place” fate has decided for them.’

Inger Dahlman, *Motala Tidning*

‘The darkness Tichý evokes has an epic, radiant energy. The frenzy in the narrator’s flashbacks forces its way up through the narrative like volcanic continents, full of ruin, tragedy, wretchedness, and a rare, raging and destructive power. It is magnificent, across the board, magnificent.’

Jan-Olov Nyström, *Skånska Dagbladet*

WRETCHEDNESS

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Andrzej Tichý

Translated by Nichola Smalley

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Contradiction alone is the proof that we are not everything. Contradiction is our wretchedness, and the sense of our wretchedness is the sense of reality. For we do not invent our wretchedness. It is true. That is why we have to value it. All the rest is imaginary.

SIMONE WEIL,
GRAVITY AND GRACE, 1947

That last day – a Friday afternoon at the beginning of October – I was waiting for the guitarist and the composer down by the canal, by the gravel track between the police station and the water. I stood there, thinking about the wax plants, whose whitish-pink and perfumed petals had opened overnight, and about some of the lessons I felt I might take away from that morning's practice of a Scelsi piece, which had been as focused as it was fruitful. And just as I was unsuccessfully trying to remember the name of an Italian philosopher who'd written a long and exceptionally deep and incisive essay on Scelsi's work and importance, a guy came up and asked if I could spare any change for the homeless. I felt about in my right pocket and found a twenty-krona note, scrunched up, irregularly folded, which I gave to him. He took it without a word and stuffed it in the pocket of his black jacket, whose fur-edged hood was pulled up, hiding large parts of his head. I was smoking and I could see that he was looking at the cigarette, following it with his eyes. I saw him but I didn't offer him one. I looked back at him, looked him straight in the eye and I wasn't afraid. He was a young guy, really thin, frail, I thought, if he tries anything I'll knock him down no problem. Even if he has a knife or a

gun. He was still looking at the cigarette as I brought it to my lips. I took a drag, and then let my hand drift from the lower part of my face down to my stomach, approximately level with my navel, and I saw his eyes follow the movement. I exhaled. Smoke and ember, paper and tobacco. I could have offered him a cigarette, but I didn't think of it. He could have asked, but he didn't. And I saw he was looking at my bike, which was leant against the wooden bench behind me, or perhaps it was a utility box. Then he said he'd been beaten up in the night, the previous night. He said: I don't know where I'm going to sleep and I got beaten up yesterday. He said someone had hit him in the ribs and the face. I looked again and now I saw it, a bruise and a little graze on his left cheek, by his cheekbone. I asked him: who beat you up? He said something I didn't understand. He said a name. His tongue moved in his mouth. I asked why and he said something about them *getting junked too much*. He said: he's a whore. Those words made me flinch a little, as though their aggression was too intimate, and all at once I thought of Robert, a childhood friend I'd recently bumped into, on a sunny day, down by the sea, down by Limhamn Fields, before a five-a-side match. We hadn't seen each other for years. He was big and well built now, no longer the gangly teenager I remembered, and he told me in a neutral tone, with no shame or swagger, that he'd been inside, that he'd stabbed a guy with a screwdriver when he was interrupted doing a robbery. He did a few years, got out and got a job at some factory making optical equipment or whatever. He said it was cool now, it was good to have a job. I told him briefly what I'd been doing the last few years. I mentioned the adult education classes, the

Academy of Music and my life as a freelance musician. It's cool, I said, adding that I guessed it must be nice to have a permanent job. He replied that it wasn't permanent. He was on a zero-hours contract. But there's stuff to do, he said. Then he asked if I went to Prague much. I said: no, it's been a few years. He said: fucking nice whores in Prague. I didn't reply. Followed the freshly chalked touchline with my gaze, over to the corner flag, the little orange triangle in the high wind. When I looked back at him he'd also turned away. I don't know what happened. I think we shook hands and said: well, take it easy, bro, look after yourself. We went our separate ways. The wind blew up great clouds from the dry gravel pitches. I looked after him, saw his shoulder blades and the muscles on his back and thought, I have to tell someone about this, but I never have, not even the guitarist or the composer. I stood looking after him and suddenly remembered how he'd helped me once during a fight on one of the estates. I was fighting Carlos, I think about his girl Victoria, she was standing on one side, flattered I think – I saw her one night years later when I was buying a burger at the kiosk on Möllevångstorget, she was working there, making fries in her Sibylla uniform, pretending she hadn't recognised me – and I had Carlos in some kind of grip so he couldn't breathe, and his top was pulled up, exposing the bottom of his back, and then Robi ran up with a lighter and some kind of spray can, like deodorant or something, and set light to the gas and burned Carlos on the back. Only for three or four seconds, but he yelled and I let him go and he backed away and stood against the brick wall and we could tell from the look of him that he'd lost, that he was scared and about to give up. But the thing was

that Carlos was my friend. He was a hard little Chilean. He was smart, a maths geek. He lived with his grandparents, I think because his dad was a user and a drinker – a few times, years later, I thought I saw the dad, sitting on the benches by Värnhemstorget, and every time I had to stifle an impulse to go up and ask what had happened to Carlos, his little Carlito, my friend – and I don't know what was up with his mum. She was Swedish I think, I'm not sure I ever met her. There was some custody thing I think, at least when he was younger, like in primary school. Once, when we were in year one or two, a car came into the turning area by the supermarket, there by the school, what was it, Snödroppsgatan maybe, and someone jumped out and dragged Carlos into the car, right in the middle of break while we were playing our games, playing marbles or whatever, and we thought it was pretty weird that someone could just rock up from nowhere and drag a kid into a car like that, it felt like something out of a film, not reality. But we'd seen it happen. What did it mean? I don't really know what we decided. Several days later Carlos was back, peddling some lie no one believed, and then we never talked about it again. Homes were generally very simple. The houses were usually built of mud or plastered, often with just one room. The houses mostly had flat roofs, where the family could rest, sleep and work. The roofs were made of brushwood, mud and earth. They had to be flattened out after heavy rainfall. Years later I heard he'd been into drugs and hanging out with little kids, getting them to run errands for him so he wouldn't go down, probably, but someone at the school told the kids they shouldn't hang out with him, and then he went to the school and

threatened the teachers. I dunno. What can I say? It felt so ridiculous. This thing with the gaze. Or, I dunno, these fantasies, and this thing of not being the first to look away, you know. And if you are it doesn't feel good. What can I say? There's nothing weird about it, actually, even though you might think there is. Me and Robert, who was half Polish, used to hang out with a Polish gypsy called Tony, we called him Montana, yeah, and he went around wearing a suit and you know like gold chains and jewellery and all that shit, he used to have 100-krona notes tucked into the plastic wrapper on his cigarette packets, playin gangsta, as we used to say, and one time I met him by the school – he liked me, you know, I don't know why, maybe because we spoke Polish sometimes and he was too young to understand it didn't mean anything, you know, that the Poles hated him just as much as the Swedes, I dunno – but anyway I ran up to him and he was standing there with this bike and the chain had come off, one of those racing bikes from the eighties, so I said that's easy to fix, just turn it upside down and we'll fix it, but he said no, fuck it, you'll just get dirty, leave it, come on, come with me to my cousin Luciano's place in Kroksbäck, and we walked along and he said you're all right, you can share my fags as we go, and he pulled out a pack of Marlboros, then suddenly he got mad as hell and said he'd lost a 100-krona note he'd had in there, and as we walked along this guy came past, we didn't know him but I'd seen him at school, was in year nine, geeky, Swedish, and as he passes us, Tony says like, hey fix my bike, and the guy says I can't, I don't know how to do it, and Tony says what, what do you mean you don't know how, just put the fucking chain back on man, it's easy,

you'll ace it, and the guy, scared out of his wits, is still like, but, but, but I don't know and shit and Tony jumps up and does a roundhouse kick on his head, hits like, the cheek, not really hard, no blood or nothing, but still, I was a bit surprised, and the guy just gets down on his knees, hands shaking, fiddles with the chain, gets his fingers totally black, I said take it easy Tony, but I was scared of him too, everyone was, and in the end the three of us did it together, Tony holding the bike, me turning the pedals and the guy, I think he might have been called Daniel, like the guy with the lion in the Bible or in that song by Elton John, the guy fiddled with the oily chain till it was in place, and he headed off and we smoked a fag and then he cycled off, Tony did, and I walked on and looked sort of lazily for the 100 he might have lost. That wasn't really my style, actually, jumping innocents like that – that's what I thought then in any case, but maybe that was exactly what I did, maybe I thought it was exciting, kind of fun, kind of entertaining, to see someone get jumped without doing anything myself, I don't know – but I liked Tony all the same, there was some kind of bond there, and one time he helped me when I got in a fight with a guy from the fancy part of town, from Bellevue, some rich man's kid (I looked him up years later, by that point he was a pretty famous chef), who jumped in through the window during class, yeah, cos for some lessons I had to take the remedial classes, as they called them, for unruly students, we were in a smaller group and it was a bit quieter actually, but he climbed in and started picking on some little guy called Lars, he was really small for his age, used to take growth hormones and shit, and the other guy, the rich one, he was a year

or two older than us, so I got between them and gave it all that, then he got thrown out and then we bumped into one another again and fought for a bit, but some teachers broke it up, and then someone said we should meet by the hills at twelve, and we met there and had a fight, he chipped a bit off my left front tooth, I can still feel the unevenness with my tongue today, like twenty-five years later, and I guess I got in a few punches and a kick or two, enough for him to know it would cost him something to humiliate me, and in the end we got tired and the circle around us thinned out and we stopped fighting and it ended kind of undecided, but the thing was that Tony found out about it later, and a rumour went round that he was gonna kill the rich kid, and you know, everyone knew he was crazy, and we had another mate, Marcin, a Pole, he bumped into the rich kid in a car park, there was a fight, nothing serious, but you know, Marcin was from Rosengård and had a load of friends there, and Tony knew all the gypsies, as we used to say – so all these rumours spread and in the end the rich kid got well freaked out, or else someone snitched, cos in the end the teachers called me and the rich kid in for some kind of peace negotiation, though it was nothing to do with me any more, but now there we were, and we were meant to apologise and shake hands and shit, and I can't remember what they threatened but I shook his hand and he shook mine and I asked Marcin and Tony to back off and they did, and then he became a chef as I said, pretty famous I think, but still a piece of work, you know, I remember he lived up in the villas, drove around on his brand-new fucking MT5, while me and Rodrigo shared a stolen fucking Puch Maxi with a broken front wheel, we

nicked it off Hamza who'd nicked it off someone else of course – and it wasn't exactly risk-free, cos the thing was Hamza was totally wild, shot people in the eye with air guns and shit. What can I say? Homes were generally very simple. We used to sit, me and Carlos and the Kassem twins, Robi and a few others, in the stairwells and set light to plastic. Pots, plastic bags, whatever. I don't know why it fascinated us so much. Mostly we talked about the sound of the plastic dripping on the stone steps. Chop, chop, it went, and we called the whole game 'chop-chop'. I think the whole thing started when someone taught us how to make little smoke bombs from ping-pong balls and aluminium foil. You stole a ping-pong ball and some aluminium foil, wrapped the ball in the foil, it had to be smooth, no wrinkles, and then you set fire to it, the foil would burn, the ball would start burning slowly, start giving off a lot of smoke. The smoke made your eyes itch. The houses were normally divided into two sections, one for the humans and one for their animals. The humans lived in a somewhat raised section with a floor of flattened earth. The windows were small and had no glass, and small oil lamps provided light. A peasant farmer's family would have had no furniture, aside from a few rough skins that were rolled out for sleeping on. The woman of the house was responsible for household work – preparing food, cleaning, spinning, weaving and sewing. She also helped out in the fields and the vineyards at times, and she taught the children when they were young. Generally, they ate two meals a day – a light breakfast of bread, fruit and cheese, and an evening meal consisting of meat, vegetables and wine. And so the years passed. He mumbled something about drugs. I asked which drugs and he said:

too much. He said: benzos, speed, horse. Too much. Grain harvest, linen harvest. The early figs ripen. I don't know where I'm going to sleep tonight. Grape harvest. How old are you? Olive harvest. Twenty-four. He inhales. Summer figs, dates. Go now. We'll pray for you. Winter figs, ploughing. Sowing. Lemon harvest. Yet another year has passed. And he, like an idiot, said it was no good. He said: brah, you know . . . it's no good. And I kind of nodded and shook my head all at once, because I knew and didn't know, saying: I know, bro. And then I left. And everything played on in my head. And he, like an idiot, said: it's no good, the life you're living, it's not good, man, you're young and that, and I replied: I know, man, I'm not stupid, and he, like a big brother or maybe a father, no, not a father, then he would have hit me, that's what I was thinking, beaten a little sense into me, as they say, like a real father, but no, and again he said it was no good, he said he'd also *been into that kind of thing*, sounded like a real idiot, but he'd quit, was totally *clean*, totally *squeaky*, and I looked at him, as I would at a brother or something, I swear, and he said: I've got out of selling, got off road, *yani*, I swear, and I said, sort of looked up to him and replied: got off everything, have you? Walking defeated and dirty and deathlike along the edge of the path in a black jacket, hood pulled up. Chapped skin and damp, smoke-infused clothes propping up head and face. Walking, fiddling with a lighter. I replied: yeah, bro, I have kids now, family and a job now, have to take it easy now, and you know . . . it's no good. And then a few years passed and then I went by again and then he looked at me and said: *I'm ashamed of you*, and then *shit you're an embarrassment, man*. I left. And everything played on in my mind, the whole night,

whole nights. Then the guitarist came and the composer, they were late and I could see the guitarist had been stressing and he apologised and I said no big deal, and the composer said she thought we still had plenty of time, and we started walking and I was about to say something about the junkie when the guitarist said: do you remember?