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FROM POLAND

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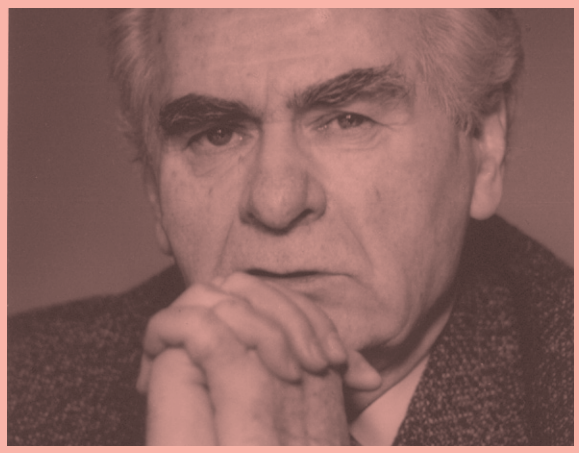
WIESŁAW MYŚLIWSKI

THE FINAL DEAL



Wiesław Myśliwski *(born 1932) is a novelist and playwright, winner of many Polish and foreign literary awards (including Polish prizes the Nike and the Gdynia, the American Best Translated Book Award and the French Grand Prix Littéraire de St. Emilion). He rarely publishes, but each new book is a major literary event.*

In *The Final Deal*, Myśliwski once again puts his favourite format to use – the monologue of a nameless central character extended into a full-length novel, which he narrates in his declining years as an attempt to take stock of his life. His rambling account is intersected by all sorts of reminiscences (scenes and images from the past), which appear as digressions and with no respect for chronology, usually dramatised and fitted with dialogue. A new feature is the presence of a love theme, because the monologue is supplemented by letters written to the main character for several decades by his girlfriend from school, Maria. The odd thing is that he has never once replied, even though the letters are full of ardent confessions and declarations of undying love for him. As we read on, we discover that his cruelty towards Maria has a deeper motive: he is obsessed with the idea of freedom. Again and again he has quite consciously changed profession and place of residence; as he has always chosen to live in rented rooms, he has never had a home of his own or even any furniture. He has never been in a relationship that lasted more than a few months or, a couple of times, a few years. He admits that he has "voluntarily disinherited" himself of just about everything, and then he asks: "In the name of what? Freedom? Rubbish. Unless freedom in the form of constantly running away from myself". Of course the cruellest of his rapid exits was when he ran away from Maria, and the stupidest was from painting, from his own talent. He had all the makings of a first-rate painter, but he dropped out of the academy and took up professional tailoring instead. This choice – like everything in his life – was random and didn't last. But is this the story of the unsuccessful life of an unfortunate man? Not necessarily. What exactly does a successful or unsuccessful life mean? What in fact is life? Here we find plenty of questions of this kind – fundamental, ultimate ones, of an almost philosophical cut. However grandiloquent it may sound, Myśliwski tries to fathom the meaning of existence and the mystery of life, without offering any solutions or unambiguous answers along the way.

It is worth commenting on the novel's title. The central character is a born card-player, always happy to play poker with Mateja the cobbler, but he plays his most significant game at... the cemetery, against – and there is no other way to understand this – the cobbler's ghost. To some extent Myśliwski invalidates the ominous word "final" in the title, which is fully confirmed in the last scene of the book. Thus in her final letter, Maria – now old and tired of life – informs our hero of her plan to commit suicide. But this farewell letter was by no means the very last, and not because Maria abandoned this plan. It is easy to guess where it was sent from. It would be hard to imagine a finer coda to the heartbreaking love song which Myśliwski sings in *The Final Deal*: the unfulfilled lovers will come together in the world beyond, in incomparably more pleasant circumstances – in other words, where there is no passage of time, and where the concepts of youth and beauty no longer apply.

Dariusz Nowacki
Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

WIESŁAW MYŚLIWSKI
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ON THE OTHER

THE FINAL DEAL

side of the lake I could see a building, a resort or guest house. It looked a lot bigger than ours, but even in full sunlight you couldn't make out much more than the fact it was there. Ours wasn't that big, modest you might say, but the ad in the paper had claimed it was the best place to unwind, deep in the woods. I figured there wouldn't be many guests, because who goes on vacation at that time of year, when the trees have lost almost all of their leaves, and there's starting to be a chill in the early morning.

Sure enough, aside from me the only person there was the aforementioned Mr. Dionizy. If it hadn't been for the owner and her son, who came by two or three times a week because he lived elsewhere, the place would have seemed completely deserted. I was the only person upstairs; Mr. Dionizy lived on the ground floor, since he had trouble walking. He leaned heavily on a cane, as if every step was painful. I don't believe he ever went on walks. In any case I never saw him out, not just in the morning, but in the afternoon or evening either. Apparently he'd brought an entire carload of books with him. The owner's son, who delivered supplies for the guest house and did odd jobs around the place – and now, in the fall, also raked the leaves – needed more than one trip just to bring the books in. Plus, he found himself with the additional task of bringing Mr. Dionizy an entire week's worth of newspapers and magazines every Saturday evening.

I wondered when he ever got any writing done, if he read all of that stuff. Every now and then he'd offer me some newspaper or magazine in which he reckoned there was something of interest. I said thanks but no thanks, normally I'd be glad to look at it but I had also come there to work and there wasn't time for reading. Also, whenever I would head out for a stroll or to walk the dog, I heard the radio playing in his room. He must have been a bit hard of hearing, or maybe he liked to have it turned up so he wouldn't miss anything. There are people who can't stand silence, they lose themselves in it like in mist. Or maybe for them silence amounts to the same thing as loneliness.

Even after I'd gotten a ways from the guest house I could still hear the radio behind me. Then in the evenings, once the TV news programs began, he'd always sit in front of the television in the dining room. He never missed a day, and there were times he'd watch till late at night. Not just the news, but panel discussions, press conferences, commentaries, interviews; he'd change the channel and sometimes turn up the volume so loud I could hear it through my door on the second floor. True, he was pleased when I showed up; he hobbled out with his cane and greeted me warmly, as if we'd met many times in that guest house.

"At last there'll be someone to talk to. Welcome, my dear sir."

The very next day at dinner, he was eating his main course when I came down to the dining room, and he grabbed his knife, fork and plate and moved over to my table.

"I hope you don't mind, it's not nice eating alone. Are you here for long?"

The next day he gave me his business card.

"I wrote my cell number on there also, I only give it out to people I trust. If you're ever in town I'd love to have you over. Please just call ahead and let me know."

I glanced at the card. Dionizy Orzelewski, nothing else. And the address.

"Thank you," I said. "I'll be sure to take you up on that if I ever pass through." I introduced myself in return. I stuck his card in the breast pocket of my jacket. Later, when I got back home, I copied it out into my address book, though I wondered why. I mean, even if I'd visited the town where he lived I wouldn't have called. And I had no intention of going back to the guest house. For some reason I didn't find the card in my address book. Maybe it got stuck under another card. Cards stick to each other like that when they haven't been looked at in a long time.

A few days later he started telling me what he'd been reading about in the papers, then what he'd heard on the radio, then after that what he'd seen on TV the previous evening. I pretended to listen, but my mind was elsewhere: some time ago I learned how to make it seem like I was listening to people when I wasn't. On top of everything else his mouth was full, so the words were indistinct, like they were being chewed up along with the food, and you could hardly understand any of them. Then one day after that, apparently convinced he could trust me, he got all heated up like he was actually taking part in one of the debates or discussions he'd watched the night before on the television, his raised voice almost seemed filled with rage, he was mocking, derisive, he exploded in sarcastic laughter, he flung insults about, but I couldn't figure out whom it was he was insulting.

"They've no idea what they're doing, the idiots. What a bunch of ignoramuses!" He clattered his fork against his plate, but all I understood was that there were some idiots or ignoramuses.

About halfway through my stay I was so sick of the man I began to wonder how I could get free of him. I started coming down earlier to the dining room for meals, but that didn't work. Then I began arriving later, but that did no good either. Some instinct led him to come early or late just like me. I even considered cutting my time there short; if I was going to have to listen to him at every mealtime for the rest of my stay, there'd be no unwinding, and unwinding was the whole point of being there.

At some point he joined me at my table again at dinnertime. I could tell he was worked up, because before he'd even settled in his chair (he had trouble sitting because of whatever was wrong with his leg), he tossed out a question:

"What do you think about all that's been going on?"

"What's been going on?" I responded with a seemingly innocent question, to try and calm him down a bit.

"What do you mean?" he snorted. "Don't you read the papers, listen to the radio, watch TV? History's going on, before our eyes." He fixed me with an expectant stare.

Coolly, as if we hadn't been talking at all, I cut off a piece of steak, put it in my mouth, chewed it, swallowed, and only then replied:

"History's always going on before our eyes, it's just that those eyes aren't always willing to be ours."

"I don't understand."

"You don't need to."

"Perhaps I'd like to, though. Understanding isn't the same as agreeing. Besides, it depends who you're agreeing with."

"In that case let me tell you something someone once said about history: 'What do I care about history. My world is the first and only one.'"

"Who was that?" he snapped, making no attempt to conceal his annoyance.

"You ought to know him."

"I don't think so. I don't spend time with idiots."

"He wasn't an idiot, he was a philosopher."

"A philosopher?" He waved his fork dismissively, then tugged the chunk of meat that was on it off with his teeth. As he chewed, he said: "You think a philosopher can't be an idiot?"

"In that case, it may mean more to you that he was an officer, because he was both. And not just any officer, he served well, he was brave, he was decorated for fortitude and valor."

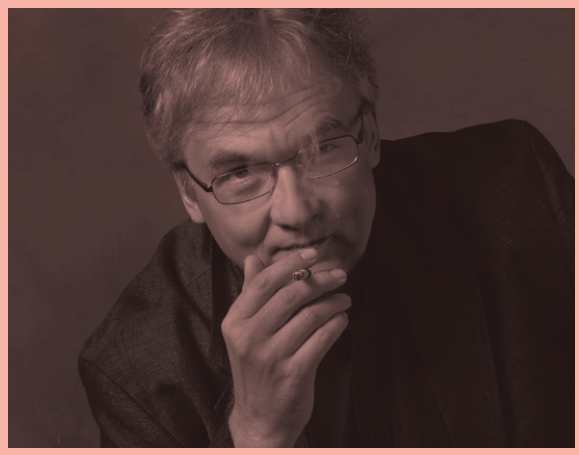
"A philosopher and an officer?" He paused in his eating for a moment as if he were mulling something over. I thought the thing about the officer had convinced him, but he muttered contemptuously: "Big deal."

From that time on he didn't join me again at my table. He never even exchanged a word about the weather whenever we'd run into one another as I was coming back from my walk.

Translated by Bill Johnston

JERZY PILCH

MANY DEVILS



Jerzy Pilch *(born 1952) is one of Poland's most outstanding and widely-read authors. He has written nineteen books, and his work has been translated into seventeen languages. He has been nominated for the Nike Award seven times, winning it in 2001 for his novel The Mighty Angel. Many Devils is his first novel for five years.*

Jerzy Pilch's new novel, which has been enthusiastically received by the critics, takes up two major themes which are unreservedly at the heart of literature – love and death, ecstasy and nonentity. Here gloomy pessimism alternates with the orgiastic rhythm of the pleasure of story-telling, delight with mockery, belief with disbelief. The novel depicts the life of the Polish Lutherans in a small place called Sigła, at some point in the 1960s. The local and personal character of it are familiar to Pilch's readers, because Sigła is none other than his home town of Wisła, which is not only his birth place, but almost his entire world. The symbolism of *Many Devils* comes from Protestant theology, and the way the book is constructed makes reference to literary myth – lined with nonentity and exhaustion, but stunning for its evocative images, tense plot, and well-paced narrative.

Life in Sigła is seemingly cold – because Protestants are economical with the firewood – and gloomy, because they sit in rooms without enough lighting. There are passions and addictions throbbing away here, but order prevails. The world can be heartbreakingly beautiful, on mornings when the grass steams in the October sunshine, or "the frost takes grip like a crystal vice", or else it can be extremely nasty. "Man is born at the bottom of a terrible abyss, lives for God knows what reason, and dies in torments". Death, under various guises, attracts, horrifies, pesters and haunts the main characters and the narrator, an almost transparent figure, very closely related to the author. Childhood fears are more familiar with death than with the real world. "The hallway is like gloomy, ice-cold delirium. They'll die, they'll die, they'll die. Under a ceiling coated in brown rime a weak light-bulb burns, as someone steals across the garden". The disappearance and search for one of the Reverend Mrak's beautiful daughters makes *Many Devils* a bit like a crime story. But only ostensibly, as its essence is a mystery, not a riddle. Indeed, "after a few years' thought" the clairvoyant postman points out the spot where "encrusted with never melting brown-and-green ice floes lay the dark cherry-red – so dark as to be almost black – pyjamas of the younger Miss Mrak". But if it shows up at all, the alleged corpse will only appear in flashes excluded from the main story. As Pilch himself implies, it is more like the sort of disappearance that features in Peter Weir's film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* – the girl remains the spirit of the story, a virginal angel shrouded in dense eroticism, like Ophelia, a figure representing the loss of an opportunity for love to be fulfilled. The mystery of Ola's fate acts as bait for the reader, as her body becomes an ever more elusive object of desire, not just male, but also motherly and sisterly. The real horror is happening somewhere lower down, in people's homes, in everyday life assiduously changed into hell. The special devilishness of sheer existence in a religious community is a paradox that typifies the Protestant characters familiar to us from Pilch's autobiographical fiction. But *Many Devils* is not a gloomy horror story. It is a dense, narcotic tale about the devils of literature and the inevitability of dying.

Kazimiera Szczuka

JERZY PILCH
„WIELE DEMONÓW"
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In the middle

MANY DEVILS

of the last century there was a postman called Fryderyk Moitschek working at the Sigła post office who knew the secret of human life, knew where we are heading and what will happen after death. Only a handful of people believed in him, although everything he proclaimed, or rather read out of a thick ring binder, came true to the letter.

People died, fell sick and got well again according to his predictions, tomorrow's weather was just as he had said it would be, and he accurately foretold foehn winds as stifling as the grave, floods that tore away bridges, overwhelming, oleaginous heatwaves and infinitely cold, snowy winters that came in from all directions.

He took a middling interest in football, and only once in a blue moon; it was all the harder to persuade him to predict the results, but once he did place a bet he was spot on: Real Madrid, Ruch Chorzów, FC Santos, Wisła Krakow – even our A-class eleven, altogether all the teams to which he turned his countenance always scored and always lost exactly as many goals as he wanted. It was a rare event, because he avoided situations in which his gift might not so much serve to make an easy profit, as generally be associated with any kind of shallow machinations. A shadow of surprise – one could sense that Fritz's divinity did not rely on the weekly miracle of winning the football pools, picking the right lottery numbers, or consistently avoiding losing raffle tickets, one could sense it, one could plainly sense it, and with all subtlety one would not insist. Do not tempt me, anti-Christ! Get away from me, Satan! "And when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from him for a season" (Luke, 4:13). Fritz was not a conjuror making a living out of breathtaking tricks. Fritz was a prophet, made of flesh and blood. Made of God's flesh and Christ's blood. His kingdom was not of this earth. He had plenty of cash, nobody knew where from, but definitely not fees for rendering prophetic services to humanity.

He predicted Zuzia Bujok's lethargy and her awakening from lethargy, Józek Lumentiger's abstinence and his abandonment of abstinence, Poland's communism and its emergence from communism. All, let it be understood, gratis; in the final instance not just gratis, but with a good deal of patriotic fervour.

It was like this always, and with everything: gratis, gratis and once again gratis. Never a penny for anything, though he often incurred costs himself, though he sacrificed any amount of time, though he risked his health, and thus his life too. Perhaps only the Lord God, the Spirit of literary fiction, or a small number of other transcendent beings know to what strains he subjected his body, and to

what injuries he subjected his unearthly, and thus especially fragile inner man.

It can't be said that he didn't treat his own folks seriously, helping and most lovingly caring for us with great devotion in whatever way he could, and not just being supportive in times of illness. Unfortunately he did not donate his entire strength, and all the ardent passion and skills of a talented healer to us alone. He served others, often complete strangers, not from Sigła, but from the world outside, with just the same, and sometimes – as one couldn't help noticing – perhaps even greater ardour, solving their problems, curing them of all manner of phobias, recovering their irretrievably lost items, warning them against specific dangers, recommending thorough domestic therapies and – to be blunt about it – overzealously, especially when dealing with the fair sex, extremely overzealously elaborating all sorts of important and unimportant details of the treatment point by point; he would predict a favourable, at last a favourable turn of fortune for them, of course he still foresaw some minor difficulties, but at once he advised on how to dispel them, shrewdly explaining the situation – all tip top stuff, but at what price? To say that he managed his nature, his form and his condition wastefully, is to say nothing; not just wasteful, but how frivolous, how irresponsibly self-sacrificing – for instance nobody ever saw Fritz eating… Nobody, not ever… Do you see? Nobody ever saw him eat, and yet he must have eaten something… No? He didn't eat? Did he live on air? The incidents and events came along in such rapid succession that there was no time for as much as a sandwich? Just a small apple on the run? But nobody ever saw that apple either! They just told stories about it. Were there tales and legends about Fritz's apple? Anecdotes? Yes there were, this, that, and the other too. There were hundreds of questions, though it was really just one question. So what about our saviour, our healer, has he eaten anything this morning? An apple for lunch. One apple. Small, rather than big. So does Fritz keep himself going all round the clock on a single apple? So it appears. One day he'll drop dead and it'll all be over. No more miracles, no more prophecies, no more prescriptions against suicidal thoughts. Fritz will never drop dead, at any rate he doesn't look like weakening. And that's the worst thing – it would be a thousand times better if his weaknesses, hardships, cravings and what have you came out onto the surface. Out in the open they may look ghastly, but they're not dangerous. Invisible, hidden deep in the heart and brain they're in danger of exploding. Indeed, Fritz was exploding, thanks to his own exploits.

From the Kubatschkes's house he drove out the ghost of a husband, pathologically jealous in life, and demonically jealous after death. For Doctor Nieobadany he predicted first four, and then, seeing what was in the wind, seven daughters. He cured Mr Ujma, manager of the pump room, of his penchant for men. He knocked the suicidal thoughts out of Emilka Morżolikówna's head. All that on a very empty stomach? He never felt hunger, because he had no appetite? His bland body was so crushed by the strength of his spirit that it did not even require basic rations? Taking a broader view, is it that digestive processes (not to mention excretion) do not befit true prophets? They do not. To tell the truth, not even the most refined corporeal or biological aspects befit them. Was Fritz a ghost? He never offered anyone his hand; the question spontaneously arises, whether anyone ever touched him? Surely the numerous women who used to visit him? You would be surprised, you sure would be surprised. And you definitely are going to be surprised, but just a little later on.

Apparently a good few years before the war and a good few dozen years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, he had new maps of Europe and Asia in his ring binder sketched with a copying pencil – those who saw them claimed that with the exception of East Prussia and Turkmenistan, it was all correct to the last millimetre.

Whether he ever resurrected the dead is not certain. He most certainly did revive Juda Tadeusz, the practically dead pet of the pastor's wife – the most intelligent of the three parish cats.

He removed painful swellings from the udders of Greta and Maryna, both cows belonging to Józef from Ubocz. Not such a big thing, perhaps, but Fritz did it from a distance.

He bellowed in a dreadful voice at the paralysed Alsatian dog, leader of Frau Scherschenick's pack: "Drop thy cane! Verily I say unto Thee: Drop thy cane!" – and frenzied by fear, the animal did not in truth drop its cane, because for the life of me it had never used one, but it stood up on all four paws. And that's not all – it roamed the earth, fit and able, for a good couple of years more! And whenever it saw Fritz, or merely scented him from afar, yet more healing powers plainly entered it, because with a healthy howl it would be off like a shot.

Yes indeed, even if he wasn't a one-hundred-percent miracle-worker, Fritz Moitschek had a gift. He would enter a house and infallibly sense idle motion in the electrical wires.

"There's a light on somewhere, Mr Homeowner!" he'd say, and unhurriedly take a look around. "There's a light on somewhere! Non-stop! Broad daylight, a long way to go until evening, but in your house at least one light bulb has been on since yesterday, or goodness knows when, Mr Homeowner!"

And every member of the household would leap to their feet and check the rooms to which the electricity extended, and every single time, be it in the cellar or in the attic, or in a cupboard locked and bolted since time immemorial, they'd find a dull yellow 40-watt bulb burning away in vain.

Fritz knew in advance who was going to get a parcel from America, whose child would get lost in woods while picking blueberries, who would steal whose cubic meter of planks and in which shed they'd hide them. He would infallibly point out the shelters on the edge of town where rash lovers would hole up, and the Austro-Hungarian bunkers where schoolboys inclined to commit offences would go and smoke their cigarettes.

Indeed there were those who claimed that Fritz figured out the mystery of the electricity by taking a discreet glance at the meter ticking over in the hall; that he knew about the parcels because he was a postman and sometimes even deliberately held on to them, just to have a chance to display his prophetic skills; that he wasn't the only one to sense which child was feather-brained, who had criminal tendencies, who was conspiring with whom and in what shelter they hid, not to mention where the young lads puffed away. There were more than a few sceptics and doubters; frankly, they were the decided majority. A majority's a majority, but a mystery is a mystery.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

IGNACY KARPOWICZ

NESSES

Ignacy Karpowicz *(born 1976), traveler and translator, is one of the leading authors of the younger generation. Since his debut in 2006, he has published four books, been nominated for the NIKE twice, and won the Polityka Passport Prize (in 2010).*

Ignacy Karpowicz, winner of the prestigious *Polityka* Passport Prize, is back with a fascinating new novel. *nesses* is a highly humorous tale about the need for close-ness and kind-ness, and perhaps, most importantly, about other-ness, which when laid out against this fabular landscape becomes ordinari-ness. Once again, this Polish writer demonstrates that he is constantly developing – each of his previous books was different; his warmly received debut *Uncool* is a grotesque joyride through Polish capitalism, *Gestures* an investigation of the difficult relationship between mother and son, and his much-lauded *Balladinas and Romances* an original approach to the presence of religion in today's world.

This time Karpowicz's protagonist is a collective one. He turns his curious gaze, so full of warmth, on the (not all bad) bourgeois, all fully fixated on their own, mostly romantic, problems. The characters in his books come from Poland's middle class and represent a wide spectrum of attitudes and views. They include Norbert, who, despite not expressing much sympathy for homosexuals in general, is himself engaged in an affair with the Vietnamese Kuan (who turns into famous drag queen Kim Lee in the evenings). Meanwhile he flirts with a female professor by the name of Ninel, who herself remains in a strange relationship with Szymon, husband to unstable Maya, the mother of a teenage son and sister of fervently Catholic Faustina. And a friend of Andrzej, who lives with the chaotic Krzyś... And so on. Summarizing Karpowicz's new novel makes it sound like an Almodovar film. Except that the Polish writer presents this diverse cast of colorful characters (whom he renders beautifully) in a manner devoid of madness. It's a harmonious, very funny story of everyday life that sometimes gets just a little bit out of control, and yet that disorder does not lead to high drama – in fact, what it leads to is the creation of a new, more satisfying (?) order.

Daily life stripped down to these essential "–nesses" might seem frightening in its messi-ness, but it ultimately isn't here. Karpowicz manages to defuse its provocative charge and put it all in order, and in writing a book that actively engages with the world, in creating a kind of ideal society – open to difference, tolerant, free of prejudices – what he's really doing is simply telling us the story of a couple of nice, somewhat lost people, a story characterized, all in all, by perfect ordinari-ness.

How could it be otherwise, since – as the author demonstrates – our lives, though to us seemingly the most important in the world, are actually component parts of millions of structures and systems much larger and more important than we are – which is precisely why that small-ness is the right scale for investigating this type of moral turmoil.

Patrycja Pustkowiak

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NESSES

“Maya,

you’re the most amazing person in the whole world.”

“Sorry, did you say something?”

Only then did Maya realize that her silent mantra had overflowed into sound. She blushed. It wasn’t talking to herself that she found embarrassing. Crazy people on public transportation blabbering on to God and sundry didn’t really bother her. But at least they had something to blabber about. It was their fellow passengers – the silent ones – who ought to feel embarrassed.

What Maya found embarrassing now was the contents of the words she had uttered. For safety reasons, and for the sake of her own dignity, she thought she ought to change mantras, say something less personal. She thought of phrases that were neutral vis-à-vis the ego, like “Please don’t push, sir,” and “Tickets, please.” She thought she would try out the first phrase, although she couldn’t imagine that it would be as reassuring as “Maya, you’re the most amazing person in the world.”

She had not murmured her new therapeutic phrase even twice when that other voice returned:

“I heard you quite distinctly. You were saying something.”

She surrendered. She glanced up now in search of the source of that irritating jabber. She wasn’t expecting anything in particular – perhaps if anything a transistor radio – but still, what she saw was something she *really* wasn’t expecting. Standing there before her was a broad-shouldered man around thirty years of age, with painstakingly gelled hair parted on the right, symmetrical facial features, a complexion free of any imperfection, wart, or pimple, smooth-shaven cheeks, an outline of facial hair as clear as the line taken by the Vatican on gender equality. Beneath his unbuttoned gray jacket he wore a perfectly white shirt. She didn’t check to see what his trousers looked like because she was afraid to glance down now – it would probably look like she was inspecting his crotch, like she numbered among the sexually ravenous, and even if it had in fact looked altogether otherwise, or like nothing at all, Maya had already gotten it into her head that it would look like that, hence she invested all of her willpower in keeping her neck straight.

Looking the stranger straight in the eye, she wanted to ask what kind of trousers he was wearing, given that for largely objective reasons entirely independent of her she was not able to determine this on her own. Fortunately, she managed to keep herself quiet. The man introduced himself, providing far too much information, in a fashion that was crisp and orderly, and to Maya’s tastes, exaggeratedly, irritatingly, precise. Here before her, she thought, was the Model Son of Terrific Parents.

Anxiety sent shivers down her spine: *this man* had been raised in a dysfunctional family in which every single morning his sadistic mother had arranged his hair, making him wear clothing straight out of her own nightmarish vision of the perfect child, approximately a century out of date. Meanwhile his father, Mr. Stick-Up-His-Ass, gave the same instructions every single morning: "Remember, Son, always look your interlocutor in the eyes when you are conversing."

Maya's imagination was racing. She pictured Monsieur Comme-il-faut at the table, finishing up his lunch; on a plate otherwise so clean it was as if it had never seen food in the first place, there remained a single pea. Any normal person would be there for fifteen minutes chasing that pea around with his fork, but not Mister Precision-Engineered. With a single terrifying gesture he took up his fork and impaled the single pea upon it. He lifted it to his mouth. Maya was more and more scared. It was now beyond a shadow of a doubt: here before her, standing face to face with her, was a deadly creature, a brunet barracuda. She had to dredge up some reassuring counter-image from her imagination. She thought of her son, his mohawk, his casual relationship with soap and water – but thinking of her son only made Maya feel worse. Now she became afraid that her beloved Bruno might someday meet this Beast in the snow-white collar and that he might come down with his disease, shave off his mohawk, and part his hair! Dear God, she thought, please, not Bruno!

"I should have taken a taxi."

"I'm sorry?"

"You always get such awful people on the bus."

"Are you referring to me, by any chance?"

"Soon they'll have stops on demand," she said, her voice shaking, nearly failing her. "I demand, sir, that you get off this bus."

He smiled. "I have a feeling," he said, "that my mother would take quite a liking to you."

"Oh, I suck at mothers. I fear I would not reciprocate your mother's feelings." She very nearly added, "After all, she did raise a *monster*," but she managed to stop herself just in time. This small victory – not always did Maya manage to refrain from saying what she didn't intend to say – comforted her. The bus was crowded, and she was in no danger – at worst she might catch the flu or some fungus from her fellow passengers; rape, however, could now be crossed off her list of high-probability threats. The situation was simply and uncomfortably as follows: she was speaking with a polite, astonishingly clean, high-quality man who had been assembled in a kind of hyperrealist manner.

"You don't have to get off at the next stop," she said in a conciliatory tone after a long pause. "You can wait till we get where you're going."

He lowered his head a little. He cleared his throat as though troubled.

"I'd really like to get to know you a little better. I have to say you've made quite an impression on me."

She now took another look at him. The fact that he was interested in her allowed Maya to evaluate him anew, with a little bit more sympathy, or at least a little less antipathy. She acknowledged now that he might be able to be sullied slightly, have his hair ruffled, spout two or three pimples on his cheeks, in which case he would be a horse of another color altogether. She might even be able to take him with her to the club. He was probably not a psychopath, just a person who was behind the times in conceptual, civilizational, and/or hygienic terms.

"During the November Uprising, which is clearly where you've just come from, did you get away with picking up young maidens on public transportation?"

While he strained to summon the right rejoinder, she imagined Mister I-Pee-Pure-Mountain-Spring-Water amidst a series of younger siblings. The whole litter at the table, attacking that pea with their forks in unison, on command. The scene struck Maya as so touchingly comic that she didn't even try to hide her smile.

"I can't quite," he confessed finally, gravely, "come up with a witty retort."

"It's the opposite for me," said Maya. "Witty retorts occur to me all the time. But what difference does that make if I couldn't care less about whatever it is I'm retorting to?"

"Could I ask you to dinner?"

Maya was more and more interested now in the stranger, particularly his impeccable appearance. She felt simultaneously like an archaeologist, a government health inspector, and a biologist who has just discovered an extraterrestrial life form. She practically felt like the inventor of Teflon. The inventor of the purest substance on earth; well, maybe *ex aequo* with the communion wafer.

"Are you sweating?" she asked.

"Hmm. Yes, now, for example, my hands are sweating due to nervousness. My palms, actually."

"Do you…"

"I'll answer all of your questions on condition that we go out one night."

"Okay. In a well-lit, public place. Do you ever get a runny nose? You know… snot?"

"This is where I get off," he said. "The next stop. Please give me your number."

Maya dictated her number. He extracted a business card from a very slender leather billfold.

"I'll call you tomorrow. The card is just in case," he said. "Goodbye."

He got off; she did not watch. She didn't know what would be worse: if he stood and watched her, or if he just turned around and marched off. Maya didn't like looking when she didn't know what she wanted to see. The gaze that was not determined in advance was an extremely risky one, and she had no desire to come down with conjunctivitis at present.

Her head was all abuzz – not with delicate little champagne bubbles, but with something stronger, clearly hydraulic, like the noises of a jacuzzi. Blub-blub. Blub-blub. Must urgently get rid of the plumber, she thought, stuck inside my skull.

One minute the conversation on the bus seemed to her to have been a completely unreliable product of her antidepressants, and the next minute something pathetic, as though she were trying to impersonate the adolescent girl she had been ages ago. She replayed it over and over again in her head, always starting out with that awkward prologue ("Maya, you're the most amazing person in the whole world"), and each time it all sounded more and more desperately pretentious. People who are truly intelligent and well-brought-up shouldn't say things that directly express their intelligence and excellent upbringing. Intelligent, well-mannered people would choose a polite topic. The weather. Raising the retirement age. The train wreck. The number of victims.

Translated by Jennifer Croft

JUSTYNA BARGIELSKA

LITTLE FOXES

Justyna Bargielska *(born 1977) is a poet whose first published collection was entitled Dating Sessions (2003). This was followed in 2005 by China Shipping, and then in 2009 by Two Fiats, which won the Gdynia Literary Prize. She also won the third Rainer Maria Rilke poetry competition in 2001, and a special prize in the Jacek Bierezin poetry contest (2002). Her poems have been translated into Slovene and English. Her first work in prose, Stillbirthlets (2010), was nominated in 2011 for the Polityka Passport Award, the Nike Literary Prize and the Gdynia Literary Prize.*

In *The Little Foxes*, the distinct voice of a young woman reconstructs stories – her own or real-life ones she has overheard – about her children, husband, dog, mother, sister and neighbours. About the housing estate where she lives, next to a forest. About cleaning her flat, about rhythms heard in the metro and sung at home by her daughter, about the local bus. But there is something unusual lurking in all of this domestic familiarity. The fairytale romance, the world's most popular kind of fiction for women, here gains a multi-dimensional, ironic perspective. "Hey girls, have you ever had a romance with a gangster from the woods? Well, girls, I have." This how *The Little Foxes* starts. The title is as ambiguous as it is obvious. It is the biblical little foxes, the minor sins – in this case the sins of housewives – that ruin the Lord's vineyard. How desirable it is to be a little fox and to run through the woods! Spun from the fabric of dreams, memories and fantasies, fairytales about a knife-wielding lover ultimately come at a price. The everyday nature of family life, the stuff it is made of, undergoes gentle erosion, because everything that makes the world enchanted – poetry, once even religion – has now moved outside the home, into the woods. Yet deep insight into the dynamics of this process is not exactly the same as a sense of guilt. "I don't give a f...", this poet, who very rarely uses vulgar language, can write. The meaning of this paraphrase is simple. For a woman, freedom and creative powers are rare and priceless values which she should protect with her own body.

Bargielska's poetic chatter has now become split between two characters, documenting life's everyday but no less dramatic experiences. Agnieszka, the "academic activist", one of the "ladies from the foundation", is an independent, single girl, whose activities include running a writing course at the neighbourhood cultural centre. Literary creativity appears as a limitless, collective project, questioning the unambiguous understanding of authorship. In this way Bargielska herself, casually weaving various women's names into the text, declares that *The Little Foxes* is something that belongs to her, but does not originate from her alone. In this feminine, by definition somewhat obscene chatter-writing, showing how suffering and desire burst onto the stage of everyday life, words, thoughts, places and experiences turn out to be shared. Agnieszka's story is surprisingly closely interwoven with the micro-perspective of another character, a housewife and mother, who luckily or unluckily in actual reality is a sensitive intellectual. And she is capable of writing, if only in the evenings, "to the local papers". Both women are evidently sleeping with the same intoxicating woodland bandit.

Stillbirthlets, Bargielska's previous book, is steeped in a tone of mourning. It is profound but problematic, because the author created a record of the experience of miscarriage, the loss of someone who has never existed in the actual world. The medical experience took on a religious rhythm and depiction, and the world was steeped in the dark glow of funeral rites. *The Little Foxes* is completely different. Returning to the realm of life means entering a zone of heightened threat, illegal sexual passions and fantasies about running away from home, if only drifting off down the drainpipes. But, as you can imagine, there isn't going to be any great catastrophe here. Even though there is a fantasy in which the children are put to sleep during an extended suicide attempt, they eventually wake up. And their mother is revived. The different sides of the author's personality join together, and both of the knifeman's lovers return to the housing block together, carrying the children. The plot of these tales, although significant and absorbing, is in some way conventional. The most important thing is the author's ability to convert everything into the dense substance of literature; concise, ironic, sometimes a bit surreal, but always touching on the beauty and the danger lurking in the shapelessness of existence.

Kazimiera Szczuka

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LITTLE FOXES

Hey girls,

have you ever had a romance with a gangster from the woods?

Well, girls, I have.

But today it's Tuesday, before anything ever happened, and I'm still manager of the feminist studio, a researcher as well as a volunteer at the foundation, an activist. A researcher-cum-activist. From the bus that has stopped at the traffic lights I watch two boys with backpacks who are carving the ice out of a puddle. They've got big chunks of it in their hands. The lights change, the bus drives off, and I'm wondering what they wanted all that ice for; the only explanation that comes to mind is that they're going to throw it at passing cars. I go back to the book I'm reading, but I shouldn't read on the bus, because I get very upset by what I'm reading. What upsets me the most is literary fiction about women, but some academic books also have an emotional effect on me.

I feel relieved that my bus has moved off before those boys started throwing ice at the passing cars. It may be that I should take up a sport. I've noticed that I use psychosomatic terms to describe my condition after the more controversial reading: I say that my calves are quivering, or my hands, or my entire critical self was set quivering in general. After reading I often have to go over to a special shelf and read something else, something familiar and obvious, to calm me down. Most readily Darwin. Perhaps I just need exercise.

In fact I like fresh air. It helps get parts of my brain going that haven't been very fit until now. One time I was on holiday in the countryside, and one day, out of the blue, I suddenly thought of the perfect riposte to the statement made by the lady from the ministry at a meeting a year earlier, who said she would inform us of the date for the next meeting soon, without any option to negotiate, because the ladies from the foundation have plenty of time. I should have told her that the ladies from the foundation donate their spare time free of charge, in order to fix things that fat parasites like her have messed up during their hours of employment for public money! Except I don't know whether I'd have said it with an exclamation mark or not. Altogether, it's a good thing that cutting retort didn't occur to me right then, on the spot, because even if it had, I might have spoiled the effect by wondering about the exclamation mark.

For the good of these parts of the brain I recently got myself a dog. He's a Westie. His white fur doesn't cause allergies. Twice a day I take him out onto the grass behind my housing estate, and once a day we go to the woods across the street. He's quite hard to see against the snow.

And one day I'm in the woods with my Westie, and there's a man coming towards me from about a hundred metres away. He's tall, with curly, greying hair, in track suit bottoms, a flannel shirt and a coat down to his knees, unbuttoned.

"Some people are proper scum!" he cries.

He comes nearer, says hello, and explains that he was talking about whoever has been dumping their rubbish in the woods. The rubbish is all too easy to see against the snow.

"There are two more computer monitors lying over there," I say.

The man's dog runs up, and the man asks if our dogs can play together. They can, although his little dog is rather lethargic, and all my Westie can do is jump around him a bit.

"We're in mourning," the man explains. "He had a lady friend, but she had to be put down because she had cancer. I did a bad thing – I buried her with him watching. He didn't get the idea that it was a burial, the last rites and all that. After all, he's a dog, he can't be expected to understand."

About a hundred metres further into the woods I had seen a portrait photo of a bulldog lying on the snow. The glass was cracked, maybe by the cold. I guess there's a sort of pet cemetery there – I'd seen cut flowers there before the winter. Finally my Westie gives up – the man in the unbuttoned coat's dog wants to be on its own.

For the next few days I take my Westie to the meadow on the other side of the estate. Above the meadow the high-tension, low-slung wires never stop buzzing. I like their buzz, because thanks to it I've got a meadow next door, rather than another housing estate. Then I go back to the woods.

Once while I was out on my walk I took a photograph of something I couldn't understand. I copied it onto the computer and blew it up, but I still didn't know what that set-up was for. There were four trees growing in roughly a square which had small bags hung on them from a cord, filled with something that had frozen solid and looked hard even in the photos. A large stone had been placed in the middle, not a huge boulder, just a rock big enough to look as if it had been brought here on purpose, and hadn't just been found by chance in the woods. Next to the stone there was a tin box, cut out so that its base had been made into a grip and its sides into two slanting blades.

Well, I have no idea.

Then I met the man in the unbuttoned coat. He probably didn't recognize me, because I was wrapped in a scarf almost up to my eyebrows, it was so cold. But I think he recognized me by my Westie.

"Shall I show you something?" he asked.

We went deep into the woods, down towards the one-family housing development on the other side. He showed me something a bit like the remains of a shack.

"This is where Pajda lived," he said. "With his concubine."

I'd read something about it.

"The knife man, Miss. He set up this shack for himself – it's actually a tent, which he covered with branches, as a shelter. Camouflage. He lived here all summer, with his concubine and two children."

"Two children as well?"

"And the pregnant concubine."

Indeed I had read something about it. Our housing estate doesn't get the local paper, but the neighbouring one-family housing development does – they hang up the *Echo* on the gates in special plastic covers with flaps, but they don't distribute it to our house. After all, who would stuff it in all three hundred letterboxes, and what for, when weekend in, weekend out, at least half of our lot goes off to their real homes, far beyond Warsaw, and are only interested in digesting the local news there? And in paying the taxes there, too. So I once bought myself a copy of the *Echo* at a shop.

What a lot of mischief that Pajda had got up to! In the local bus, last summer, coming back from the lake one July evening, he'd attacked the driver. The bus had stopped at the end of the line, but Pajda and his pal wanted to have a drink and then get going. The driver asked them to get off the bus, because there was a rule that said you have to get out at the terminus. Then Pajda took out a knife and stabbed the driver, who ended up in hospital, and Pajda and his pal earned themselves an arrest warrant.

"Oh look, here," said the man in the unbuttoned coat. "Here's where he had his tent."

All that was left of the tent was its organic cover: a few bald branches fixed to a beam laid across two neighbouring trees.

"They caught him in this tent. The concubine, her two children, a one-year-old and a three-year-old, and that pregnancy, I don't know how to count that. Mobile phones, jewellery, DVDs."

"DVDs?"

"Unfortunately. They lived here all summer."

It occurred to me that next time I should ask the man in the unbuttoned coat whether he was the man from the notice. There's a notice up in our stairwell about someone who used to live with us, and then went missing, but I can't really tell from the photo, or rather the photocopy of a photo, what that man was meant to look like. Anyway, I'm very bad at recognizing faces, I prefer to just ask if someone is someone, or someone else, or not.

I think about Pajda mainly when I'm in the shower. My estate has defective central heating, or at least that's what I reckon. But it may be that my downstairs neighbours just wash less often. Whenever I take a shower, I have to wait about two minutes before the sort of water I want comes out of the tap – in other words, warm. First cold water comes out, then boiling hot and cold by turns, and finally, after some time, the temperature stabilizes and I can wash. Either way, I find it very annoying, and right then I usually think about Pajda in his shelter.

I also think about Pajda's concubine. I've never been pregnant, but I imagine hygiene is of key importance at that stage. I have also read something about children, which said that for them dirty means happy. The water keeps flowing until finally it comes out at the right temperature, it's not very environmentally friendly, but I don't even want to think about that. Whereas the shelter is environmentally friendly, and I think about it non-stop.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

SZCZEPAN TWARDOCH

MORPHINE

Szczepan Twardoch *(born 1979) is an essayist and columnist. He recently published the warmly received novel Wieczny Grunwald [Eternal Grunwald] and a collection of essays Tak jest dobrze [It's Good Like That]. He is an expert on the language and culture of Silesia, as well as in the field of weapons. For Morphine he received Polityka's prestigious "Paszport," an award for artists who define new directions in the development of Polish culture.*

They say this is not the time of great novels, yet every so often a book appears that contradicts this thesis. This impressively lengthy book, with its full-blooded characters, takes up literature's eternal themes: the fate of a man caught up in history, his national and existential entanglements, love, death, war... This is Szczepan Twardoch's *Morphine*.

The protagonist of this nearly six-hundred-page novel set in 1939 Warsaw is Konstanty Willemann, a thirty-year-old whose vast biography could easily be divided among several people. On the one hand, he is Hela's husband and Jureczek's father, while on the other he is a womanizer, nubile Sala's lover, a *bon vivant* and a morphinist. The son of the fanatical Katarzyna, a Silesian woman who chose her Polish identity, and a German officer of aristocratic heritage, he does not feel any attachment to either of his national options. He is a second lieutenant attempting to avoid his military duties, while at the same time a grotesque conspirator pulled into the underground resistance against his will. He is reminiscent of characters from the literature of Gombrowicz and Witkacy, and there are also echoes of Mickiewicz's Konrad Wallenrod and Andrzej Munk's films, full of opportunists thrown into war, not believing in the patriotic ethos.

Twardoch is as interested in Willemann's personal problems as he is in his troubles with the war, his identity and his nationality – a "man without a heart or a country." Torn between the "saintly woman" (his wife Hela), with his obligations as a husband and father, and the demonic, dissolute Sala, between loyalty to his friend Jacek and passion towards his wife, Iga, Konstanty develops into a fascinating character who is ambiguous, repulsive and cynical. As is often the case in the best kind of literature, we root for him, despite the fact that it is difficult to sympathize with him.

Morphine pulls you in just like the drug the book is named after, carrying off the reader with its rushing, pulsating rhythm. Despite its nineteenth-century dimensions, the novel is very contemporary in terms of its language. Thanks to Twardoch, we are transported to Warsaw during the first weeks of the German occupation, wandering through a variety of suspicious places and burned-out streets; we meet an entire cross-section of people and watch their complex fates unfold over a period of many years. A strange voice follows our protagonist step by step – a mysterious power that knows both the past and the future. We do not know if this is some mechanism that exercises control over the world, Evil, or the title drug whispering malevolent spells into our protagonist's ear. Szczepan Twardoch is a keen observer, a harsh analyst of the world around him. He avoids obvious conclusions or simple diagnoses – he shows a man tossed about by the whirlwinds of history and his own impulses, someone with more shameful sides to his character than good. Perhaps this is just the way the world is.

Patrycja Pustkowiak

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IT'S ME.

MORPHINE

Disheveled hair, pale mug, two-days' growth.

Only now is everything coming to me, or rather coming back: the city destroyed, no longer mine, Hela and Jureczek in our flat in the Wedel building on Madalińskiego Street, the mobilization, the siege, the surrender, Starzyński raving about the disgrace of the German army fighting the poor people of Praga, commendations, back pay, Ksyk's insanity and his black mustache, after our surrender we move from our positions at Sielecki Park and on Parkowa Street to the light cavalry's barracks where we're meant to wait for imprisonment, but I'm not going to be taken prisoner, the babbling on about how we have to continue to fight, the colonel lets me leave, go, go, absolutely right, we've got to continue fighting, we'll bury my pistol, along with a few of my friends' guns, in the Sisters of Nazareth's garden on Czerniakowska Street, then we'll burn our uniforms, even our boots, in the stove, though it's a shame to do that to our boots, it stinks horribly, I'm not going to be a prisoner of war, there's no way. And earlier, along with the mobilization – a promise. Sobriety. After our surrender it was limited to sobriety *à la m*, which explains the last bottles of wine yesterday, where can you get wine now? Nowhere. Hiding out, what a circus!

Smoke above the burning Citadel, so noble and beautiful. We send a brotherly greeting to soldiers fighting on the Hel peninsula, the radio presenter is speaking in a trembling voice, long live Poland, Poland hasn't perished yet. But it has.

I give up.

I drink a little more water, straight from the bucket, I lift it up with strong arms, until my stomach swells again like a wineskin. A mirror. It's me, it's me, it's me.

I hate this place. I hate it.

"Aniela, make me some coffee!" I yell, my scream piercing my temples with thick nails, like Pontius Pilate's fingers.

"There ain't no coffee!" she patiently shouts back from the flat, she shouted the same thing yesterday.

I know there isn't any, so why am I yelling?

"Well then make me some tea."

"There ain't no tea. I just lit the stove. But what for, what for?"

"What's there to eat?"

"Nuthin'. Sir, you gotta go, gotta buy somethin'. They're sellin' bread on Mirowska Street, 30 groszy a kilo, the ration's a quarter loaf."

Aniela purrs, she purrs from the kitchen, from the little kitchen in this little flat, where they sublet yet another

tiny room, a room in which it stinks like an old lady, it stinks like boiled cabbage and onions, even though she certainly hasn't cooked a single onion or cabbage for at least a month, but it still stinks, or maybe it just seems like it should stink of cabbage and onions, or maybe it should stink of tripe and I'm bringing forth these smells for myself, I'm imagining them in order to raise my spirits?

Out into the city, I must go out. Leave this flat and not come back. Outside – rain, freezing cold. Back to the bathroom. To shave or not to shave? Shave, with cold water? I'll shave. And tidy up my hair. But without brilliantine, even though there is some, in the package on the shelf, but this isn't the time for brilliantine, wartime, so just a comb, in order not to go around disheveled. And then aspirin, two. They're also running out. Then an undershirt, long underwear, socks. Then I put on a thick Scottish wool jacket, underneath it I'm wearing a warm pullover. Hat. Scarf. I won't take an overcoat, it's still too early for an overcoat. It's not enough, not enough. Tweed keeps the warmth in, but it's not enough. Clothing, as proof that I'm somebody, but I'm nobody. As protection from the end of the world, as a reminder that I am – not just anybody.

Me, this is me. I am Konstanty Willemann, I like cars, elegant clothes, I don't like horses, uniforms or losers. I'm – not just anybody. Or am I?

But it's for nothing, for nothing. I look at myself in the mirror, me, it's me, but the world has ended and in this world – me, it's not me anymore. And even if it were, I'd certainly be nobody. Even in expensive clothes, in expensive shoes. Nobody. Exactly.

I'm leaving. The door closes behind me contemptuously. It's mocking me, this old door, Aniela's door, not my door, though it is mine. I'm leaving. I won't come back. I don't know yet where I'll go, but I won't come back here.

I left, not my city. Windows without panes, where they were, they're papered over with crosses, St. Andrew's window crosses, on these crosses our lives have been crucified, but more often there's only blank plywood and black eye sockets of gouged-out window frames and ripped out panes. Stores are closed, boarded up or trashed, instead of stores commerce is in the streets, people are selling everything: English riding boots, combs, lamps and food for exorbitant prices. And the people, babushkas from outside Warsaw, God knows where they got their wares from, elegant women, bandits, small-time hoodlums, youngsters. Society is now dissolved, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there are no ladies, there are no whores, there is neither professor nor thief. Goods from smashed-up stores, from robberies or regular looting, or their own furs, the old world has melted away onto the streets, onto newspapers and cardboard, the order of things is flowing away like melted crystal, fur coats coveted in this cold October have made their way from their rightful closets onto the streets, from the streets into improper hands, some horrid woman is trying to sell a cavalry saddle, pulled off someone's horse, pulled out from under someone's ass and who needs a stock saddle? Maybe you could strap it on your back and carry Germans through the streets.

They may well shoot her.

"They can shoot you for that, woman," I say.

"If you're not buying, sir, get going, sir…!"

So I leave. It's good that I have money, and I have it because I'm clever. At first I'm walking along, clever as I am, I'm going down Krochmalna Street, Jews appear, they want to sell me everything, but only for dollars and gold, they're in a hurry and are damned frightened, but I keep going, I don't look at the Jews, I'm going to Hala Mirowska, to buy some bread, fatback, eggs. Only half of the stalls are manned. Crazy prices, a kilo of bread for a zloty seventy. Municipally distributed bread for thirty groszy is no longer available, it's all gone. Have to pay market prices, worse than from a Jew. I take a kilo. Apart from the bread, I buy a cup of curdled milk, a filthy cup on a string, for ten groszy the stallholder ladles milk from the milk can for anyone who wants some, I pay, to hell with the filthy lip prints on the tin cup, I drink, it helps.

It doesn't help. A woman has chocolate, from before the war, one bar twelve zloty. Twelve! I take three zlotys' worth for Jureczek, with her dirty hands the woman breaks some off, wraps it in newspaper.

With food in my briefcase, because I'm not going to carry a bag in my hand like some servant, I continue on. When you've got money, you can get anything, you can survive anything.

And I have some. In August, a week before the mobilization, I cleaned out my account with PKO, I didn't have a lot, but there was something, so I cleaned it out, I was so prudent, so wise, I bought gold at an exorbitant price, but a prewar price, I bought dollars and so now I have some, and Hela also has something to feed Jureczek with, I think about this proudly, avoiding the line in front of PKO, I purposefully take a roundabout way, so I can take a look at that line that winds all the way to the Philharmonic, they're only allowing withdrawals of fifty zloty at a time, people are looking at each other with wolves' eyes from under the brims of their hats and in those looks: *sanacja*, thieves, damned colonels, where is our, my money!

But I've got some. Because I'm clever, and people are idiots.

Translated by Jason A. Goldsmith

PAWEŁ POTOROCZYN

PART AND PARCEL OF LIFE

Paweł Potoroczyn *(born 1961) is a diplomat, publisher and film and music producer. Formerly the Polish consul in Los Angeles, and then head of the Polish Cultural Institute, first in New York and then in London, since 2008 he has been in charge of the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, the aim of which is to promote Polish culture abroad. Part and Parcel of Life is his literary debut.*

Part and Parcel of Life is a surprising, late debut which aims to outline the history of a community of Poles, not 'focusing on the nobility' but on the villagers: the peasants, the Jewish community, the presbytery, the partisans and, of course, the village women. The village is called Piórków. Its inhabitants are grim, vindictive and governed by innate urges. They are a community of decent people who check what each other is doing and inflict harm upon each other that affects whole generations, in a way that is human and commonplace, part and parcel of life. *Part and Parcel*, which was well received by critics, has been written in meticulously worked, stylised, flexible language, which manages to encompass the realities of peasant life and the author's irony along with a different angle from the standard Polish stance which sees only heroes and martyrs. The vitality of this story lies in the astuteness of its farcical characterisation and its derisive way of reducing national issues, such as resistance to the German occupying forces, to nitty-gritty reality, bringing them down to earth and down to bodily motives. It all starts with a funeral, since, as we read in the book, "In Piórków there was more of a buzz at funerals than at weddings or the picture house or in sparks of electricity." The village tradition that one and all would attend a funeral – because tickets and invitations were unnecessary and if it were an enemy being laid to rest a funeral provided "pure delight" – seems to be a metaphor for the entire Polish community's approach to life, focusing on funeral rituals and concealing its murky, primitive, impulsive behaviour behind uplifting images of Our Saviour and Our Lady. The author of *Part and Parcel of Life* does not hold the adherence to ritual in peasant culture to be either sacred or profane in its own right. Along with everything else these matters are subject to chance, fate, psychological influences and the historical forces which sweep through the village. Good and evil coexist and intermingle – always and everywhere. The ebb and flow of life and death, acted out in the wedding processions and funeral cortèges which trail through the village, gives no basis for assessing, weighing up or curbing the uneven measure of virtuous deeds and misdemeanours. One goes one way, the other another.

There are several key storylines which are interwoven in the book: the main one tells of the love between Jaś Smyczek, a gifted musician and womaniser, and Wanda, the beautiful baker's wife. Neither the priest nor the villagers can forgive them for living in sin. Smyczek, a partisan, is killed by a German bullet in the opening scene of the novel. The reader is taken back in time to explore the tangled web of Piórków's inhabitants' lives: those of the gentry, the peasants, the Jews and even the Germans. The characters include female communists, artists and globetrotters. Potoroczyn writes a new style of rural prose, which has been freed from the usual black-and-white approach and religious patriarchal order. He draws on the traditions established by Reymont, Kawalec and Myśliwski, but in his prose there are also echoes of Gombrowicz's irony and the distinctive rhythms of Jerzy Pilch's local narratives. A hidden 'focus' of *Part and Parcel of Life* is its discussion of art, questions about who can be considered an artist and who is just dabbling and can only aspire to the role. There is a large dose of a new writer's self-mockery in these questions.

Kazimiera Szczuka

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PART AND PARCEL OF LIFE

the note

from Father Morga to Squire Radecki contained only two sentences. The first read, 'Grzegorz, I'll drop in on Saturday for afternoon tea and a game of Preference.' The second, 'Whatever you can do for the unfortunate soul who hands you this note will be done as if unto your brother and unto me.'

The squire took both these declarations to heart. He went to such great lengths over the tea that it was like a dinner: after the boletus mushroom soup, pikeperch and duck followed by poppy-seed cake, mead, fruit liqueurs and dry rye vodka there was not enough of the evening left for a game of Preference. He ordered quarters to be prepared for Smyczek in the attic – it was the manor house attic. Once the carriage taking Morga home disappeared down the avenue of poplars, he settled down to write a letter of recommendation to an old family friend.

There was no reason whatsoever why Mr Radecki should like Smyczek. The squire did not like him because Wanda had rejected the squire's advances; not just once, but twice. The first time was after the baker died. Outwardly she wore mourning, whereas under the covers, as it later became clear, she was coupling with Smyczek. And she rejected him for the second time when Jaś was serving time in Tarnów prison.

The squire did not like him because during the hunting season he had to send for Smyczek when he wanted to serve his guests partridge or hare; on his own he couldn't have hit a cart laden with hay from five paces.

The squire did not like him because once he had taken the libertine under his roof, in spite of himself, he could not help treating him better than the rest of the servants, in fact better even than he had treated the householders in the days when the manor in Olszany was still a family home. The squire did not like him because once he had shown Smyczek the pianoforte, from which the squire had never managed to extract a clear sound, the instrument was as good as lost together with the remains of his feeling of superiority.

The squire just did not like him and that was that.

The lord of the manor would have killed to be talented, in any way whatsoever, or even to have a semblance of talent, a shadowy trace of talent in any of the arts deemed worthy of pursuit. Although able to read music, he could not play any instrument. At best he could assist by turning the pages, avenging himself with an equivocal bow directed at the pianist, which gave to understand he was an artist of no less calibre who, merely due to a lack of boldness, accepted a secondary role with grace; a bow which expressed

the belief that real genius is unassuming, whereas mere talent is more prone to flaunt itself. His portrayal of weariness was so convincing, he closed his eyelids and tipped his head back so genuinely, he flipped the skirts of his frock coat aside with such a perfect gesture as he sat down on the stool behind the pianist that he created the impression that a maestro had come to the manor house at Olszany to grace the homely musical gathering with his presence. The squire's études were so evocative that there was no doubt some of the applause was intended for him, and rightly and justly so.

From his early youth until well into maturity, the squire had tried his hand at poetry, as he assumed it did not require a natural gift as with music or painting, and that words were equally accessible to the deaf and the blind and their meaning fairly distributed amongst all those who were able to write. This assumption proved as false as his poetry regardless of whether he was writing odes in Russian, sonnets in English or haiku. A fatal tendency to overemphasise the point, a common blunder in verse, completely wrecked what Radecki himself considered the essence of poetry – freedom from literary constraints and freedom of expression. Although the rhythms, melodies and tones which are not at the disposal of those to whom writing comes with the utmost difficulty were indeed present in his poems, they had the facile, tinny ring of an enamel pail, whichever language he employed.

He was able to paint, it seemed, but an unnatural perspective betrayed him, so that even his relatively acceptable pictures seemed to have been painted by a long-sighted person who had to stand four paces away from the canvas to see the shapes and colours which had made their way onto it, a person who from close up could only see brush strokes and particles of paint. Or perhaps he had the ability, but didn't like to exercise it except in the case of his self-conscious nudes of young boys whose ethereal substance frozen in banal poses pointed towards dithering in the face of new discoveries, while the small lips and huge genitals gave an indication of the artist's state of anguish. The exceedingly troublesome stratagems required to obtain models caused him to paint rarely and with great trepidation.

It was the squire's misfortune – a curse bestowed on him by his rigorous education and truly good taste – that he was conscious of his lack of talent. Unfortunately he was not aware that to express yourself you need to know who you are.

He abandoned all attempts at singing when he was still a boy after noticing the somewhat troubled expressions on his parents' faces. 'You need not sing, dear,' said his mother, 'perhaps you could just tell us about it.'

Many a time the squire had wondered how Morga, who, after all, was a newcomer to the area – indeed no more than a drifter in terms of the Radecki and Gieskaner families, who could trace their roots back in these parts some four hundred years – commanded the peasants' obedience to the extent that they immediately did whatever he ordered, sometimes without even a murmur or the customary grumble. He wasn't particularly clever or learned; his excessive pride made him merciless, although he was fair, in his own way. The authority conveyed by age might have explained it, except that Morga wasn't that old. Perhaps the reason why he was less respected by the womenfolk for whom a vigorous male, even one wearing robes, will always just be a bloke (all the more so if he is virtuous) was that nothing arouses a peasant woman's curiosity as much as indifference or impotence, and nothing reduces the respect she feels more than such curiosity. And perhaps the same causes gave rise to the respect he was accorded by the menfolk because he wasn't yet old but had already voluntarily joined the other camp, so to speak.

In addition to all this the squire, while not understanding why Smyczek obeyed Morga's dictum and abandoned the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, had reasons and obligations of his own to obey the parish priest. And so he wrote a letter which began with the words, 'Dear Uncle, forgive me for approaching you directly, but I have no connections in the *Gunbatsu*. Since our last meeting in the imperial palace gardens, I have not asked for anything and I would not dream of squandering your time or putting you to any trouble for my own sake, but an opportunity has arisen to help an ordinary man of the sort you spoke of when we met.'

The letter ended with the words, '…otherwise it is only a matter of time until he ends up behind bars.'

The squire's projections were as simplistic as the silent films on show at the picture house in Częstochowa. Act I: Wicked Smyczek gets his just deserts and departs into exile. Act II: The squire throws his whole world at Wanda's feet (the intoxicating rush of a sleigh on sparkling snow, sunlight beaming through the treetops). In Act III Wanda succumbs to the squire (the whole picture spins), but in Act IV she is tormented by her guilty conscience (subtitle: *What, oh what, have I done!*), yet the squire asks for her hand in marriage (a diamond engagement ring shimmers in the candlelight).

Act V: Wicked Smyczek turns out to be innocent and, secretly assisted by the squire, he escapes from exile. Smyczek reconciles himself to his fate and the squire marries Wanda.

Or:

Act V: Smyczek, who has been unjustly convicted, returns from exile and forgives Wanda. As an act of contrition, the squire offers the newlyweds a generous trousseau.

Or:

Act V: Smyczek marries another woman or is killed in the war. Under duress from his family and society, with a heavy heart, the squire breaks off his engagement. Wanda tosses the ring into the village pond and bemoans her fate (*Oh, woe is me!*).

No reply ever arrived from the Marshal, but the squire's letter did the trick. Before two months were up, an army dispatch rider arrived at the manor house on his motorcycle with call-up papers for Smyczek.

Then, for the first time, in a letter to Wanda, Jaś used a treble clef for his signature. Without getting out of the motorcycle's sidecar, he gave the letter to Wawerek and asked him to deliver it. Wawerek agreed, tipped his hat and walked off towards Zatylna. Smyczek pulled the regulation goggles down over his eyes, the vehicle roared, filled the area with smoke, spun around on the spot and then disappeared down the road to Broniszewo in a flurry of dust and a curious stench of violet exhaust fumes.

Translated by Kasia Beresford

HUBERT KLIMKO-DOBRZANIECKI

GREEKS GO HOME TO DIE

Hubert Klimko-Dobrzaniecki *(born 1967) writes fiction and poetry. For many years he has lived outside Poland (in places including Iceland, and now Austria). His work includes novels and short stories, and to date he has published nine books. His fiction is full of oddballs, lunatics, misfits and people who have been uprooted, or sometimes derailed, who refuse or are unable to find their own unambiguously defined place in life.*

At the end of the 1940s, after the Greek civil war which was lost by the forces of the left, some fifteen thousand political refugees came to Poland. They settled mainly in Lower Silesian towns such as Bielawa, where Hubert Klimko-Dobrzaniecki spent his childhood and early youth. The writer has dedicated this story to the Bielawa Greeks, his one-time neighbours. In the process, he once again brings up an issue which is very meaningful to him – the painful experience of emigration.

The central problem here is a sense of estrangement and an inability to put down roots, in a double sense. The novel's main character, Sakis Sallas, despite having been born and educated in Poland, and thus entirely assimilated, will always be a foreigner. When he returns to the land of his ancestors in 1980, the same thing happens to him: in the eyes of the Greeks he is a "Polonos" (a Pole). But is this why his personal life consists of a string of defeats? We see him as an embittered fifty-year-old, formerly a journalist for an Athens-based paper, but now embarking on a career as a writer, who comes to a Greek island to write a novel about his family at a residential house for artists. But not only does he want to pay tribute to his adored Father and beloved Mother (who always have capital letters), and take a nostalgic look at his extremely happy childhood – his main aim is to conduct a private investigation. The fact is that Sakis is worried that he knows very little about his parents' past; they consistently avoided reminiscence, and he rightly suspects that both of them are, or rather were (they died long ago), concealing a grim secret, and that their life story has a hidden dimension. The dreadful truth will be revealed in the final scene, and will totally immerse Sakis in sorrow.

Greeks Go Home to Die is told on two planes – recollections and the present. The former is filled with numerous, on the whole humorous small-town anecdotes, in which the main figure is the eccentric Father – an unrivalled dreamer and fantasist. They are supplemented by moving scenes from home life. Not much happens on the present-day narrative level, however – Sakis starts a relationship with one of the town's residents, and then with the woman running the house for Greek authors. But it is hard to call these relationships love affairs. The women, Eris and Maria, make the hero aware that he is emotionally crippled.

To generalise, the most important feature here is the realm of the emotions, hence the "Greekness" of the novel – historical as well as cultural – seems more than conventional. These are just stage settings. At heart it is about family emotions, so to say, covering in the first place the relationship between a child and his parents, about a fulfilled fatherhood on the one hand, and about the empty place left by the father's departure on the other. The latter seems particularly crucial, because Sakis's father dies twice – once in reality, and once symbolically, when the truth is accidentally revealed about the disgraceful acts he committed before escaping to Poland.

Dariusz Nowacki

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GREEKS GO HOME TO DIE

FATHER

had tried his hand at various occupations. He wasn't able to hold a steady job like Mother. In sickness and in health. Starting on the hour, on the dot, or even earlier. Always the same, ever the same. From the first of the month to the first of the next. Rhythm wasn't a notion that suited my dear Daddy. My Papa, like the King he was, the owner of the green throne he had brought over to the new house, adored change, motion, the turmoil of life. Something always had to be happening. A little fuss, a tiny revolution, because, after all, my father, Dad, Daddy, dearest Daddy, the self-professed revolutionary, the guerrilla from the distant mountains, would offer his services to anyone who had a cargo to unload. Whenever a train arrived bringing something or someone, he would be the first to meet it. If anything broke off, got smashed or failed to arrive, a mysterious surge of strength would drive him to lift, fix, put away, insert and remove everything in sight. He would return home exhausted but happy, with money in his pocket. And on those occasions he would give me a penny, saying here's some money, my boy, it's good money, honestly earned. Go to a pastry shop, my boy, and get yourself something sweet, and don't forget about your Mother, don't forget to get her a cream puff. A cream puff for your Mother and whatever you fancy for yourself. And off I'd go with a golden coin proffered by the King of all Seas and Oceans. Sometimes I could even keep the change.

As years went by his back started to give way. He was simply getting older. I have to add that we weren't the only people of our kind in our town but Daddy wasn't keen on their company. They had come from another mountain, another forest, and had a different perspective on the world. Perhaps a more pragmatic one, and besides, it wasn't right for a King to have dealings with commoners. He regarded some of them as traitors because they had converted to Catholicism. Some of them had even started to believe in God, and still others were not from his unit. Those who were had preferred to settle in Czechoslovakia for some reason. They had gone their separate ways at some stage of their journey, never to be heard of again. Mum had also converted to Catholicism and went to church, she even had me baptised. Apparently Father didn't speak to her for over a month. But she was different, she could do whatever she liked, for Father was grateful for her industriousness and, above all, he loved her. In the early days, when life had been very difficult, Mummy used to say: we've got potatoes, we've got onions, we've got garlic, we'll survive. And there was nothing she couldn't conjure up for Father using these scant ingredients. What's for dinner tonight? Tonight, my dearest, we're having stuffed grape leaves. Mum would grate some potatoes,

add a few eggs, a little garlic and a pinch of pepper, wrap it all up in layers of peeled onion and stick it into the oven. *Dolmathakia yaladzi* is being served! I look at my Father and can see that he wants to believe it's not just plain potatoes. He revels in the food. The stuffed grape leaves melt on his tongue, he takes his time with each mouthful. He is back home now, back in the old country. The sun is shining, there is a soft breeze. After a while he raises his eyes towards heaven and says, there's a little cloud coming but it will go away very soon, picking up another piece of the magic deception with his fork. More quiet mumbling. Swallowing. Wonderful, my dear, wonderful. What an exquisite starter. What's for mains? How can you even ask? It's your favourite! Don't say you've made beef stew with chestnuts? Slices of potato sizzle in the frying pan. Mummy fries them until they turn golden, really golden. First on one side then on the other. She seasons them with pepper and salt. Then tips them out onto a plate. The onion splashes about in the burnt oil, Mum adds a spoonful of sugar and waits for the onion to go all sheeny and brown. She tips it out onto the potatoes and tops it with chopped garlic. *Kreas me kastana!* Wildfire burns in Dad's eyes. He swallows the main course faster than the starter. His chin shakes, he buries it in his plate. And the beef with chestnuts disappears in the cavernous stomach of my King of all Oceans. And what about dessert? What are we having for dessert? Would *ravani* do, except without semolina, just some orange peel. It'll do fine. Mum fishes out some orange peel, bone-dry from a jar, probably a leftover from the Germans. She puts it in the frying pan, covers it with boiling water, adds a little fat and a spoonful of sugar. Here's your dessert, here you go. It's the best dessert in the world, Daddy thanks her. He brushes her careworn hands with his red beard, bristly like a new whisk. Father's whisk on Mum's hand, that's the best thank you. After a while, once the regal dinner has opened up new nooks and crannies in Poseidon's brain, for the sugar was plentiful and the meal was lovely and festive, Father says to Mum: I can't go on with the unloading. I'm getting old. But I'm not up to your kind of work either. I would die of boredom there, working shifts would kill me. That's not how I want to meet Him. What, then? What do you want, what would you like to do? The King scratched his belly. He stroked his red beard. He put a cigarette in his mouth. Struck a match. He watched the flame. He was lost in thought and let the match go out. A trail of smoke shrouded the Red Sea. It twisted and turned, disappearing in its depths. Warszawa, he said. There's a guy at the other end of town who wants to sell a Warszawa car.

Once my parents were slightly better off, after Father had won some money at cards and earned some by unloading, and because Mum kept meeting 200 percent quotas working insane hours in the textile factory, and they had saved up, borrowed and scrimped and saved every penny they could, they somehow managed to buy a secondhand Warszawa. It was grey, like everything else in Poland in those days. Like Warsaw, the capital my Dad had once visited. He had felt the need to go to the Greek Embassy. He had gone there to ask for something, to try and explain something, but had come back empty-handed and sad and later told us what had happened. Warsaw is just like our Warszawa, it's all grim and grey, sometimes growling like a stray dog. It's full of concrete and it's all dug-up. And it's much bigger than our Warszawa. Oh yes, much, much bigger. If you look at the back seat, and then through the back windshield, the other Warsaw stretches way, way further. Its end is nowhere in sight and neither is the end of its sadness. If at least it were somewhere in the mountains or on the seaside. But it's on a flat plain, with no cicadas chirping, just the police directing traffic with their whistles and batons. Even though there's not much traffic to direct, since everyone drives however they want anyway. It's much nicer here. Much, much nicer... And so the Warszawa became a taxi. One of the four taxis in town.

And Father became one of the four taxi drivers, the only foreigner among them. He used to park at the taxi stand in the main square and wait for a phone call, for the taxi stand had its own phone, like a public phonebox except they were the only ones who could use it. Daddy would wait for a call from those who were better off, for there were some rich people in our town, too. And sometimes people who were not so rich but needy would turn up. Those who had no money, or not enough, would come back later, with various tokens of their gratitude. Anything from food to wicker baskets. His kindness had elevated my Father to the status of a minor hero with a red beard, until people started coming to the taxi stand and demanding a ride from the Greek and no other driver. The Greek is good. He knows the way and talks funny. If the Greek drives you, you get where you want to go. And if you don't have the money the Greek will wait, or you can give him something else instead. When it happened that all four drivers were at the taxi stand together and the phone rang, and Father was second or third, or perhaps fourth and last in line, and the first driver took the call, the voice usually asked, is the Greek there, can the Greek come? Dad wasn't stupid, kings are rarely as stupid as taxi drivers, and after all, my Father wasn't really a taxi driver, he was a King driving a taxi, and that's why, at times like these, he had to take royal decisions. He didn't want any trouble with the others either. It was three to one. He was outnumbered but he did have his head screwed on the right way. And so, whenever the phone rang and Papa was not the first in line and a customer insisted on the Greek, he would tell the other guy to lie and say the Greek was on another job. And when people came to the taxi stand and wanted to climb into our grey Warszawa he pretended he couldn't get the engine started. And not just that, Poseidon the Redbeard eventually became the head of the taxi mafia and for a long time anyone wanting to drive a fifth taxi wouldn't stand a chance. Between them they had decided that four was enough. Enough for our town and enough for them. There was this chap. He bought a car, had it registered, got his permit. But then one day there was sand in his tank even though he hadn't driven to the sea. And so it was just the four of them again. A quartet, for a good few years. But what use was it for Papa to have his pals elect him the mafia boss. None whatever, in fact he suffered on account of his office. Having accepted the sceptre of the first among equals on the taxi stand, he announced: I free Sundays. You driving. Good? Surprise and joy gripped the other three. Yes, yes, yes! And they loved him even more because there was one less driver on Sundays, and the rates were double. But my Daddy was a Greek King and he knew that work on Sundays wasn't work but slavery at double the rate. Sundays were a holiday for us because Dad was at home. He was there for Mum and for me. Well, maybe not completely, because on Sundays Dad was also there for coffee and pastries at Goważewski's.

Translated by Julia and Peter Sherwood

BEATA CHOMĄTOWSKA

A FRIEND IN NEED IS A FRIEND INDEED

Beata Chomątowska *(born 1976) is a journalist and author of a work of historical reportage, Muranów Station, which is about the Warsaw district built on the ruins of the Jewish ghetto. In 1999 she hitch-hiked to Holland to take up a Tempus programme scholarship, and spent eighteen months living and working in Breda, which provided her with plenty of inter-cultural discoveries. She is now working on a new book.*

It's true to say the Dutch town of Breda doesn't sound as familiar as London, where it's impossible to cross the street without hearing someone speaking Polish; in fact, it seems downright exotic. Just like the wild stories collected in Beata Chomątowska's book, *A Friend in Need is a Friend Indeed*. The author of the well-received book *Muranów Station*, a monumental work of historical reportage about a district of Warsaw built on the rubble of the former Jewish ghetto, now recollects the year and a half of her life during which she lived in Holland as a Tempus scholarship student. But this time it's not reportage – it's something so cleverly woven together that it eludes genres. Although the author herself admits that it has a strong foothold in reality, her artistic processing of events linked with narrative talent cause this book to soar into the realm of the novel.

The protagonist of the book is a student who, in the late 1990s, travels to Holland with her boyfriend in search of adventures which do not befit a young woman – like her – from a well-educated home. There is mention, of course, of various kinds of stimulants, as well as sexual freedom, which is the daily bread of this haven of liberalism. In Breda she is supposedly attending courses at the university (getting to know her classmates without excessive enthusiasm, and finding it hard to acknowledge the fact that what is generally known in Poland as "a student's 15-minute grace period" doesn't exist in this country of perfect punctuality). But then she finds a job at a bar that enjoys – as she soon finds out – cult-like popularity, where she meets the array of bizarre, freedom-loving friends alluded to in the book's title. Chomątowska describes the youthful adventures of the two central characters and their continual amazement at the sharp cultural contrasts between Holland and Poland in a very playful and dynamic manner, prompting the reader's surprise again and again, as well as evoking memories from not so long ago. Yes, after all, little more than a decade has passed since the times when Polish people regarded foreign currencies as a luxury item, and found it hard to believe that there could be lovely clean toilets in public places with mysterious flush handles.

A Friend in Need is a Friend Indeed is an honest, ironic, occasionally insolent portrait of young Polish emigrants at the end of the 1990s, very different from those who emigrated before the fall of communism. No longer seeking asylum abroad, and no longer obsessed with putting money aside to buy a house in Poland, emigrants at that time were increasingly more courageous (although still struggling with Polish complexes) in their attempts to profit from life and to become part of that famous and mythical United Europe which a few years later became for Poles an irrevocable fact.

Patrycja Pustkowiak

BEATA CHOMĄTOWSKA
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Intoxicated

A FRIEND IN NEED IS A FRIEND INDEED

by new friendships, I didn't pay much attention to the approaching exam. But, to my total surprise, I passed it. I got one of the lowest marks, but so what, all that mattered was that I'd passed. I began to get excited about the next task given to us by Meneer Hors in the second semester – to draw up a promotional plan for a wine-producing firm at a Dutch vineyard. To start with, a whole group of us was taken there so that we could take a look at the place and talk with the wine-maker about his needs. When we got to the huge farm in the countryside close to Tilburg, of course they had arranged a wine-tasting session for us. We alternately tried white and red, convincing the owner that they tasted no worse than wines from traditional wine-producing countries, although we had no damn idea by what miracle he managed to brew even dishwater like that in such a cold, damp climate. Frankly speaking, the hangover was just as bad from that stuff as from mixing more sophisticated booze, so we weren't being entirely dishonest. I started to get interested in the subject, using my spare time to figure out how I could really promote this Dutch wine, since it actually existed. I shared my excitement with P. ("in fact it's quite interesting," he said), and took the group work really seriously. This time I was working with Victor and Katelin. We had a whole heap of ideas, starting with selling the wine on the VVV tourist information network as an original gift for foreigners to take home from Holland, and ending with the shape of the box that it should be packed in, which would make reference to traditional emblems: a herring, a clog or a windmill. The group's best idea was supposed to be put into practise. We were sure we'd win. We were simply the best. When the day came for the final presentation of our ideas in front of all the students and a judging panel of teachers, we didn't even have to cross our fingers for Victor, the one we'd chosen to present our wisdom, since we knew he'd do it with flying colours. And we were right. He went out, took a bow, and started off on a really theatrical speech, a brilliant, freestyle rap about Dutch wines, pausing meaningfully at just the right moments, emphasizing everything with gesticulations, while perfectly coordinated slides were projected behind him. It all lasted about a quarter of an hour, fifteen minutes of ripping his guts out in public for the sake of our group's victory. We had all played a part in preparing the performance, of course, but it was Victor of whom we were proudest. He finished, wiped the sweat from his forehead and waited for a storm of applause. But silence filled the room. The students were staring at him in mute fascination; it was clear they'd liked it. The jury had impenetrable expressions on their faces, as if the excess of

words and sounds had turned them to stone. Meneer Hors was the first to awaken from his lethargy and raised a sign with a number on it. Zero! Victor squinted, thinking the old fool must have made a mistake, in a moment he'll reach his quavering hands behind him and change the score to the correct one. The rest, in one quick gesture, also raised signs: zero, zero, five zeroes, only Janka Kapusta, out of pity, gave us a 2, but was then mortified, terrified about breaking free of the rest in this way. No, no, it's not possible! Victor swept his gaze one more time around the room, making sure that he wasn't hallucinating. We two girls did the same. *To hell with you! Lul!* he shouted angrily in Dutch at the audience, and rushed out of the room with his blond hair streaming behind him. We could still hear the patter of his running shoes on the stairs when Meneer Hors announced in a calm tone of voice, as if nothing had happened, *Next, please*, and returned to his seat, ready to judge. Nobody wanted to hear any more from us. The rest of the presentations were as proper and boring as hell. Girls in ladies' suits stuttering things, boys in gentlemen's suits with hackneyed Powerpoint slides. Everyone got decent marks. Something wasn't right here, but only later was I able to comprehend what it was, when I myself failed the second exam set by Horst, despite having genuine commitment to the subject and a million wonderful ideas about the promotion of spirits made in Holland. Listening to my answers, he didn't even blink, and later he said, *Hmm, perhaps your undeniable talents could be profitably applied elsewhere*, and when I'd already begun to rejoice that his comment indicated the highest kind of praise, he gave me an F. His dubious compliment had been intended as honey coating a bitter pill, so that I'd swallow it with no protest. Nobody expected any creativity from us, the kind that's rewarded in America – just obedience to standard procedures. Victor proved from the very beginning that he didn't have any respect for them; he broke all of the *beleid* in force at the school. What else could he be trying to prove by being late all the time? When he presented our group's idea so over-theatrically, he revealed his ignorance – after so many trial conferences he should have known it wouldn't be regarded very positively. In Holland the serious audiences aren't seduced by rhetoric, only by arguments that follow set patterns. And to top it all off, he ruined the nice mood that had been so painstakingly created. He didn't show up for the exam at all, and so they failed him, without saying a single word about him and remaining tactfully silent about the whole incident. I was expected to show up for an exam retake in a month. None of the teachers offered me help, I had to ask for it myself. In Holland everyone is considered a mature individual, responsible for their own actions. Students aren't led along by the hand, unless they clearly indicate they want to be; in which case the bureaucracy prepared in advance for such circumstances gets rolling right away, directing them through the proper procedures. Among all of the Poles and Hungarians, only Katelin offered any help. Even my Polish admirer could no longer be found at the hour of need – maybe I'd effectively scared him off. I couldn't expect anything from the rest. They were now absorbed by a totally different kind of drama that was playing out right in front of our eyes. Krisztina and Istvan had broken up. But it wasn't a typical break-up. Istvan had turned out to be a "loverboy."

In Dutch slang, this term, borrowed from English, by no means indicated a hot young lover, but a specific kind of pimp who preyed on foreign girls. He lurks around the campus and in bars where foreign students hang out, trying hard to spot the one (or even better, more than one) in the crowd with a sad gaze, who seems slightly lost. He knows that even though everyone seems to stick together in such circles, it's difficult to find real intimacy so far away from home. Girls start longing to find someone to be close to here, on the spot – someone they could share their problems with. With some it's possible to detect it right away, while others, such as Krisztina, disguise themselves with fake confidence, but the sharp eye of a loverboy has seen many such cases, and can easily pick them all out in a crowd. He also knows very well, since he has spent time surveying the scene, that females who have recently arrived from Eastern Europe are all hoping to find long-term partners in the West. The best would be a Dutch guy, but if a Moroccan or a Turk born in Holland turned out to be civilized enough, they won't stick all that stubbornly to their original plan. Once the object of attack has been chosen, the loverboy gets down to business. He's got to snag the girl and convince her that he's interested in her. Usually it goes quickly – after only a few fairly lavish dinners, the target softens up, and even falls in love. The next task is to sustain the passion for a few weeks, a month at the most, all the while paying compliments and buying gifts, until he reaches the stage at which he can confide in her about a serious problem: he has run into a bit of debt with a certain guy he knows. This pal of his works in a difficult line of business, it might sound shameful, but here in Holland, as you've undoubtedly already noticed, it's a profession like any other. He has seen us together, he likes you. If you agree to meet with him just once, the business will be settled.

We never found out if Istvan had managed to coax Krisztina into this, or if, skeptical about the situation, she had cut off contact with him just in the nick of time – we only saw her now, in tears, with makeup smeared across her cheeks, totally oblivious to our presence. But never mind us – the worst was that eventually she had to tell the teachers about it, since Istvan refused to take the break-up seriously and she was beginning to feel unsafe.

Translated by Scotia Gilroy

JAN KRASNOWOLSKI

AFRICAN ELECTRONICS

Jan Krasnowolski *(born 1972) has published two previous collections of short stories, Nine Easy Pieces (2001) and The Cage (2006). After graduating from art college he worked in a wide range of professions. In 2006 he moved to Great Britain and settled in Bournemouth. Here too he has tried his hand at several professions, now runs a building firm and – as this book proves – is still writing.*

African Electronics is Jan Krasnowolski's third book of short stories. Reading this new collection (including "Dirty Heniek", "African Electronics", "Hasta siempre, comandante" and "Kindoki") reminds us of what Stanisław Lem wrote in the foreword to Krasnowolski's first set of stories: "The author doesn't like our times at all, a view one is bound to agree with". In Krasnowolski's work there is always evil lurking, lying in wait, changing case, disguising itself, playing underhand tricks and making surprise strikes. This is not our world, the best of all possible worlds. Here there are no good, honest policemen, but there is political intrigue and dishonesty affecting every sphere of life. The guardians of order turns out to be keeping disorder (Krasnowolski jokingly reminds us that the law does not fall from heaven, but is the result of various decisions and compromises), and coming to terms with the complexities of the past seems almost impossible.

A mature child of pop culture, in his most incredible, and thus probable stories, Krasnowolski is constantly disarming myth after myth. And in the process he produces very serious literature: light, trivial, satirical, fantastical, and as a result truly realistic. He speaks out on major historical issues, both local and global. Poland's martial law period features in his stories (including Heniek, Dziuba and comrade Gierciuch in new, democratic settings), and so do ideological vampires (Ernesto "Che" Guevara gains immortality for a merciful act, and sucks the blood out of beautiful virgin bodies – and not just those dressed in T-shirts with his image on them), Satan in the body of a child, racism, fascism, and (perhaps most importantly) the work of the non-institutional upholders of justice. Victims of the Holocaust who come looming out of the fog, or a war criminal on fire imply that sometimes we should be reading Krasnowolski in the context of the tradition of stories which are incredible (e.g. the portrait that attracts misfortune) and free of bombast, which as they crawl along, steal up and grab History from behind, in their search for answers to agonizing questions such as where does this weakness come from? Where is the mediocrity from? And finally where does the evil come from?

Krasnowolski manages not to run aground on absurdity, thanks to a large dose of ridiculous humour and the courage to turn to unconventional solutions. Drunk and stoned, doped and desperate, Krasnowolski's marginalised central characters prompt questions about the overlap and difference between dreaming and waking, madness and normality, good and evil. Nor will we find the answers of a cheap moralizer here – we have all the more reason to be inclined to agree with Stanisław Lem's early diagnosis that Jan Krasnowolski "is in fact already a mature writer".

Anna Marchewka

JAN KRASNOWOLSKI
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AFRICAN ELECTRONICS

He took

the kid to the restaurant at the end of the first passenger deck. Most of the seats were already occupied, mainly by football fans on their way home from an away match. A few dozen blokes in their club colours – they all looked rather sour-faced, which showed unambiguously that the match hadn't ended favourably for them. Some of them had already opened their first cans of beer, and were loudly fulminating against the "sodding French". Rybka managed to get a seat in the corner, right by the window, where there was also a view of the television set suspended from the ceiling.

"At least you can watch a bit of telly," he said to the boy. "Normally you'd be able to see the sea, the other ships and seagulls, but it's foggy today so you can't see anything."

Then it occurred to him that the kid had probably seen a good deal of sea lately during the voyage from Africa. Though perhaps not necessarily – after all, he didn't know the circumstances in which he had made the journey. As a stowaway he might have spent the entire journey locked in a stuffy cabin, if not in a crate crammed into the cargo hold. Who knows – the road to a better life isn't always easy.

"Wait here and don't move an inch," he said, as the shudder of the engines grew stronger and he felt them pulling away from the shore.

He went to order some food, never taking his eyes off the kid as he stood in the queue. The boy sat still in his seat in the corner, fixing his gaze on the window, as if he had noticed something interesting in the fog swaddling the ship.

As the little black boy tucked into bacon and beans, without taking his eyes off the Cartoon Network, Rybka thought he wouldn't have any problem adapting. In a few months nobody would be able to tell him apart from the other kids born and brought up in the British Isles. The boy would blend in, melt into the colourful crowd that filled the streets of London, start talking like a born Londoner, get to know the city and learn to live in it. And in a few years he wouldn't remember Africa any more, the village somewhere in the jungle or the slum where he'd lived until now.

"Aren't you feeling homesick?" he asked.

"My home burned down," said the little boy, sticking the last beans from the plate onto his fork. "There's nothing left of it."

"I'm sorry," mumbled Rybka in confusion, regretting that he'd brought up a topic that was so difficult for the kid. "I hope nobody was hurt?"

"They were burned up. All of them. Mummy, daddy, my three sisters and my brother," muttered the kid, tearing his eyes from the screen, on which SpongeBob was jumping about the seabed. "Those people stood there with machetes

to make sure nobody escaped from the fire. That's how my brother was killed, because he tried to escape. Only I survived."

"Oh my God, I really am very sorry," said Rybka, shocked, regretting that he'd started questioning the kid at all. "You must have been through an awful lot, son."

"Uh-huh. The beans were yummy. I'd like a Coke please," said the boy, pushing the empty plate away and smiling endearingly. "May I?"

As he stood in the queue for the till again, Rybka wondered what sort of traumatic experiences the kid must have been through. Everybody knows what happens in some of those African countries. Tribal conflicts, massacres, dirty wars in which insane commanders make soldiers out of little nippers like him, stuff them full of drugs and then put guns and machetes in their hands, changing them into merciless killing machines. But it's one thing filtered through the flat screen of a television set, and quite another when you're standing face to face with someone who experienced it. This child clearly had the bad luck to be born in some place that was gripped by conflict and had endured a nightmare, which was sure to cast a shadow across his entire life. What good luck he'd managed to get out of there. Little Eugene deserved to live in a better world, where the kids go to school, don't see dreadful things around them and have a real childhood, instead of running about with guns, sowing death and destruction, until another stoned kid packs them full of bullets.

The little boy had seen his relatives die. Rybka found it hard to comprehend how he could talk about it so calmly. It must have been traumatic – maybe the child was still in shock. Altogether that would explain his composure and lack of emotion.

For the first time in ages he felt he was actually doing the right thing. He was helping to save this kid, get him out of hell and give him a new life. Little Eugene had already been through more than anyone ever should, he had seen his family die, and had come close to death himself. Rybka promised himself he'd deliver the boy to London, even if the world collapsed. Not because of the money, but because it was a necessity.

Rybka had been in business for a few years now. Smuggling cocaine, or "Charlie," as the white powder was called in British slang, guaranteed him a regular source of pretty good income. It was all so easy that there was no moral dilemma keeping him awake at night. It was just a job like any other. One guy sits in an office for eight hours flipping through pieces of paper, another toils away in a factory at a conveyor belt. Rybka had tried both of these, and now he was smuggling drugs, because the opportunity had arisen and he'd got to know some people who'd given him the chance. If he didn't do it, someone else would – only a total loser would let an opportunity like that go by. Great Britain was like a gigantic vacuum cleaner: thousands, tens of thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands of people, from the unemployed on benefits to the board member of a big company, snorted streaks of white powder through rolled-up banknotes every day of the week. Doped-up politicians ran the country, doped-up businessmen managed the corporations, doped-up cops caught doped-up crooks, and even the average Dave Smith liked to snort a line at a club of a weekend. It was thanks to cocaine that this country functioned at all. If the entire supply were suddenly cut off, the whole place would come to a standstill, like a machine that's out of fuel. The financial system would break down without warning, the economy would instantly collapse, the country would be plunged into chaos, and riots would break out in the streets. Great Britain would slide into an abyss. That was roughly what Rybka imagined, as he salved his own conscience.

He didn't even think of himself as a smuggler. He reckoned he was more like a one-man courier firm for special deliveries. Smugglers were losers who let themselves be sent to Colombia, from where they'd come back stuffed with condoms full of white powder, risking their lives for a paltry few thousand, which even so would never get them onto the straight. Or petty conmen, who pack their estate cars full of boxes of fags and vodka, then drive all day and night across Europe just to fall foul of the first customs official who casts a glance at their vehicle in Dover.

This commission was different from all the rest. When he heard that it involved bringing a seven-year-old boy from Marseille to London, he refused. A discreet package which can be concealed in a specially prepared hiding place under the boot is one thing, but a live person is quite another. A much greater risk, and, what's more, the British services had cracked down lately on smuggling illegal immigrants, especially since there had suddenly been far too many of the legal kind. Taking all this into consideration, Rybka had told his employer to look for someone else. But the gentleman evidently wasn't used to being refused.

"You'll bring me the kid," he had said, and then brought out a packet of money from the pocket of his expensive overcoat. Rybka knew without counting that it was more than he was capable of earning in six months.

"As much again when the job's done," said the black man, whom Rybka knew to be someone who counted in the London underworld. One of those who had climbed high enough not to have to dirty their own hands any more.

"I've got something else here in case you still can't make up your mind."

The black gentleman reached into his coat pocket again and brought out a small card, which turned out to be a photograph. He put it on the table in front of Rybka, for whom one glance at the picture was enough to understand that this man had him in his grip.

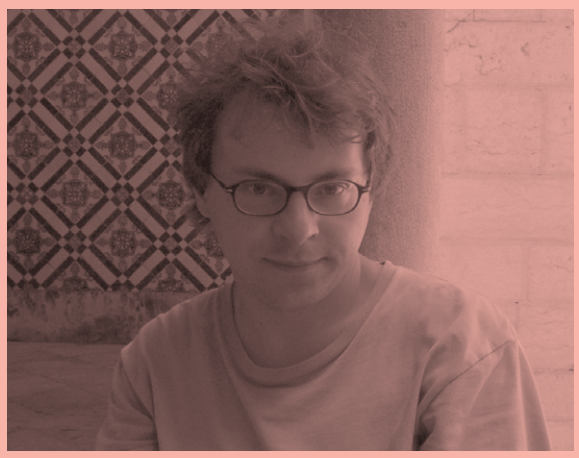
He could feel the blood drain from his face.

"You must care very much about this kid," he said, staring straight into the gangster's ice-cold eyes. He smiled weakly, though he actually felt like leaping at the man's throat, knocking him to the floor and squeezing the life out of him. He knew he couldn't take the liberty.

"More than you can imagine. He's my nephew. So you're going to do your best to make sure not a hair falls from his head. Otherwise another kid might have an accident..."

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

PIOTR PAZIŃSKI



BIRD STREETS

Piotr Paziński *(born 1973) is a journalist, essayist, literary critic and translator, editor-in-chief of the Jewish bi-monthly Midrasz and author of two books on James Joyce. His first novel, The Boarding House (2009), won him the European Prize for Literature awarded by the European Parliament.*

"We never walked down those streets. Nobody could even imagine doing so, as if we had banned ourselves from entering them," writes Piotr Paziński in "The Manuscript of Izaak Feldwurm", one of the four novellas in this collection. Within the book this ban is broken, and we step inside a space that is very densely inscribed with meaning. It is the area of pre-war Warsaw's northern district which was later made into the biggest Jewish ghetto in Europe – for that is just what "those" streets, the "bird" streets, are encoding – doomed "never to rise from the dead", and yet they are alive, drawing us into their strange "in-between" formed by the time and space of the entire set of stories. In Paziński's work this is an invisible place, obscured by post-war topography, annihilated from maps and from memory, emanating a posthumous life so intense that present-day reality fades and pales, handing life back to the phantoms. "A net of contemporary cross-streets, cast there at random, as if none had been there earlier, did not adhere to the ground, but hung in the void, ineffectually concealing the nothingness." Eagle, Goose, Crow and Duckling Streets – all bird names – "rang in the air, and it seemed as if each one were singing its own tune". The important characters in the stories, as well as the ones only mentioned in passing, are old friends, a family circle of castaways from the Polish-Jewish world: Mr Sztajn, Mrs Tecia, Dr Kamińska, Mr Abram, Mr Rubin, the grandmother, the uncles, and finally, tangled up in it all, the narrator, somebody from the grandchildren's generation, the third since the Holocaust. Everyone is engrossed in a spectral life, in the task of recreating memory. Some are entirely phantasmal figures, such as the Feldwurm of the title, or the Tzaddik from the story "The Cortege". Others, like the dead man being carried by absent-minded mourners, or Dr Kamińska, live, temporarily, in the form of actual corpses. But all of them belong to that in-between realm, where both people and ghosts exist, the domain not of the traditionally uncanny, but of literature itself, the weakened magic of fiction – the only life of people who are being forgotten – which requires constant reanimation by its readers.

As in his first novel, *The Boarding House*, but in a far deeper way, this prose is built upon the idea of an expedition into a place where the past is lurking, hiding, but also waiting for someone to summon it by name. It can be scented out, imagined, and seen. It can, but it doesn't have to be. Elegiac memory materialises partly, hesitantly, shakily. Paziński leads us through a half-real, half-dreamlike and spectral space, where he finds a shape for absence, an expression for non-existence, and a record for the invisible. He proves an unusual, ironical seeker and chronicler of the lost Jewish world. The style he has succeeded in creating for this purpose is at once distinctive and muted, brilliant but at the same time conscious of its own impotence. This writing is filled with deeply internalised knowledge of the fact that what was once called the "literature of exhaustion" ultimately found fulfilment in the upshot of the Holocaust, the need to write literature about the non-existence of one's heroes and even about the death of objects, as in the superb story "The Apartment". This erudite style, full of paraphrases of Schulz, biblical allusions and Talmudic references, is a special way of practising the philosophy of loss, which is fundamental to Paziński's literary mission.

Kazimiera Szczuka

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BIRD STREETS

Jakub

didn't answer. For quite a time he hadn't been listening, but was watching a pair of squirrels chasing each other along a branch. The man, who had introduced himself as Lejzer, noticed this and stopped talking. The sounds of the funeral cortege died away too. Jakub began to worry whether he'd really done the right thing by remaining here with a man who, one might reasonably suppose, had little in common with the other mourners and had not concealed his contempt for the entire ceremony.

"We'll catch them up, they'll be coming this way at least once again," the man reassured him. "I'd better tell you what the real writing was like. I remember my grandfather, Szmuel the sofer, as he toiled over the sacred scrolls. He'd sit in total silence over a sheet of the best calfskin, and we'd be afraid to move. We were just kids, you see. Kids usually run around the room, but not at our place. At our place there was none of the racket you get in ordinary people's homes. The house wasn't large, and there were a lot of us, but nobody made a noise – nobody even spoke, sometimes just Grandma whispered to us very softly. Because at our place it was so quiet you could hear a pin drop! Nobody dared to scratch their head. What am I saying – if we could have stopped breathing, I'm sure we would never have breathed again, just like dead bodies. Anything to avoid disturbing Grandpa, who from the crack of dawn to late at night sat writing out the Torah. Later, once everyone was asleep, he'd meditate over every line he'd written and form his own account of those sacred verses. But in the daytime all his grandchildren were there, and just the scraping of his pen! Grandma used to worry. What would happen if Grandpa made a mistake? What if his pen broke? But Grandpa didn't make mistakes, and sometimes, as I was his oldest grandchild, on condition that I didn't say a word of course, he would let me stand behind him and watch..."

Jakub was looking out for the cortege. There was nobody coming down the road, but several times Jakub was ready to swear he could hear people striding along, now closer, now at a certain distance again. The man took no notice of this. He remained somewhere on high, invisible to Jakub, talking with ever greater fervour, as if he hadn't had the opportunity since long ago.

"So I used to read the Torah over Grandpa's shoulder! And two Torahs at once! One of them, complete, lay on the table wound on rollers, just as on the bimah in the synagogue. Grandpa would be copying it line after line, in the same order as his predecessor had once written them down, and before him yet another sofer, all the way back to the rabbi Moses himself. Each letter was equally important, and so was each crown over seven of the twenty-two letters, which together

were like one body. And the entire scroll was like one single name, which Grandpa skilfully divided into individual words. I would read them, as they gradually emerged from the parchment, which in an incomprehensible way became black in exactly the places where it was necessary. Grandpa didn't so much touch it with his pen as address it in his thoughts, and like this he summoned up the images of letters and entire sentences. And if it hadn't been blasphemy, I'd have shouted: *V'zotha'torahashersam Moshe lifneib'neiYisrael!* This is the law that Moses presented to the sons of Israel! But in those days I was afraid to blaspheme, though to tell the truth I was more scared of Grandpa and his anger, for if, God forbid, a single drop of ink had fallen on the parchment and made a blot, that would have been the end…"

Jakub felt that he lacked the strength to leave the man on his own. In fact, despite some discomfort he was quite happy sitting there, and even the man's story was quite absorbing. He reproached himself for not having the courage to fetch out a notebook. The words were melting so rapidly into the dark undergrowth that after a while it was hard to distinguish them from their background. Nevertheless, Eliezer did not stop talking.

"The finest moment always came when Grandpa added the names. The entire sheet would appear to be ready, three neat columns, one beside the other, the splendour emanating from every word and every letter, and I thought we'd found ourselves in heaven, but the most wonderful thing was still ahead of me. As he wrote, Grandpa would leave blank spaces in the text for the unutterable name of the Holy One, may He be blessed. Then he would go and cleanse himself at the mikvah, and in a sublime state he would sit down to work again. Now it was the whiteness of the parchment that shone, no letters were visible, just their white outlines. I would wait in suspense until he picked up the pen, and then the names of the Holiest alone would glow forth and eclipse everything Grandpa had written thus far. And so indeed it would happen. I would watch in total awe, for even though I had followed Grandpa's writing, forming the finished sentences in my head, now, as the unutterable names were dazzling me with their power, I was quite incapable of doing it. Grandpa could cope with it somehow. Whether or not he closed his eyes and inscribed the missing letters from memory, I don't know. Or perhaps he let them take away his sight? I wanted to ask him about it, but one day he came back from the mikvah and went blind. He sat down at the table, unfolded a sheet of paper, checked the inkwell, recited the blessing… And nothing more! He could no longer write a thing. And it was the *parshatkitisa*, what's more, the point where the Name appears twice in a row. He couldn't bear the brilliance! Silence fell, but it was different from before, it was awful. All the letters were escaping from the scroll, leaving blank parchment behind! There I stood behind Grandpa, as if spellbound. I longed to help him, but I knew I wasn't allowed to, for he was the sofer, not I. It lasted a long time, perhaps longer than the actual writing. I gazed at Grandpa, who sat hunched, covering his head with his hands, as if petrified. We could hear that he was weeping. Very loud. That was the only sound I can remember."

From beyond the trees came the creaking of a two-wheeled gig. …

"I'm not looking for Grandpa's grave. I think I know where he's buried."

Sztajn nodded.

"In our garden, so I imagine. Because we had a garden, a wonderful one, the loveliest in the world, full of sunlight, and fabulous trees grew there, and the birds sang, but I wasn't allowed to go outside, I knew I had to stay in the room beside Grandpa and watch him write out the holy scrolls, sheet after sheet. But out there, beyond the window, out there was the real brightness, the light came to a stop in the goblets of flowers, which before the spring had yet settled in for good were all but bending under its weight. It looked as if they were just about to burst, swollen to the absolute limits. That brightness even tempted me later on, when the Days of Awe were approaching and the golden remains were fading, tangled in gossamer threads just above the sun-scorched grass. Sometimes I would sneak out there on a Saturday after dinner, when Grandpa had dozed off and stopped guarding us for a while. If the gate was locked, I would squeeze between the boards – there was a narrow little passage there, a sort of chink, nothing more, but just the right size for me. Grandpa knew nothing about it – he'd have been very angry that instead of sitting over Rashi's commentary, I was wasting time on nonsense. Fear Ye the Lord! Sin has infested my house. Sin has slipped through a hole in the fence, you treacherous spawn, I only have to take my eyes off you and at once, nettles and thistles! He'd have shouted all evening, heedless to the fact that one should bid farewell to the Sabbath Queen with due respect, for it is said that he who flies into a rage has perpetrated a form of idolatry. Meanwhile it was I who was the idolater, I the *apikoros*, Elisha, who had attained paradise…"

"…and there he saw a black angel on God's throne and lost his faith," Sztajn interrupted sternly. "That is why we owe obedience to rabbi Akiva, who taught that tradition is a fence around the Torah."

"…and silence is a fence around wisdom. I know, I remember, we repeated it every Friday at table. But which side of it does wisdom come from? I would lie down there on the ground, like a pagan, or maybe like an ordinary boy craving sunshine, I would lie there for hours, so it seemed to me, although they were only short intervals. I would absorb the fragrance of wild herbs and gaze at the branches of the apple tree, where the first fruits were budding. Something would awake in me just then, a sort of yearning, my head would be flooded with heat, my body would be straining towards life…"

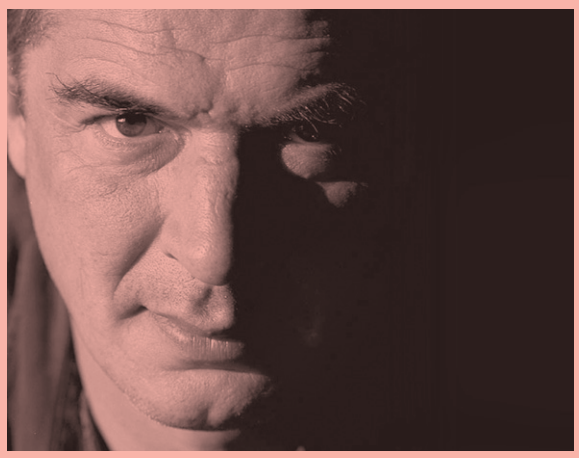
"Sinner!" jeered Sztajn. They both began to laugh. It went on for a good few seconds; perhaps they didn't want the high spirits to leave them. But Eliezer went straight back to his previous mood.

"Now it has no significance anymore," he said, running a hand across the nearest gravestone. The marks of his gnarled fingers were left on it. "Yet it bothers me. Could it be that my Grandpa, of blessed memory, could it be that he lost his sight in vain? Or maybe not? How can one ever know? Even I, as I lay there in the grass, was unable to forget the parchment and the candle, I could still smell the ink and our dark room. They blended inside me, the smell of the garden and of the calfskin, I felt as if the one could not exist without the other, so as I stood behind Grandpa watching him inscribe the sacred letters, in my thoughts I would escape to the other side of the fence, but once I was really there again, I would be drawn to Grandpa's study, and words and whole sentences would whirl before my eyes. Until it all melted into one."

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

ANDRZEJ STASIUK

YOU CAN'T GET ESPRESSO ON COUNTRY ROADS



Andrzej Stasiuk *(born 1960) writes books (over a dozen to date), plays, and articles for newspapers and magazines. He is also a publisher. The most recent books he has written include Taksim (2009), the short story collection Grochów (2012), and another collection of travel essays entitled Diary Kept Afterwards (2010). He has received a number of prestigious literary prizes, including Poland's highest, the Nike, for On the Road to Babadag.*

The wealth of texts in Andrzej Stasiuk's latest book, entitled *You Can't Get Espresso on Country Roads*, might be called travel notes – and it turns out that those travels take place further and further from Europe. We get records, then, of Stasiuk's voyages to Mongolia, to China, to Kyrgyzstan, as well as Russia's Far East.

Stasiuk seeks in those places exactly what he is always looking for (I mean his earlier traveling around the "worse" parts of Europe, particularly the Balkans), i.e., what he sees as subtle mysticism, epiphanies, enchantment, and the sometimes spectacular paradox. Not suprisingly – for he has accustomed us to it by now – he feels most himself in the middle of nowhere, in the Mongolian-Manchurian steppe or the Gobi Desert. And when he does discuss his own small homeland (Poland's Beskid Niski, where he has lived for years) or those countries nearest by to it, he focuses on "Slavic sadness," on that fragility and that curiousness of existence that make themselves felt acutely in those places. In one of these feuilletons he writes from home regarding his immediate surroundings that he lives "in the land of spirits," going on to explain exactly where he came up with that idea. His explanations are often quite detailed, partly because some of the pieces in this collection were originally intended for an international audience to whom it would make sense to explain – for instance – what Lemko culture once was and how it disappeared.

This book will please faithful readers of both Andrzej Stasiuk's artistic and argumentative prose. Although by this point we know all too well what the author dislikes (e.g. anything that is in imitation of anything, or "postmodernist crap"), and what he adores (e.g. all post-Soviet traces, be they architectural or be they mental, which he interprets as signs of the bankruptcy of a dangerous utopia), the barrier to learning that this erects does not interfere with our enjoyment. Stasiuk's pen is economical and accurate, and the writerly tidbits offered here are elegant, sophisticated literary miniatures.

Stasiuk systematically refuses to engage with the things that thrill the media on a day-to-day basis. He's absolutely true to himself, to his own obsessions, to places on the peripheries, and to the most personal of histories. Of that latter, this book contains stories of Stasiuk's childhood and early adolescence. And here there is a new tone in Stasiuk's writing – he is increasingly willing to go into his plebeian ancestors, to dig deeper and deeper into his own peasant-laborer genealogy, inevitably becoming an incorrigible nostalgic.

Dariusz Nowacki

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I'm sitting

YOU CAN'T GET ESPRESSO ON COUNTRY ROADS

in my room imagining southern Italy. I'm looking at a green valley, some shadow-dappled spruce and birch forests, rippling grass, and at the wooden houses of my village, and I'm imagining southern Italy, imagining Calabria and Basilicata. I've never been there. In two weeks I'll get on a plane in Warsaw and stop over in Rome and then fly on to Brindisi. From Brindisi I'll take a ferry to Durrës in Albania, and I'll spend a week in the south of that country, near the border with Kosovo. But on my way back, I'll also spend a week in Calabria.

Whenever I've wanted to go to Italy, I've always thought about that furthest part of the peninsula. Never about Rome, Venice, Florence, or Milan. Even Naples was just too nearby. I always imagined the south, because that's where the continent ends – that's where Europe ends. I'd picture the saltwater and the sun's heat gnawing at the earth, reclaiming it from human beings. On maps, the Italian peninsula looks like an ancient bone, like a piece of the skeleton of some primeval animal. And that must be the reason I've always imagined that southern section as so extraordinarily old, primordial, tormented by the passage of time. White rocks, merciless light, and shadows black as soot – that's how I picture it. Plus with the fixed gaze of old women sitting out in front of their houses. They look as though they could see the future completely and as if they also knew the past. Men may differ, but old women are the same everywhere. Here in Poland, in Slovakia, in Hungary, in the Balkans. They sit there in the black dress of widows with their kerchiefs and they look right through time. And that's surely how it is around there, say in Savelli, or Longobucco. I'm sure of that, but I'll go just to see it in person. I'll go to check and make sure that the old ladies of Calabria look the same as the ones in the Polish village where I live.

I won't take very much luggage, and I'll avoid the seaside resorts like the plague. Beaches in the summer look like medieval visions of hell. I'll learn fifty Italian words and find out how to get around by hitchhiking while I'm there. I'll take a lightweight sleeping bag, and every so often I'll sleep beneath the open skies, saving money on lodgings. Of course I'll be scared of tarantulas, but wine will assuage that fear. In towns and in villages, I will seek out the shade. I know that you can spend the whole day in the main square of one of these godforsaken towns, shifting slowly like the sun from side to side, and I know that sometimes that's greater and more important than all the museums of Rome and Florence. After an hour, two people will grow accustomed to the presence of a stranger, and you enter into their life as subtly as if you were invisible. They sort of see you, but at the same time they try to just carry on like they

always do, because pride does not allow them to change anything at the sight of a vagrant. Yes, sitting in the square of a little town or village you've never been to in another country is like reading a spectacular book. You comprehend some things, but the rest you just have to imagine. People's gestures are identical to the ones people use at home, and yet here you can't quite get their meaning. Only animals – cats and dogs – act the same as everywhere, reacting more to the scent of a body and the warmth of a voice than to words and appearance.

Such is my naïve plan. I look at a map of Europe and see only its borders, places from whence you can only come back. Yes, I should think "Paris," but I think "Lisbon." I should think "Venice," but I think "Danube Delta." It was there one summer that I felt the continent sinking into the sea, giving up, there, in the town of Sulina, Europe's last backwater, where I felt sadness mixed with joy at the thought that I had now reached the end, the very edge of that historical, geographical and ideological abstraction that was as real as it could possibly be here: boats rusting and ships plunged into sand dunes, that cemetery with the names of sailors from all over the world from a century ago, a sad army and the black framework of the radars searching for some sort of invasion, stray dogs and swamps stretching out tens of thousands of hectares. Can you imagine a European city that is only accessible by water? A city situated at the mouth of one of our largest rivers? Eighty kilometers by boat, by ferry, by hydrofoil, because there's simply no other way to get there.

I have nothing against the center, but I'm more drawn to the peripheries. Already the middle of the continent is becoming more monolithic. The metropolises are ceasing to be distinct. Soon we'll only be able to tell them apart by their venerable, dead landmarks. If, that is, those landmarks can even still be discerned beneath the garish coat of contemporaneity: all the same names of hotel chains, the same ads, the same ATMs, beer brands, the same parking meters, the same arrangement of supermarket shelves and the same lineup at the movie theaters.

I think we'll start heading for the peripheries quite soon, to the limits of the continent, to the lands where old women in kerchiefs sit outside. Obviously and fortunately not everyone. Only those interested in the past not as anachronism and superstition, but as the site of their own origins.

MAY

Someone I was talking to recently made me realize that we live in a country whose weather is never boring. You ought to try living in the tropics, he said. It's pouring rain for half the year. And throughout the other half there's monotonous and stultifying heat. I pictured myself in that meteorological prison, and I'm now all the readier to praise Poland for that mutability of hers, that unpredictability, that sequence of seasons that always take too long coming or last too long, but compared with the tropics, those seasons do at least have that great variety.

So praise be to the motherland, and praise be all the more so to the arrival of May. To that plain and simple miracle that comes and covers the post-winter, posthumous nudity of the earth. That dresses the skeleton made up of mud, stalks, and last year's leftovers. A golden dust floats down like holy grace from the heavens, a greenish mist, and hour after hour, day after day, it condenses into leaves, crystallizes into plant clumps, penetrates into the depths of the earth, and like a kind of supernatural catalyst, it releases the earth's warm odors. I could sit in front of my house for hours and watch, smell, and listen to the most beautiful of the seasons gathering its momentum. But it almost never works out, because there is always somewhere to go, to head to, to travel around. Such is my lot. But I'm not complaining. Because it looks even nicer from the road, on the move, from that passing perspective. As though I were flowing down a stream of green blood inside the body of the motherland. As though that Poland lying on her back, hot, were traversed by veins and arteries that pulse from excess, from readiness, from potentiality. We live inside, but we need May to remind us of the beauty of those insides.

A Saturday twilight begins. Green shadows stretch across the road. You're standing in the Central Delicatessen in Ciężkowice waiting to buy a Coke and a Red Bull for the road. Some kids ride up; there's music. They're sporting white t-shirts, silver chains, and East Asian tattoos. The basses rumble. Somehow the girls are already suntanned. The inside of the store is big, bright, as colorful as a movie or a dream. And that Saturday, that May, those kids blend together and create a sort of festive, even ecstatic cocktail. The boys wear cologne; the girls wear perfume. They look like happy, self-conscious newlyweds when they load up their beer, sausage, mustard, bread, charcoal, and kindling into their vehicles. The boys wear shorts and tennis shoes. The girls' eyes are lined in black. Women a little bit older ask for fifty decagrams of this, ten of that, fifteen of this other thing. And all of it sliced. That plodding and imperious whim of having everything sliced for you has always irritated me, as though no one had a knife at home. But not now, because this looks like getting ready for a wedding, a reception, a feast, something lavish. Three types of ham, headcheese at twenty zlotys per kilo, radishes, lettuce, a two-liter bottle of orange soda, and to top it all off, great puffed-up cushions of chips in four different flavors. An older couple around my own age stands facing the wine shelves. Their memory reaches back to the time when wine was just wine. Domestic and Bulgarian. Sweet and dry. White, red, and vermouth. And yet here are shelves that reach all the way up to the ceiling. They stand there and whisper into one another's ears. Discreetly they point at this or that bottle. Lost like children in the fairytale interior of the Central Delicatessen, enveloped in that Saturday atmosphere, that May atmosphere, which feels a bit like a special dispensation, a bit like license to go kind of crazy with old friends and a bottle of Tokay Furmint.

Outside, the shadows have grown even longer and greener. Women are gathering around little shrines. Grandmothers and granddaughters. No mothers. Old age transmits its mysterious wisdom and most likely its unshakeable faith to those who are ready to receive them. That same image all across the country: grandmothers and granddaughters on little wooden benches at the feet of figures draped with plastic flora. I can remember when those flowers were fresh or made of crepe paper. From the latter the first rainfall would wash out all the color. The young girls sit in dignified and serious poses, unconsciously imitating the old ladies. I can't hear the words of their litanies, but of course I know them by heart.

Translated by Jennifer Croft

ARTUR DOMOSŁAWSKI

DEATH IN AMAZONIA

Artur Domosławski *(born 1967) is a journalist and writer who has published five books to date. His main areas of interest are Latin America, anti-globalist movements and social conflict. He was a pupil and friend of Ryszard Kapuściński, about whom he wrote a biography which was published in Poland in 2010. It was soon translated into several languages and has become an international bestseller.*

It is the twenty-fourth of May, 2011, in the state of Pará, Brazil. Unknown perpetrators fire at two ecologists, José Claudio da Silva and his wife Maria, who are killed on the spot. The killers cut off José's ear. It will be proof for the person who ordered the assassinatio n. It turns out that this is not an isolated incident. Peasant leaders and ecologists who live in Amazonia receive threats and live in constant fear. "In the state of Pará, over the past fifteen years, 205 rural activists have been murdered, and in the last forty years more than 800. Fewer than five of the people who ordered the killings are in prison," says one of this book's central characters. The police and the local authorities watch the whole process passively, or perhaps even take part in it. So what is it all about?

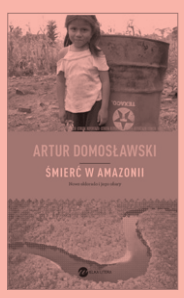
When we start to read *Death in Amazonia* we think we are going to be accompanying the author on a journalistic inquiry which will lead us to the solving of a mystery. We will learn the names of the guilty parties, we will hear a just verdict or, in the worst case, we shall ponder the indolence of the courts in Latin America. However, we do not suspect that the threads running from the events described in the book will lead all the way to our own homes. And that after reading it we shall have to view the world differently, including our own immediate environment.

The three excellent reports that form *Death in Amazonia* unite a single topic – the devastation of the natural environment on a major scale (cutting down the Amazonian rain forests in Brazil, gold mining in Peru and oil extraction in Ecuador), and the consequent destruction of the local communities. Domosławski makes ordinary-but-unusual people the heroes of his book, who risk everything to defend the environment and their right to a dignified life. Their fight – so it appears – is inevitably doomed to failure, though the final text offers a glimmer of hope. Domosławski talks to farmers, local activists, investigative journalists, lawyers and businessmen. Patiently, thread by thread, he disentangles a complex network of connections between those who commit the killings, local business, the world of politics and multinational corporations. He shows the ruthlessness of the businessmen and the politicians, their deceit, manipulation and propaganda tricks.

From the details of specific situations, Domosławski moves to an outline of the broader picture – and this is one of the moments when reading the book becomes particularly painful. If until now we have always imagined we have nothing to do with the devastation of the Amazon rain forests, it is time to look around our own homes... We will not feel any better after reading the other two reports.

"We condemn these crimes, this one and every one that follows. But can we swear that we take no part in sharing the plunder?" asks Domosławski, citing another remarkable reporter, Sven Lindqvist. This book, restrained, to the point, full of facts and names, has explosive power. Reading it makes you feel like going outside and starting to change the world. And perhaps it's high time we did it.

Małgorzata Szczurek



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they made

DEATH IN AMAZONIA

seventeen holes in his body.

Four of the bullets pierced his abdominal cavity, six went into the right lung, one went into the inner part of his neck on the left side, another one lodged in the back of his head and the rest wounded various parts of his body.

Forty-three-year-old Edmundo Becerra, whom everyone called Esmundo, was watering his cattle at a place named Pampa del Ahijadero, not far from the village of Yanacanchilla, where he lived with his wife and four-year-old son.

The murder victim's sister, Jovita, saw the killers from some distance away – two men dressed in red and blue ponchos, one in a cap, the other in a hat. Later it turned out there was a third man on the spot too. Before the execution one of the killers had apparently said that all people like Edmundo would end up the same way. Shortly after, shots were heard. Seventeen of them. The killers ran off in the direction of the highway to Bambamarca. They didn't steal anything. The motive of robbery was ruled out from the start.

I'm looking through cuttings from the local press in the days immediately after the killing.

One of the papers reported that Esmundo was getting ready to go to Lima for a meeting which was going to be attended by the members of a committee opposed to the mining corporation's practices and by representatives of the Ministry. It concerned exploitation of San Cirilo hill, which he was against, as was everyone living in the village. One of the local activists, Ivan Salas, raised the alarm that Yanacocha-Newmont was going to arm highlanders whom it had won over to its side. Apparently they would shoot any of their neighbours who refused to sell their land to the corporation, and who were opposed to the exploitation of San Cirilo hill. "We are dealing with a gang which cooperates with the corporation's office in charge of buying up land. A few weeks ago, when an engineer came to conduct topographic research, the same gang fired at him, preventing him from doing his job."

Representatives of the corporation replied that these were all lies.

The newspapers that supported Yanacocha-Newmont wrote that the motive for Esmundo's killing was "to settle scores" and "a fight about land."

Somebody recalled that a few months earlier, following the murder of Isidro Llanos – another local leader and critic of the corporation – a representative of Yanacocha-Newmont had publicly declared that the man had died of a heart attack. In fact, Isidro Llanos was shot during a clash between protesting workers on one side, and the corporation's security guards and the police on the other.

Marco told me the most about Esmundo and the circumstances of the killing.

He was not a typical, indigent highlander from the Cajamarca region, says Marco. Educated, a vet by profession, he had a large piece of land and a small herd of cattle. He was a dairy farmer.

When the corporation was getting ready to exploit new deposits situated a short distance above the village of Yanacanchilla, Esmundo founded the Front for Protection of the Environment. *No pasaran!* In response, the corporation brought in people from outside the region. They looked like indigenous Andeans, and they started to settle in the terrain above the village. They set up a rival Front for Protection of the Environment and Development – the typical strategy of dividing people to be able to say later on, "Look how many of the locals support us". The "importees" had guns and walkie-talkies, and operated as an organised group.

Conflict erupted when Esmundo tried watering his cattle in the lagoons located on land occupied by the newcomers. The ownership law does not cover the lagoons, and the owners of the land around them have a duty to enable access, for instance for farmers who want to water their cattle. But the newcomers had no respect for the law.

He started receiving threats: don't interfere with mining issues. He was showered in insults of the worst kind.

One day some armed men beat Esmundo up. He drove to the police station in Chanta Alta, two hours away from the village, to report the incident. Go and see the judge in Cajamarca, the policemen told him. And they laughed.

Others who were intimidated heard men from the armed group boasting that they were untouchable because they were protected by Yanacocha-Newmont.

Soon after, Esmundo was shot dead.

The killing, says Marco, is reminiscent of the typical elimination of an inconvenient community leader, in Colombian or Brazilian style. The project to exploit the new deposit was suspended. The "imported" highlanders dissolved into thin air, and their front for development disappeared along with them.

Esmundo's village was traumatised. It is a small community, consisting of forty-five families at the time, among whom fear, mistrust and suspicion prevailed. The crime broke those people, says Marco, it did them harm. Genaro López, Esmundo's closest associate in the struggle, moved to Cajamarca. He now keeps his distance from social activism and refuses to talk about his friend's death.

Esmundo's wife and child left the village, but nobody knows where they went.

From what they say, Esmundo was an exceptional person, "the second most important leader of the local communities" (after Marco Arana). Always willing to help, charismatic and intelligent – all this made him politically inconvenient. Dangerous.

The press and the bulletins issued by the protest movements record that he was the sixth leader from the Cajamarca region to be murdered in recent years.

In 2003: José Llajahuanca from San Ignacio.

In 2004: Juan Montenegro from Santa Cruz.

In 2005: Reinberto Herrera and Melanio Garcia from San Ignacio.

In 2006: Isidro Llanos from Combayo.

They died in various circumstances, usually at the hand of unidentified culprits. Isidro Llanos had organised a protest against labour conditions at the corporation, which bordered on slavery. He was shot during a scuffle between striking workers and security guards supported by the police.

Esmundo was the victim of an execution planned in cold blood.

It's hard to speculate on the motives. The only possibility arises spontaneously, even if one would like to reject it. Is a chance incident impossible? Hypothetically it's possible. Yet who would kill Esmundo and why?

But here nobody believes in a chance incident or that someone was settling scores.

[...]

Thanks to Esmundo's sister's statement, the police soon established the names of the killers: they were brothers Aguinaldo and Fortunato Rodríguez. There was also a third man at the murder site, who was let off the charges.

When the police tried to arrest the chief assassin, there was a shoot-out, and Aguinaldo was killed on the spot. The circumstances of the incident aroused suspicion that they didn't want to catch the killer at all. Was he killed on purpose so that he wouldn't testify in court?

Mirtha received some information which makes this hypothesis seem plausible. The killer was locally known to be a gunman, and everybody knew he was hired to carry out sentences on commission. The day before his death he called Congressman Werner Cabrero, and spoke to his assistant, Ivan Salas. Rodríguez declared that he was planning to hand himself over to the police and to reveal who had paid for Esmundo's killing. The next day, during the attempt to arrest him, he was killed. According to the police, he had been resisting arrest, but Mirtha reckoned that was a fairytale – after all, twenty policemen had been sent to arrest him.

A few years later Mirtha's theory reinforced an investigation into a completely different case. In 2011 a scandal erupted when the security firm Business Track was found to be eavesdropping on two government politicians. During the inquiry it came to light that for several years this firm had been bugging social activists, institutions and enterprises. One of the circles within which it had amassed a very large amount of material, including recordings of phone conversations, consisted of people connected with the Grufides organisation [which campaigns for environmental protection]. Mirtha thinks someone extremely wealthy must have paid for all those years and years of surveillance, most probably a mining firm: the recordings produced by bugging the organisation's activists were found in a file marked "extraction industry". Among the recordings was a conversation between Mirtha and Ivan Salas, in which Salas said that he could not believe Esmundo's killer had resisted arrest, as the day before he had declared that he was going to hand himself over to the police. Salas accused the policemen of carrying out an execution.

Mirtha says there are too many chance incidents here.

Marco spreads his hands helplessly. We don't know who ordered Esmundo's assassination, he says. We do know that a leader of the local community, a man of the highest level of awareness, guided by high ethical standards, was eliminated and is no longer among us.

The killer's accomplice, Fortunato Rodríguez, was given a fifteen-year jail sentence. He did not reveal the motive for the killing. He was released in 2011 for good conduct, after serving less than five years. They say that in prison he enjoyed privileges and was constantly telling everyone he wouldn't be incarcerated for long.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

KATARZYNA PAWLAK

NOT FOR ALL THE TEA IN CHINA

Katarzyna Pawlak *is a sociologist, translator and co-author of a textbook for learning Chinese. A traveller and blogger, her blog www.zachinyludowe.net, written while she was living and studying in China, was the inspiration for this book. She has lived in Taipei, Beijing and Shanghai. What she enjoys most are unhurried journeys within China.*

The dictionary translates the word 'foreigner' into Chinese as *wàiguórén*, or 'person from an outside country'. That sounds neutral, but the Chinese often prefer to use the term *lăowài*, meaning 'old outsider'. And this is a completely different story – *lăowài* implies 'you're not from here, and you never will be'.

"'Mummy, look, there's a *lăowài* coming!' says a little kid, knee high to a grasshopper, pointing me out, and his mother laughs and says: 'So small, and yet so eloquent!'" writes Pawlak. *"Aaa, lăowài"*, say workmen and groups of adolescent boys, pointing a finger at her. They often follow this exclamation by squealing: "Hellooo! Okaaaay?" then they giggle, and run off.

Labelled with the epithet *lăowài*, Pawlak remarks that two months down the line, the face looking out at her from the mirror was not one she recognised. "It wasn't Kasia any more, a Polish woman (essentially still a young one), a PhD student, but a large, pasty-faced 'old-outsider' with hair the colour of straw and a great big hooter." Every foreigner feels this sense of being alien in China. Asked for the thousandth time if he/she likes China and if he /she likes the food, even if he/she has lived there for years, a foreigner still try to convince the Chinese that he/she's not an 'old stranger' but a human being. Pawlak tries too. However, even after delivering an academic paper in fluent Chinese at Shanghai University, she is asked the usual astonished questions – if she knows who Confucius was, and, inevitably, if she likes Chinese food.

To help her describe the Central State (which is the meaning of the common name for China, *Zhongguo*) she recruits some Chinese words, such as *benben zu* – literally 'the racing tribe', in other words people who travel about the country to earn their living, without ever settling in one spot. Or *yi zu* – 'the ant-like tribe', i.e. impecunious people from the provinces who inhabit the outskirts of Beijing or Shanghai.

Not For All the Tea in China is a very funny and highly intelligent description of contemporary China. By education a sociologist and Sinologist, Pawlak is an excellent writer, with a talent for finding just the right expressions and drawing spot-on conclusions. She spent two years in Shanghai and Beijing, accompanying the locals on trains and in the streets, in the mountains and at Chinese New Year, watching television with them and reading their newspapers. She observed them eating sunflower seeds, mugging up strings of words in English and doing so much spitting on the train that there wasn't a dry spot to put down her backpack.

Don't be fooled by the light tone – *Not For All the Tea in China* is a solid piece of sociology, consisting of small treatises on Chinese television and internet use, on the complicated *hukou* (registration) system, the health service, social inequalities, the dowry which in China is contributed by the man, the role of women, and many other issues.

Maria Kruczkowska

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NOT FOR ALL THE TEA IN CHINA

WHEN I WAS

looking for an apartment to rent and explained at the accommodation agencies what price range I was interested in, I was offered flats in the "older blocks". "How old is that?" "About twenty-five years old." Accustomed to living in a prime specimen of socialist-realist architecture in Warsaw, a solid colossus in the Muranów district with walls so thick they can bend titanium drill bits, I thought it was funny to call a thirty-year-old building "older", and didn't really understand the problem (or else I didn't want to understand; anyone who has ever been a long way from home facing an extended stay is familiar with the circumstances in which decisions about choosing accommodation are made). People tentatively told me "the quality is not the best". I thought that might mean there were no lifts, or that the place had the typical attributes of Polish pre-fabs – poor acoustics, old windows or crooked walls. Apart from that, as you do, I thought the sort of things which could happen while living in a less-than top-quality building weren't going to happen to me, of course. Or else they'd just involve minor, non-specific repairs, a smiling handyman, a few little nails or a few little gaskets, which for someone who has ended up in a city of twenty-five million with one single suitcase, completely on her own and with no home to go to, would be no problem at all. Anyway, I'd have a roof over my head, electricity, gas (I was pretty thrilled to learn that gas is installed everywhere here, so you don't have to lug cylinders about as I once had to when living in an apartment in Taiwan), and water. What else could I possibly need?

All the more because I had found an apartment (the one in which I am now sitting and writing; it's not likely to blow up today, is it?) which was nice, clean, bright and attractive. Of course there was all sorts of stuff in the stairwell – old buckets, broken furniture, a canary cage with no canary, and Momo, the neighbours' bobtail (I hardly recognised him as a bobtail because he'd been shaved to keep him cool). He sleeps on the stairs because there's no room for him in their studio flat.

I was even more attracted by the whole estate, consisting roughly of:

About a dozen shabby blocks with a million annexes + residents (who wander around the estate in their pyjamas, decent ones, with bright patterns, and as I am later to discover, suited to the time of year: in spring and summer they're cotton, and in autumn and winter they're thicker, quilted).

A market, where as well as vegetables, spices and tofu, you can buy live chickens and pigeons. You can also ask to have them butchered on the spot.

A man I have already mentioned, who sells live frogs in a bag made of nylon thread. SLL, a Taiwanese woman (with reddish coffee-brown hair and a smile from ear to ear) whom I met at classes and to whom I took an instant liking, prompts me to buy one, to keep as a domestic pet. When I start by asking the frog man the price of a single frog, he makes sure, by asking: "You mean one *jin*, 300 grams? Gut it for you?"

Another man I have already mentioned, who sells God-knows-what or offers God-knows-what services (to the very end of my stay in Shanghai I will only ever see an empty container, blood flowing down the street, and that guy with a sinister, blood-stained blade in his hand).

The Local Revolutionary Committee (that's what I called it, in honour of the nosey committees that informed on people during the Cultural Revolution; an alternative definition is the Gerontocracy). Its members sit at tiny tables by the main junction of paths, keeping an eye on things. In pyjamas, they have snow-white hair and play cards, with an old dog panting at their feet. "That fellow came out of her place this morning, though they haven't had a wedding". "That lady threw out a perfectly good television – she must have suddenly got rich, on the fiddle most likely."

Some little shops and snack bars, including a café run by four generations of Hui people. Their women, who wear black lace headscarves and yell at the grimy kids scrambling about under the tables, make the best mutton with caraway seed, and the men (who have little beards and round white skull caps), through a series of spectacular swings and punches make the best noodles in the world. And at the Feast of the Sacrifice they slaughter a sheep, staining the local pavement red.

Hordes of cats, including a stripy queen (who apparently, when the neighbour whose door she was miaowing outside for two days finally let her in, immediately gave birth to six kittens).

In other words, everything looks okay. What's wrong with all this? What about the fact that it's a relic of a disappearing world, which nobody wants to save anymore because it's standing in the way of the inexorable laws of *fazhan* – development? In this case an "older building" means one that belongs to an older era, when different rules prevailed and a there was different logic from the one that's in force today. That is what my interlocutors were trying to tell me. My apartment is a leftover from the world in which apartments were an entitlement. They were at once a duty owed to the citizen, and also an expression of goodwill by the state and its nerve ending nearest to the citizen, the *danwei* (or work unit). These apartments were not subject to the criteria and principles of the market, because those did not yet exist. But there did have to be a very large number of apartments, right now, this minute, instantly. In the face of a mission on that scale, who would have asked questions about quality, especially as they were free? A nice little flat from the *danwei*, a long-awaited *yongjiu* ("everlasting") bicycle on subscription, a sewing machine and a little plastic radio were the ultimate dream, fate tipping the wink to say it's all working out, everything's going in the right direction. A minor stabilisation, a nice, safe little world.

Nowadays estates like this one are still breathing, they're still alive, but it is life up the blind alley of omnipresent, all-powerful *fazhan*. For the time being, fitting after fitting, step after step, stairwell after stairwell, the place is slowly falling apart. But later on, suddenly it will only take a few days, a week perhaps, for the washing, the bazaar, the chickens and the Hui people to clear out, and for the windows to gape blankly. Then one after another the concrete slabs will be sliced off the skeletons, the skeletons will turn to dust, and new world flats will arise in their place – *shangpin fang*, meaning "commercial". With no pyjamas, no man with a blade, and no stripy cat, but with surveillance, a little fountain, and underground parking instead. Maybe even a swimming pool?

However, before this process gets underway at my estate too, first of all in one little apartment, in the block with a cat and a bald bobtail, in merely two days a whole wall goes mouldy – becoming entirely covered in a green coating, like grass, but growing vertically. ("There's a drainpipe in the wall, so what do you expect?" the estate handyman enlightens me, one of the many who pass through my four walls in the course of the year). And now what? Now there's a nasty gas leak. Something came loose in literally just a few minutes, and it's impossible to turn off the supply, because the gas pipe runs not through the stairwell, but through my apartment, right through the middle of my kitchen; that was how they built these places, to save time and money. A remote voice from the gas emergency service (he's sitting safely somewhere miles away, no doubt in a brand-new tower block or a "commercial" building, the wise guy!) which I call in a panic, tells me to open all the windows, close the door of the room where I sleep and wait until tomorrow morning, when they'll come with a new pipe and a new meter.

It's the last thing I want to do, but I think I'll go out and dance the night away.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

WOJCIECH TOCHMAN

ELI, ELI

Wojciech Tochman *(born 1969) is a journalist and writer, one of the most widely translated Polish news reporters. A co-founder of the Reportage Institute, his earlier books include Like Eating A Stone, on the aftermath of the war in Bosnia, and Today We're Going To Draw Death, on the genocide in Rwanda.*

This new book by Wojciech Tochman – or rather by Tochman and photographer Grzegorz Wełnicki, since rather than being mere illustrations, in a way the pictures are the driving force behind the action and an essential part of the journalistic narrative – is not long, but it works on many levels and is quite an ambitious undertaking.

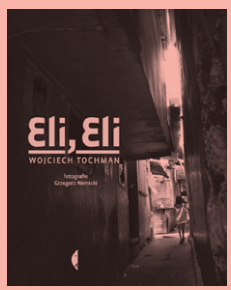
In the foreground we have a shocking account of the slums of Manila, with several distinct central characters describing their lives, including an unfortunate girl who suffers from a mysterious illness. These mini-narratives give emphasis to the broader picture which Tochman paints, showing an excluded society of beggars betrayed by their own country and by their richer neighbours. Tochman convinces us very eloquently that Americans make a major contribution to the poverty and crime in Manila (by maintaining military bases in the Philippines), as does the dominant Catholic Church, which here is truly Pharisee-like in its nature.

But the book has an equally important level of twofold meta-narrative inspired by the reporter's and the photographer's experiences in the Philippines. First of all, it considers the possibilities of intervention from the outside – by individuals rather than institutions – into this and similar worlds of continual misery. Tochman seems to be asking himself what he can actually do for these people, and he tells us what happened when, within the limits of their modest capabilities, he and Wełnicki tried to do something.

Secondly, the book discusses the issue of the semi-pornographic status of images and accounts of human misery, and thus the basic ethical issue facing everyone who discusses and documents it. This also involves the simplest, most obvious things: "When a book is successful," Tochman reminds us, "the author goes to meetings with readers in his home country, and if it's a success, he goes abroad too, because he is invited by libraries, cultural centres, colleges, book fairs and literary festivals. He sits before a full or not full auditorium, and talks about human suffering, humiliation, fear and contempt. About injustice, inequality and exploitation. He is wise with a wisdom that is not his own. Often he expresses the thoughts of the people whom he interviewed when he was researching the subject. Without people, a reporter doesn't exist."

Eli, Eli – the title is from Christ's words on the cross – is full of pain, anger and despair. It poses questions which do not necessarily have to be answered in the way the author seems to be answering them, but from which it is impossible to escape.

Marcin Sendecki



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ELI, ELI

the eyes

of the child looking at us are not happy. A face behind wire, behind the white bars of a shelf from an old fridge brought from the junk shop. Moist, mistrustful, immobile eyes. This is Pia. Three years old, with ulcerations on her skin, she doesn't speak, moves feebly and rarely smiles. She is sitting in the black hole which is her home. It's a foul-smelling cupboard, less than two metres high, knocked together from plywood and rags. The little girl's younger brother doesn't smile at all. This is Buboy. He squirms and scratches. He coughs. Nearby is the caring hand of their grandmother, or rather great-grandmother, probably. She is almost eighty, and the children's mother is twenty. There is no information on at least one generation. But none of us asks about details of that kind, none of us is going to bother his head with it. These children have been abandoned, says our guide. Their mother is a drug addict, and nobody knows if she's alive or where she is. Their father is in jail. There's only the grandmother, who has nothing and says almost nothing. She probably won't live for much longer. It's a sad business, a sad sight.

The people in our fairly sizeable group have all come to take photographs of poverty. We have flown here from Madrid, Paris, Frankfurt, Warsaw, London, Moscow, Tel Aviv, Sydney, Toronto and New York. Put simply, you could say we're from the Far West. We've reached Adriatico Street, where there are plenty of whites, dropped our backpacks at Frendly's hostel, and seen an advert for travellers of the Lonely-Planet-reading kind: "True Manila! The real face of Manila! See the city that's closed to tourists! Free of charge!" Five p.m. at the hostel next door, which is called Where2Next.

The organiser of the tour is Edwin N., a guy under the age of forty, who lives in Onyx Street.

°

This is Edwin N.'s story.

"...I was nine years old, my regular daily timetable was this, about noon I'd spend an hour collecting rubbish, plastic and junk, at one I went to school, then at five I'd go to the supplier to pick up copies of the evening newspaper *Red Light District*, use them as a pillow and sleep for a while, on the asphalt, but straightaway I had to get my act together, run along the smoke-filled highway until five in the morning selling the papers, at six the morning papers came, back to the highway until nine, two hours sleep at last, wake-up, rubbish, plastic, scrap metal, school...

"...white people don't come to our street, who would dare? One day I look and see a couple walking along, a guy and

a gal, they're lost, they looked really interesting, I couldn't stop staring at their fair skin, so I shouted out to them, 'Hey, Joe!' That was all the English I knew, they took my picture, smiled and went on, I'm not giving them that picture just for nothing, I thought, so I ran after them, they lived quite nearby, some sort of Christian missionaries, I don't remember, there are all sorts of people hanging around here with Jesus on their lips, they give the kids a lollypop each and at once they want your soul, these ones didn't, so I made friends with them, they took me to Wendy's for a hamburger, they showed me the cinema, an American movie, so I showed them the real Manila, then they left, before that they gave me some stationery and stamps and told me to write to them, in English, they came back, they gave me a guitar and taught me to play, they had a nice house here, full of books, they took pictures of me again, the only pictures I have from my childhood, then they left again, they sent dollars, they didn't want anything for them, no Our Father, I studied, my father hit me every day, hard and in the face, I decided to get away, I was about thirteen by then, I ran away from home, I didn't pick up my letters and I lost touch with the missionaries…

"…I was nineteen, I'd finished middle school, I had to find something to eat, I sold cigarettes on the highway, my mum sold used clothes and helped me, and I helped her, depending who'd done more trade that day, I studied criminology at college, I was going to be a policeman, I've got seven sisters and I had to protect them, but I wasn't suited to it, I'm too nervous, anyway a policeman wouldn't have a life here, I was still afraid of my father, so I didn't stop my studies, I worked at a video shop, I cleaned a cinema after the movies, a dreadful job, I cleaned the bogs and floors at Robinsons, a hard job, three people to clean a huge shopping mall, they didn't pay us, the employer did a runner, what could I do, I sold hamburgers at Wendy's, from four in the morning to ten in the evening, work and studies, round the clock for several years, I also studied classical guitar at music school, we had a band at college, where was I to get the time and strength for that? I got to the age of twenty-six, finished college, got married, we have two children, our daughter's called Jessica after the American missionary, and our son's Timmi like a famous actor in a soap opera here…

"…finally I opened my own Titanic Video Shop, where my drunken father threw up in the doorway every day, so after a year the Titanic sank, there were various businesses, which also sank one after the other, none of us here has learned how to run a business, on Onyx Street nothing ever works, no success, you get into debt and fall into the abyss, I was happy, I acted in a film, it wasn't easy, I played the leader of a gang, they killed me, then I smiled in a coffee ad, they used to call me Double Espresso round here, finally I ended up at Friendly's on Adriatico Street, there are lots of foreigners there, they'd come, they'd go, they'd leave open jam and cheese in the fridge, you could keep yourself going with them around, someone asked where I lived, and I thought, white people once helped me, so now I'll help them …

"…I'll show them my real city free of charge, it wouldn't be fair to take cash for showing poverty…

"…before going out I always have some food ready in little plastic bags, some rice and a tin of sardines, none of the white people pays for it, we walk through the slums and we hand it out, each of them has a few bags, each of them has to lean over a beggar, look him in the eyes and give it to him, that's how we teach the foreigners that the Philippines are not just green islands and turquoise ocean, that we've got another world here too, dark and stinking, some of them are stiff with confusion, it's the first time in their lives they've given food to a poor man, without a word, though we usually talk in English here, some of them have no common language with the poor, others cry, others try to outdo each other with the photos they've taken, and some say things about us that's shameful to repeat…

"…when we're done, I hold out my cap and ask for a spare penny, we'll use it to have supper together at the hostel in the evening, and we'll divide what's left in half, some for the education of the children on Onyx Street, we'll spend some on food for the next tour, we'll buy rice and sardines, maybe something else, there was a first group, then a second, a tenth, one photographer from Poland, his name was Gregory, he told me to call these tours True Manila, so I did that, there was a twentieth group, a thirtieth, a sixtieth, we've got a Facebook page, I like doing it, I like showing the whites our poverty, I like tall white women, white people trust me, they follow me all the way here, which is a mistake, because I could be a crook, I live on Onyx, or I could pull a knife, give me your money and fuck off, but luckily for you I'm OK, I'm one of the Onyx kids, not a murderer, not a thief, not a terrorist, we're just ordinary ragamuffins, we're born here by the dozen, we collect scrap metal to get money for rice, we die young, come and look, come and photograph our lives without any fear, without a bad conscience, our Onyx is yours!"

°

Obviously, Edwin N. doesn't tell that to every outsider from the Far West. Who would put up with all those details, who would take that much notice of them? True Manila relies on looking rather than talking. Snap! Snap! We each get a few little bags of rice from Edwin and set off among the beggars.

"*S'il vous plaît,*" says a Frenchman who thinks the entire world is still francophone, over a skeleton of indefinite gender which is barely breathing.

"*Tome!*" says a female tourist from Madrid who thinks her words are understood here more than a hundred years since the Spanish left, over a man with long hair.

"*Bitte schön!*" says a German. This one's just exaggerating.

"Here you are," says the Englishman, who is in a comfortable position, because these days nobody wonders why the whole world communicates in his language.

"Look at those little monkeys," says a blond man to a blonde woman. "They're waiting for food."

Pia and Buboy. They're sitting, motionless, on a box outside their cupboard-home. In the box there are four hens, their only source of livelihood: for an egg you can buy rice. Someone takes out a banana – monkeys love bananas, don't they? The grandmother peels the fruit, divides it in half and hands it to the children. By now we know there's no mother or father here. Nobody asks any further questions. And nobody sees the little girl's eyes suddenly becoming round. They're getting bigger and bigger. Everyone is concentrating on their cameras or iPhones. They all want to grab the last light of the day. Granny's blind, we're blind, only Edwin can see what's happening: he abruptly seizes the little girl and turns her upside-down. Pia is choking. And then she spits out the banana half, intact, into Edwin's hand. She knows how to swallow, but she doesn't know how to chew. Who'd have expected it!

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

ANGELIKA KUŹNIAK

PAPUSZA

Angelika Kuźniak *(born 1974) is a journalist and reporter, three times a winner of the Grand Press award. In 2009 she published a well-received volume of reportage entitled Marlene, which is about Marlene Dietrich's final years.*

The story of Bronisława (or Bronka) Wajs, known as Papusza, is branded with exotic otherness. Born in the early twentieth century, this Gypsy poet has always been a curiosity from the world of folklore, a bit like the 'bearded lady', a fascinating figure from the freak show, but has she ever been taken seriously? Is she a 'Gypsy poet', or just a poet? This book clearly shows what influences shaped Papusza – of course the world of the gypsy camp was raw material for her, but so was popular literature. Born with innate talent and curiosity about the world, in defiance of her own destiny this Gypsy child learned to read, and then write, and went on to devour all the novels she could lay her hands on. As she put it: 'I was from the gypsy camp, now I'm from nowhere. Dyźko said "Don't write no poems or you'll be unhappy". But like a fool I did write them, and now the result is that I don't belong nowhere.' Romantic ideals that come true can turn into nightmares. In this particular ideal a girl could be an object, but never the active subject. The prophetic Gypsy girl is original, but what's to be done with her? How do you get rid of her? The over-sensitivity of a girl who endured the hell of rape within marriage and domestic violence, then witnessed the extermination of several ethnicities, is tinged with madness. This insanity has nothing in the least poetic about – it must be removed and shut away in a special remedial institution.

'Papusza' means 'dolly', an unofficial name born from the little girl's prettiness (by using the name Papusza instead of Bronka, Kuźniak not only gives her a voice, but also releases her into the world of her 'own' tradition). But here the name 'Papusza' has more important significance; gender, social origin and family relations caused her to become a 'dolly' in a more dramatic, literal sense, as she was passed from hand to hand, and reacted to instructions in an almost robotic way. Her second husband, the much older Dionizy, kidnapped her and forced her to marry him. She was saved by her love for a young boy called Witold, but when he disappeared, she was driven into insanity. This sort of story looks good in a literary text; Kuźniak shows what happens when a great love of this kind that defies the whole world, a genuinely romantic 'magnetism of hearts' really does occur.

Kuźniak analyses Papusza's life story tactfully and subtly, as if from behind the scenes, and poses questions without offering answers. She shows her relationship with her mother, who is an authority for her, but does not support her decision to leave Dionizy, who beats and rapes her. Her mother, whose back is covered in 'snake-like scars inflicted by a whip' (in Papusza's words, referring to the fact that a Gypsy husband can do anything he likes to a woman and nobody will protest, because that is the custom; she also describes her memories of childhood games of 'families', the main feature of which was 'wife' beating), must support herself and her child in the belief that no other life is possible. As in the classic pattern of domestic violence, the victim makes sense of the tormentor's actions. The mother will never help her daughter to break free of the power of her brutal husband because she cannot deny the rationale of her own fate or contradict the order of her own world. In time, Papusza learns that it is meaningless: it is just a function of somebody else's existence. Loyal to the principles of the Gypsy community, Dionizy Wajs was entirely within his rights, and Papusza was a puppet in his hands. From the outsider's point of view, he committed a whole series of crimes, but nobody was interested in saving Papusza; reading was what brought her salvation. Meanwhile, in her songs she not only saved the oral culture of the nomads which was destroyed when they were forced to settle, but she also preserved the memory of the Gypsy genocide.

In *Papusza*, Angelika Kuźniak presents a multiple portrait: of a person, a poet, a reader, a daughter, mother, wife, artist, and lover. The figure of Papusza shimmers, sparkles, and never ceases to amaze. She is 'stupid' in the eyes of her greedy, cruel husband, 'a traitor' in the eyes of the Gypsy community, 'a great, primitive, innate talent' in the eyes of the Polish poets, and in her own eyes she is helpless and weak, furious and desperate. This account of an 'accursed poet', who prompted great pride as well as great shame, and an ocean of pain, this book about a superhumanly strong person may be the start of a longer conversation. Above all, it might give an opportunity to Papusza's own *Songs* to be seen as more than just exotic gems, but as poetry testifying to her life and times.

Anna Marchewka

ANGELIKA KUŹNIAK
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PAPUSZA

Papusza will

never forget the day she began learning to write. So she says, and smiles (she can clearly be heard to smile on the recording).

Her mother woke her "with the sunrise". Little Papusza got up, left the tent, and smoothed down her crumpled skirt.

She can't remember if it was her mother who plaited her hair that day. And if she stroked her head. (Though generally there was no tenderness. "She had too tough a life to cuddle me, the oldest.") She remembers her mother standing in front of her and saying twice over: "You mustn't miss an opportunity. A Gyspy woman cannot return to the camp empty-handed." *Be cunning and deceitful*, she was taught.

Papusza put on an apron over her skirt. She had made it herself, in running stitch. Underneath, it had as yet empty "thief's pockets" swinging on strings. All for protection – you had to keep the loot separate from your skirt. A woman is unclean from the waist downwards. Whatever she touches, even with just the hem of her skirt, becomes unclean as well. Papusza's power to tarnish wasn't working yet (she was still only ten, maybe twelve), but better to be on the safe side.

The old people and children stayed behind at the camp. And so did the men. It was said that God created them on Sunday. And with arms of different lengths. You only have to stretch them both out to the left to see that the right one hardly reaches the left elbow. It's obvious you can't work with arms like that.

So it was the Gypsy women's cunning that determined whether or not there'd be something to put in the pot.

Grodno – several kilometres' walk from the camp.

In the 1920s it was already a large town, with almost 60,000 citizens (sixty percent were Poles, thirty-seven percent were Jews, and three percent were Belarusians). There were telephones, electricity (since 1912) and an iron bridge (1909). There were several schools, theatres, a twelfth-century Orthodox church, a parish church, two fortified castles and a synagogue.

At the market there was a dreadful crush, people calling out and shouting. The trade was in whatever came to hand. Virgin Marys and Jesuses among the apostles, sunflower seeds, ointment for corns, resinous firewood, boot polish, pots, whetstones for knives, and tallow candles. You could buy bast shoes, baskets for potatoes, and even chairs. You could have a tooth pulled on the spot (there are pictures of this in the archives). There was someone telling stories about bandits, dragons, and some bad children who threw out their mother. The Gypsy women read cards or palms, saying what would happen tomorrow, in ten years' time, and in a hundred. They could see the past, your good and

bad deeds. They drew the sign of the cross on their female customers' hands with the coin they got from them. "God alone knows the whole truth, and a Gypsy woman only knows as much as the cards tell her," they would say.

Papusza was smart, and quickly filled her pockets, with apples, potatoes, and a little tobacco. Small beer, but (as she was persuaded on her return to the camp) it was enough to avoid a hiding from her stepfather.

She hung about among the stalls, and had a chat with every little mongrel she met on the road.

In the middle of the square there was a bear dancing on its hind paws. Since the end of the nineteenth century there had been a ban on bears entering the cities, so this was a rare sight. The academy at Smorgonie had been closed down now as well. That was where they were trained. (In a room that had a tiled stove instead of a floor, which was heated red-hot. A Gypsy would lead in a bear cub, then start playing the fiddle, and as its fore paws were burned, the bear would stand up on its hind ones, which were wrapped in cloth).

The little Papusza had already heard that you could learn letters in school. But that day was the first time she saw children with books, and ran after them.

"They drove me away. They said I was a thief. A plague. Not all people are noble. But you can't escape from what you hear. Or from what you see. It goes in your eyes and ears all by itself. What could I do? I put up with it meekly."

She spent half a day standing under the school windows.

"And when the children came out, I gathered my courage and asked them to show me some letters."

They agreed. But not for free.

Papusza learned to steal the usual way – at her mother's side.

It's a simple task. "With the left hand, the culprit scattered corn or breadcrumbs close to her own feet, while at the same time calling in the hens. Once the flock had come close and was busy eating, with a swift, decisive movement of the right hand the Gypsy woman seized the nearest one. She would grip them high up, by the neck, close to the head, while at the same time pressing them to the ground. The throttled bird would make its way into a hiding place prepared in advance, and the culprit – if she so wished – would seize the next one, as the flock would be busy eating, unaware of the imminent danger. The stolen bird would not raise the alarm either." (So this crime was described in the prosecutor's records in 1964.)

Papusza was four years old the first time she killed a hen. *I tied myself a bundle, stole my mother's cards, walked four kilometres and lost my way. I was found by a peasant who put me on his cart and took me to the village. I looks and sees hens wandering in his yard, so I catched one, wrapped it tightly in a big rag and it suffocated.*

"Because the order of the world is simple," explains Papusza. "Whatever grows in the field, the Lord God has sown, and whatever scratches and clucks in the yard, grew by the will of God for all people. The Lord God made lots of hens, enough for the Gypsies too."

*

One hen paid for one lesson.

Every day Papusza waited for the children outside the school. Later, with a stick in the sand or with charred twigs on newspapers she'd write: *A, b, c and the rest of the letters. Like in a primer.*

This went on for several days, until the children got bored.

It was then that she remembered a shop near the marketplace, where she sometimes bought sweets. There was a long, dark corridor, with the only light coming from the entrance. Behind a counter stood the shopkeeper, a Jewish woman.

"I went in with a newspaper and asked, 'Lady, show me how to read'."

She told me to bring her a fat hen for the Sabbath and to buy a primer.

The lessons were short, always after the shop closed.

Papusza's mother wasn't pleased. "Those books are useless, they poison the brain. Stupidity comes out of them," she said.

He stepfather beat her.

"The gypsies at the camp spat at me. They pointed at me and laughed, saying: 'You're going to be a teacher lady! What do you need learning for?' They ripped up the newspapers, page by page, and threw them on the fire. They didn't understand the need to learn for your own sake, for a bit of bread. And nowadays I can sign my name. I don't just put a cross. I'm proud to say that I, an ignorant Gypsy, am able to read. I had a quiet cry in the woods, and then I did my own thing anyway."

She was a quick learner.

"In a few weeks I already knew how. The Jewish woman kissed me for being so clever." (Papusza smiles again.) "I could read well, but I couldn't write, because I didn't do much writing, and didn't know it would be useful for the future. Later on, when I was fourteen, my stepfather took me across the Niemen. He played in Dyźko's band, he had a fiddle and a double bass. We sailed on a boat. First I told fortunes, and then I read a book, I can't remember which. A well-dressed lady came along and said: "A Gypsy girl who can read? That's nice!'."

I laughed out loud like a child, until the tears came to my eyes. She asked me all sorts of questions, and I gave her the answers. Finally she kissed me and went. And I was proud, and then I read some more, until my eyes ached. Good and bad, because I had no idea what I should read.

She enrolled at a library.

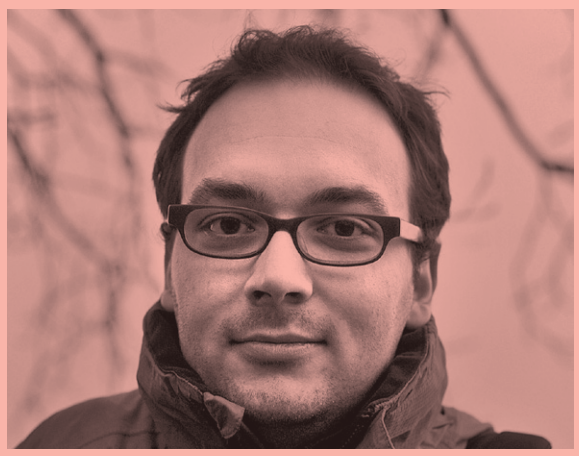
In Mikulińce near Przeworsk. They lent me a book, but an unattractive one, some children's toys, and fairytales, and I didn't want to go there any more, but the landlady we'd rented a room from advised me to get The Countess Cosel, Pan Tadeusz *and* The Bread Peddler.

I read a lot of books I got from people whose fortunes I told: Tarzan of the Apes, The Bondman, *and* The Beautiful Sister. *What I liked most of all were stories about knights and about great love.*

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

FILIP SPRINGER

BLUEPRINT



Filip Springer *(born 1982) is a journalist and photographer, regarded as one of Poland's most interesting reporters. He studied anthropology and ethnology, and has worked as a reporter since 2006. Blueprint is his third book. Later this year the next volume of his reports on architecture will be published, under the title Bathtub with a Colonnade.*

Who were Zofia and Oskar Hansen? "The Hansens were a response to the end of the world," says Joanna Mytkowska, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Warsaw, in Blueprint. But what does this mean, and who were these people who seem to have vanished into thin air after all the revolutions, as if purposefully forgotten? Filip Springer knows that the most interesting stories are found in the shadows, on the margins, and that the empty spaces can lead us to true revelations. In Blueprint, Springer chiefly sketches a portrait of the Don Quixote of the Continuous Linear System and Open Form. Though Oskar Hansen stressed that everything he did was with his wife, for Springer the former seems more important (as a significantly more open and clear-cut figure). The biographies of Oskar Hansen and his predecessors could serve as the basis for an adventure film. He was the grandson of a millionaire, and a young lord, as Zofia Hansen quipped on her husband's left-wing tendencies. This marvelous journey through the life of Oskar Hansen (war, bankruptcy, valor, a miraculous rescue, cosmopolitanism), who was capable of throwing himself into impossible situations, seems to be rooted in the biography of his trouble-making grandfather, who garnered enormous financial success, his nomadic parents, who were able to defy social conventions, his brother Erik, and his own wife, who not only grafted and developed socialist ideas in architecture, but also helped save him from oppression, serving as a voice of reason that was always at hand.

His project for the decentralist "rearranging" of Poland was impossible to execute in full – nonetheless, certain facets of the Continuous Linear System are, out of necessity, being brought to life in our day; though, as Springer observes, rather chaotically. The Continuous Linear System was meant to be, in Hansen's own words, a response to accusations from Marek Budzyński in Zachęta in 1976, a catalyst for future change. It is precisely this sort of person that Springer portraits – people who understand that only a frontal attack, something greater than safe custom, gives us a chance for development. Establishing impossible tasks is the basic aim of serious people, those who take their lives (and others' lives) seriously. In the Hansens' projects (particularly those which remain unrealized) we see a plan to build a civic society, a community of individuals working to develop themselves and to avoid harming their fellow citizens. They were convinced that there is no such thing as "the average home," and that every project should be adapted to the needs of a concrete person and his/her profession and interests.

Blueprint addresses the issue of the Polish community's rejection and misunderstanding of the Hansens, alongside the recognition of their work in Western Europe; there are those who suggest that Hansen erred in returning to Poland, where only catastrophe awaited him, while abroad he could have enjoyed fame, praise, and riches. Joanna Mytkowska mocks this speculation – Hansen's anti-commercial, anti-market approach would have kept him from working with an investor who pays and makes demands; for Hansen, an idealist through-and-through, the smallest modification to his designs was unthinkable. His infamous habit of storming out of meetings and slamming doors was less than a recipe for success... Hansen's student adds another crucial bit of information: only in a centrally governed society could a decentralization plan have a chance for even partial success.

Blueprint ultimately portrays a man whose work is not only a source of modernity in apprehending art. Filip Springer has depicted a person who lost himself in his passions, and whose lack of instinct for self-preservation seemed to keep him from noticing social and political change; slowly excluded from social life, he maintained his faith that the premises of the Continuous Linear System were correct.

What is this book about? As Joanna Mytkowska phrases it, it shows that "the Hansens' guiding principle was that people are good and intelligent, and that they want to develop and care for one another. This was the basis of their work. Oskar, in particular, believed that there were no limits, that everything was possible, you only had to think it over."

Anna Marchewka
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BLUEPRINT

BERGAMO

"It's hard for me to believe that the founder of the new architecture, one of the founders of purism, thinks it can be humanized through textiles – products intended to be bought and sold. As far as I can tell, the whole so-called renaissance in French textiles was a commercial enterprise invented for the accumulation of capital, one that seduced and exploited great artists... The architects of CIAM should resist this trend and pursue the humanization of modern architecture by its own means..." Oskar's voice boomed through the mic, his words directed at the man who a few months earlier had hosted him in his home, treating him to dinner, showing him his drawings. When Oskar was done, the hall exploded in applause. Corbusier, listening in silence until that moment, clapped along with the others.

Pierre Jeanneret had invited him here, or rather, he recommended that Oskar head to Bergamo for CIAM's seventh congress, to listen in on the conversations about contemporary architecture. Oskar took his suggestion, although he was unable to afford the trip. When he left for Italy, he didn't have a cent to his name. So he slept in the park, washed up in a fountain, lived on bread and grapes. When Jeanneret complained to Oskar about his hotel during one of the breaks between panels, then asked him about his own accommodations, Oskar replied that he'd "managed to find something cheap and comfortable."

His public appearance was a bit of an outburst. He had not planned to speak, but lost his cool during Le Corbusier's talk about the Gobelins and their utility for architecture. He asked if he might say a few words, walked up to the rostrum, said what he thought, then walked back down, semiconscious, probably unaware of what had just happened. He, Oskar Hansen, a man out of nowhere in a tattered blazer, who when the proceedings were over would head off to sleep on a bench in a nearby park, was deaf to the applause. Moments later, Jacqueline Tyrwhitt invited him to take part in CIAM's Summer School in London. Oskar accepted, although he had no idea how he would get the Polish authorities' permission to travel to England.

LONDON

They asked him if he knew English. He told them: no. They asked how old he was: Twenty-seven. They asked when he had obtained his degree. He explained he was only in his third year of architecture school. He could tell from their faces that they didn't believe him. They insisted he must be a communist ideologue. Oskar had no idea what to tell them.

These were the British journalists. They came to hear the jury's choice for the best projects of that year's CIAM Summer School in London. It was July 1949, and Oskar had already had quite enough of England.

He arrived almost two weeks late, the British embassy in Paris having balked at issuing him a visa. At the border, when they caught sight of his cardboard toiletry bag, they hauled him off to be interrogated. They examined his passport under a magnifying glass. They asked him where he was going and what for. But it was all laid out in black and white in the letter he'd gotten from London. In the end they let him in.

He enrolled late in the program and was offered a choice of projects: housing estate, office building, transportation center, or theater. He chose the estate, and worked on his own, although others were working in groups. He drew nine white buildings situated around a "social space" containing two preschools and a public park. Outside, he placed a school and pavilions for goods and services along with car access roads. He succeeded in completing his work before the deadline. His last, free day was dedicated to visiting London, mainly galleries and museums.

When the jury's decision came, he could hardly believe his ears: honorable mention. According to the jurors, he got it for doubling population density on the housing estate while retaining its "high use values."

His project made a huge impression on Ernest Nathan Rogers, who immediately offered him an assistantship at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London. The doors to high architecture (and big money) were thrown wide open to Oskar Hansen. But he had decided to return. Rogers was astonished: "Do you understand what's there?" he asked.

Oskar understood. He explained it to the Englishman as simply as he could: "It's all ruins there, they're waiting for me there," he said.

Rogers shook his head in amazement: "What you're proposing to do is an impossible task."

But that's exactly what Oskar still did not know.

Translated by W. Martin

MAŁGORZATA REJMER

BUCHAREST: BLOOD AND DUST

Małgorzata Rejmer *(born 1985) is a doctoral student at Warsaw University's Institute of Polish Culture. Her first novel, Toxaemia, published in 2009, was nominated for the Gdynia Literary Award. Her collected reportage in a volume entitled Bucharest: Dust and Blood has had excellent reviews.*

The journey to Romania's capital that led to *Bucharest: Blood and Dust* was not just a stopover, a brief stay. Małgorzata Rejmer spent two years there (off and on), and she's already saying she'll be back. It's clear from the book that its author conducted some serious fieldwork, renting a shabby little apartment in order to be able to experience the place in the most intense way possible, going around, talking to people, reading. But *Bucharest* is not just a collection of travel vignettes. Rejmer has put together a historical and cultural collection that makes it possible to answer questions that may not be possible to answer, or that may not even be permissible to answer. She bravely diagnoses the Romanian nation here: the Romanians meekly accept their fate, often death, never lifting up their heads, making do, not fighting, not arguing. The ballad "Mioriţa," or "The Little Ewe" (which Nichita Stănescu calls the Romanian *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and which Herta Müller calls a *Nibelungenlied*), as well as the saying "Asta e, ce să faci?", meaning "That's the way it is, what are you going to do about it?", enable the author to understand how Ceauşescu's regime was ever even possible.

In Bucharest, Rejmer is a researcher of a foreign culture – an eastern culture, fascinating above all for its cruelty, its savagery, the appeal of its ugliness. She writes, "I don't much care for the new. I like the old layers underneath." And she continues, "I feel the pull of this city, so laced with madness." She gets to the very bottom of everything, for the bottom is what most interests her. Extreme conditions (chaos, magnitude) are of the greatest use to her. Rejmer peers into the very heart of what's strange, what stands out, what is particular and what is total – she's simply stunned by this country without qualities, which has been shaped as though it were putty, passed from hand to hand, burned down and rebuilt, bathed in blood, while always managing to keep its head above water. In trying to explain, understand, and narrate that eastern savage quality, Rejman takes a position vis-à-vis her subject. Her choice of format, the essay, "justifies" that strategic positioning, but it might also be asked whether that human element in the text is a strength or a weakness. It seems significant, too, that Rejmer has entitled her book *Bucharest*, instead of – for instance – *My Bucharest*. It's a bold attempt at stating a "whole," not to mention stating a single, only "truth"...

Bucharest has undeniable educational value. It is an important book that reminds us of recent nightmares. Rejmer writes about things we can't be permitted to forget – about reeducation through torture, about the totalitarian system, about the ban on birth control and the tragedies it brought about. Rejmer locates the essence of Ceauşescu's totalitarian Romania in the bodies of those women forced to give birth or bleeding to death after illegal abortions (when she writes about Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, she stresses the necessity of bearing witness to that suffering, that misery, and that oppression that so tormented the film's director).

Małgorzata Rejmer's *Bucharest* definitely favors remembering, actually bracketing whole areas of the region's most recent history, which we might not want to know about, because it's better that way, more comfortable, easier. *Toxaemia*, Rejmer's first book, published in 2010, caused a big stir and raised people's hopes that we might have a new and interesting writer on our hands. The test of the second book is not an easy one to pass, but Rejmer confirms with *Bucharest* that the buzz around *Toxaemia* was justified, in its way. Although she has now changed publishers and genres, she is still dealing with the same thing: the exotic, subtle appeal of the savage world.

Anna Marchewka

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BUCHAREST: BLOOD AND DUST

Near

Râmnicu Vâlcea lies the city of Piteşti; there stands the building that once housed hell. Right around the time that Petre was listening to the radio and kissing his wife's hand, an experiment was being conducted in Piteşti, one that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn would describe in his Gulag Archipelago as "the worst barbarity of the modern world."

In Piteşti, suffering becomes separate from the body and from humanity. Dying people howl like dying animals. The walls of the torture chambers drown out the sound, and the guards have been deafened by the prisoners' cries. And the prisoners are beaten until they can no longer see or hear. They leave blood and urine stains, teeth, bunches of hair, bloody spit. A little bit of a person gets left behind in those pools. And what does manage to get out of there, that broken-down body – that, too, is just a little bit of a person.

Most of the people who end up in Piteşti are college kids who, back in the 30s, pledged their allegiance to the fascist Iron Guard. Plus religious figures, who are always suspect. Sometimes some member of the intelligentsia gets mixed up in it, some doctor or engineer, somebody who knows too much or too little, too bad for them. But Communism wants to give these guys a chance. For their lesson in the new faith, they are transported to Piteşti. It's called "re-education through torture."

Suffering can take a number of different forms. Physical suffering is just one of them. They ask, once you're in the prison, about your mother. You say she was a good, hard-working woman, who braided her hair and took good care of you. Then the guards pummel you with a metal rod until you say, I raped my mother. My mother raped me. She was a whore, she used to get fucked by dogs. I have no mother!

Then, from amongst those still at liberty, a person is chosen who's been close to a given prisoner – a college pal, a colleague, a childhood friend. Or someone who's been helping them endure Piteşti. Prisoner is pitted against prisoner. Each is armed with a rod. They must then beat each other to a bloody pulp, or else the guards will start in, and they're more skilled, and more into it.

If the prisoner begs for mercy, the guards knock his teeth out. If he doesn't want to take up the rod, then his friend knocks his teeth out, and the guards rip out his fingernails. None of the rules that prevail on earth exist in hell. You will either torture or be tortured. Dozens of guards beat dozens of people, killing one or two in order that the rest may think about the nature of their own lives.

Those who once believed in divine mercy must themselves now act without any trace of mercy. Those who thought that man was essentially good must watch how evil

degenerates. Those who previously gave their lives to God must now curse him as they feed upon their own feces like so many communion wafers.

Their souls will die slowly but completely, like wood gradually drying all the way out. The prisoners are broken, and then crushed, and then there is nothing left in them but suffering. On this barren land the seed of Marxism is planted. It does occasionally happen that these human wrecks who no longer really have anything human about them still put up resistance. But if they won't negotiate, they'll just be killed.

Petre had it all too easy, and the authorities came to even up the score. Some people in the village didn't like the bus he drove people around in. One of his neighbors went to the police station and said he had this feeling that the guy with the automobile listened to Radio Free Europe. They came and checked. There was a radio, therefore he did listen to Radio Free Europe. A landowner, and the owner of a motor vehicle, and of a three-bedroom house.

When the process of collectivization was initiated in 1949, committees went from house to house with the police. They quit knocking down people's doors in 1962 when there was nothing left to confiscate, since everything already belonged to the state. The richest ended up behind bars or doing forced labor. Prison guards helped them escape their suffering, or, in other words, helped them lose their minds. Within a couple of years, the prison started to spit people back out, all of them chewed up and destroyed.

They'd have panic attacks and bursts of aggression. They'd stop talking, and they weren't allowed physical contact. Beds were no longer beds, food was no longer food – only screams were still screams. When they died, their wives would let them go with relief, and their neighbors would say, "That's the end of his torment, may he rest in peace."

Petre Raduca got ten years. The authorities came to his house, took a look at the rooms, the carpets and the oak table with its lace tablecloth. So as not to make the state look bad, they allowed his wife to keep the little bedroom and the summer kitchen in her own home. Like chickens coming to roost, the authorities took up residence there – the Agricultural Production Collective, tasked with confiscating people's property in order to donate it to the common good, a.k.a. the state's good, and then supervise it. The largest bedroom was turned into a little grocery store. Sometimes Elena Raduca would open the door, walk down the length of her home, and stand before the window from which she had so often leaned out and looked at the yard and the road. She'd buy bread and oil, go back to the other side of the house, and place her purchases on the table of her little kitchen. First she stopped crying, and then she stopped even thinking about it.

One day, when Elena opened the door, she thought for a moment that death had come to her in the guise of two old, desiccated figures with shining eyes. As though they were guided by a primordial force that never gets extinguished, even though old age had already taken possession of and consumed their bodies, covered their hands in livid spots, wrinkled their papery eyelids, pulled back their toothless jaws.

Their delicate outlines were disappearing beneath their black habits tied with string, but they had sky-blue eyes like delicate, faded fabric, and in those eyes there was no death.

She bowed to them and made the sign of the cross.

They bowed even lower.

She looked at them, decayed, broken, their bodies ravaged by hunger.

Although ten years had passed since the Piteşti experiment, inmates in Romanian prisons were still being made to torture their fellow inmates. And everyone was beaten, without exception. The guards had no mercy; the sight of blood simply whipped them up into further frenzy.

The toothless monks slowly turned these words over in their mouths:

"You have to know."

There were three of them in the cell – him and the two of them. Petre had already been in prison for four years. For four years he had lived in that dank void, on wooden boards, with a wound that wouldn't heal. He was very stubborn, he wanted to survive, he didn't feel sorry for himself. The only thing he really lamented was that there was no music – that he didn't have that radio which had landed him in jail in the first place.

Petre was almost fifty by now, but the monks were much older. One day Petre would sit and make sure that the monks stood continuously, upright from morning to night. The next day one of the monks would sit while the other two stood. On the third day, the other monk would sit and watch the other two. Every three days you'd be the torturer; on the other two you'd be the victim.

This was the most terrible part: being confronted with your own cruelty. When you were forced to either start hating yourself or simply abstracting from your so-called self altogether. In the times of the experiment in Piteşti, those who rebelled would go back to the "tearing off the mask" stage, the annihilation of personality. For months they would be kept in solitary confinement. They'd try to commit suicide. In the end, everyone broke down.

Costantin Barbu, one of them who survived, writes in his book *Memorialul Durerii [Memoirs of Suffering]*: "I don't think that the methods used in Piteşti exist anywhere else, not even in hell. There are things the human mind can't even begin to imagine."

One day, when it was his turn to be the torturer, Petre decided he couldn't take it anymore. The monks were standing before him, bearded and emaciated, heads bowed. Their knees were shaking.

"Please," he said. "Sit. I'll take the blame, but please, sit."

So the three of them sat. They cried. The guard came into the cell and punched him right in the face. He dragged him out by his prison rags. The monks didn't see him for a few days.

When Petre came back, he was ageless. His hair and his mustache were as white as the monks' beards. The guards had knocked out all his teeth. Everything had changed – how he walked, the look in his eyes. He no longer spoke.

A bump on his head from being beaten grew to be as big as a cap.

Then he lay motionless for whole days on the top bunk, until one day he simply fell off. Like a stone you throw off a bridge into a river. Like a bag full of stones. He fell and did not rise again. Even then the guard came in and hit him in the face to make him get up, but his cheek was already cold. They buried him in a mass grave along with several dozen other prisoners somewhere around Baloteşti, near Bucharest. In early 1963. Just a few months before everyone was granted amnesty.

"That's why we are here," concluded one of the monks. "We wanted you to know that he won't be coming back. And that he died because he was a good man."

Translated by Jennifer Croft

GOMBROWICZ
MIŁOSZ
SZYMBORSKA
MROŻEK

WITOLD GOMBROWICZ

KRONOS

***Witold Gombrowicz** (1904–1969) was one of the greatest Polish authors of the twentieth century, whose work has been translated into thirty-five languages. He wrote short stories, novels and plays, and also a three-volume Diary which is regarded as a gem among the world's literary diaries. Rumours and legends about Kronos were passed around for many years, but until now very few people had access to the manuscript. Soon after publication this private diary achieved the status of a bestseller.*

Kronos is a collection of Witold Gombrowicz's formerly unknown, strictly private notes. Fascinating in themselves, these notes are of course completely different from the sophisticated diaries and works of fiction which Gombrowicz intended for publication.

Kronos would probably fit within fewer than one hundred pages of print, but here we have a solid, 500-page volume. This editorially problematic text – as anyone who opens it will see – has been equipped with the necessary footnotes, reproductions and commentaries, as well as an illuminating and moving foreword by the writer's widow, Rita Gombrowicz. It is thanks to her that *Kronos* has seen the light of day in an integral form, though there are things in it which must surely cause her pain. Thus the emphatic tone is understandable when she writes, for example, that "in the war years, when he was living in extreme poverty, Witold sometimes reminds me of Job". Another significant sentence marks a different tone, when she writes: "*Kronos* is a dogged search for the foundations of his own existence". We should listen up, because here we may be getting to the heart of the matter, however – and here we can imagine all sorts of definitions – astonishing, disappointing, shocking, blood-curdling or illusion-shattering it may be.

Gombrowicz evidently started writing *Kronos* at the end of 1952, and continued it almost until his death, recording (perhaps retrospectively) the most important (or noteworthy) events of the previous few months, a brief summing-up at the end of each year. But at the beginning we find an attempt to reconstruct, usually in an even more telegraphic style, a record of the years preceding the start of *Kronos* – dating back to 1922.

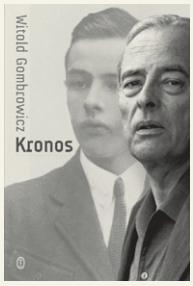
This reconstruction gives a rather electrifying impression. But the first thing to say is that in *Kronos* Gombrowicz's attention is focused on a narrow range of topics ("the foundations of his own existence"). These are mainly financial records and matters to do with his current existence, a few rather laconically presented relationships with his neighbours, health problems described in detail, successes and failures not so much of the artistic as the business kind, translations, his "increasing prestige", and finally his sex life – in the form of noting down the number (a high one, in favourable health and circumstances) of sexual encounters with a wide variety of partners. Gombrowicz's sex life appears to have been incredibly important to him, and at the same time purely physiological, devoid of any romantic element at all. Thus, in the summary of 1955 we read: "Sex: not bad, fairly quiet, 15". Significantly, Gombrowicz devotes the same amount of space to his sex life in the reconstruction of the pre-war years – and in just the same way. In one of several versions of the notes we read, for example: "1939. 5, 6. 2 whores from Mokotowska, B. from the Zodiac, 9 whores. 7. Dancing girl from Wilno (summer). Girlfriend of Boy and the Brezas (summer). 8. (J. Wilerówna). Whore with the clap. 9. Virgin. Also: b. from Praga, Franek, g. in cinema, maybe Narbuttówna. And the one with her feet in galoshes."

This matter-of-fact tone is typical of Gombrowicz's personal notes about all of the other topics listed above. And so we are tempted to ask if this is how he imagined himself – was this the only way he remembered himself, was this all he noted down as the most important facts about his own existence? This is what makes *Kronos* so fascinating – though it does not necessarily prompt us to like the author, but rather to feel distant from him.

And one more thing: in this diary-which-is-not-a-diary there are absolutely no interludes relating to "the soul", for instance, eschatology, or metaphysics of any kind at all. There are two moments when the everyday, brutally matter-of-fact tone prompts a mention of the obvious final outcome: at the end of the summary of 1961 ("Health: not bad, trouble with breathing, death ever closer") and again in 1966: "I'm battling with lots of ailments, I'm dying, with Rita it's better on the whole, but not always... O God, O God, how much longer?"

Somewhere in between *Kronos* and the rest of his work we can find Witold Gombrowicz as he really was. Or perhaps he is to be found somewhere else entirely.

Marcin Sendecki
Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA

THE FLASH OF THE REVOLVER

Wisława Szymborska *(1923–2012) was a poet, essayist and columnist. She won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996 and her work has been translated into more than forty languages. She published thirteen volumes of poetry, almost all of which are regarded as masterpieces.*

The Flash of the Revolver provides a detailed view of the unofficial side of Wisława Szymborska, not busy with her usual task of writing the world-famous poems that won her the Nobel Prize, but making up literary jokes for her own and her friends' amusement.

The fruits of these activities have been published before, for example in *Rhymes for Big Kids* (2002), but never as comprehensively as here. As Bronisław Maj – a poet, philologist, friend and accomplice of Szymborska in her literary tricks – says in his raffish, pseudo-academic preface, *The Flash...* is "a vast collection of unknown works by Wisława Szymborska, extremely rich in its variety of forms, and from every single era of her creative life – literally from first to last!" Indeed, the book opens with juvenilia, including the childish rhymes, drawings and notes of a little girl, and closes (as the editors tell us) with "Szymborska's very last poem, written in hospital following an operation in December 2011, a few weeks before her death". It goes like this: "The Dutch are a clever nation, / They know exactly what to do, / When there's n o more natural respiration!" – thus offering some dramatic but lyrical "last words" full of Szymborska's typical detachment and sense of humour.

In between her first efforts to write and her final note scribbled in hospital, the reader will find a whole miniature universe of literary jokes, arranged chronologically as well as by genre (though most of the genres are Szymborska's own invention) and subject matter. (By the way, finding the equivalents in foreign languages for such original creations as *Moskaliki, Lepieje, Adoralia* and so on will present a serious challenge for the translator, and undoubtedly a fun game, too ["Limeyricks" offers this translator for *Moskaliki*; with a name combining a pejorative name for the Russians and a hint of "limericks", these are quatrains satirising various nationalities; translated simply, *Lepieje* are "Betters", based on the word *lepiej* meaning "better" – rhyming couplets offering absurd advice; and why not "Adoralia" – more couplets expressing a man's thwarted efforts to adore various women].) In fact, not everything in the book is in verse, because it is hard to ignore the enchanting "Letters of a Parking Attendant", for instance, "Tales from the Lives of Lifeless Objects" dated 1949, or the title piece, which is part of a romantic thriller, written when Szymborska was about twelve!

I should also add that it is not the text alone which makes *The Flash of a Revolver* such an appealing book. In essence it is an album, amply illustrated with photographs, drawings and reproductions of Szymborska's manuscripts and typescripts.

Marcin Sendecki
Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

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CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ

THE HILLS OF PARNASSUS

Czesław Miłosz *(1911–2004) was a poet, novelist, essayist and translator. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980 and his work has been translated into forty-two languages. He was awarded honorary degrees by a large number of universities in the USA and in Poland, and was an honorary citizen of Lithuania and also of Krakow.*

The Hills of Parnassus is Czesław Miłosz's third and final attempt at tackling fiction (following the novels The Seizure of Power and *The Issa Valley* in the 1950s). He probably started it in 1967, worked intensively on it in 1970 and 1971, and finally, in the same year, abandoned it. In 1972 he offered some extracts from the unfinished book to the Paris-based periodical *Kultura*, but editor-in-chief Jerzy Giedroyć felt sceptical about it and refused to publish them. Covering several dozen pages of type – five chapters taken from a longer, hand-written version, plus some *Introductory Remarks* by the author – it has now been published for the first time.

There are at least three reasons why this book is significant. Firstly, as the subtitle tells us, here we have a work of science fiction, and this, in itself, is enough of an incentive to take a close look at it since it is highly intriguing to think of Miłosz "seeking a more comprehensive form" in this way. The second reason – not unrelated to the first – is that in his work as a novelist and commentator on his own fiction Miłosz adds many interesting things to what we already know about him. Thirdly and finally, even if they only represent a record of his ambitions and – as he himself admitted – his artistic failure, several dozen previously unknown pages by a Nobel prize-winning author are worth close reading.

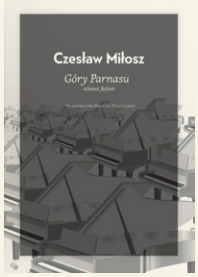
As we know, Czesław Miłosz did not have a particularly high opinion of fiction, especially late-twentieth-century modern fiction. In his view it had "come unstuck from the world of things and human relations", and, as he wrote in the *Introductory Remarks* that preface T*he Hills of Parnassus*, "the modern novel, trained on streams of consciousness, internal monologues etc., and afflicted by structural theories, has wandered off so far that it bears little resemblance to what was once understood as the novel". In his view, new fiction had lost what had, in a way, brought it to life and raised it to the heights: the ability to move the hearts and consciences of the wide reading public, the capacity to express truths and to initiate debates that were comprehensible to many people. But in science fiction Miłosz perceived a genre in which the virtues of the former, "old-fashioned" fiction were still alive, and which was still capable, more than elite poetry, of traditional communication with the general public – at any rate in its "classic" version. For example, Miłosz valued Lem's *Solaris*, just as he criticised Lem's later experiments with the genre and his search for – what irony! – a more comprehensive form for science fiction.

Miłosz tried his hand at sci-fi in order to express his concern at the direction mankind's cultural development was taking. He set about envisioning the world at the close of the twenty-first century, when technical progress would result in compulsive, pointless consumption and the degeneration of personal bonds among the masses, who are ruled by an elite caste of technocrats. In this world, which Reason has deprived of Meaning and brought to the limits, nevertheless a sort of precursor to a quasi-religious revival appears, represented by a handful of misfits led by a man called Ephraim, who are looking for a way out of the universal indifference and impotence.

We do not know how it ends. Miłosz only provided preliminary, sometimes quite vivid images of his world, and an initial, sometimes fully absorbing presentation of some of his protagonists, but he failed to get any action going at all (what else could have galvanized the reader's emotions?), and that was probably why he gave up writing the book. He explains his discouragement in more detail in the *Introductory Remarks*, which have to be read to judge for oneself to what extent he accounts for his failure in an old-fashioned way, and to what extent in an extremely modern way. Meanwhile, in her illuminating afterword, Agnieszka Kosińska discusses all the book's adventures, contexts, affiliations and surprising sequels. Lest anybody should think that *The Hills of Parnassus* stands alone as fiction, the pieces of the novel are accompanied by a related text called *Ephraim's Liturgy*, which was published in *Kultura* in 1968. Equipped with "a commentary explaining who Ephraim was", these ritual incantations mixed with evangelical parables show Miłosz in his real element.

The Hills of Parnassus is truly fascinating reading.

Marcin Sendecki
Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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MAŁGORZATA I. NIEMCZYŃSKA

MROŻEK: STRIPTEASE OF A NEUROTIC

Małgorzata I. Niemczyńska *(born 1982) is a journalist and reviewer for Gazeta Wyborcza and its quarterly supplement Książki ("Books"), where she publishes articles on issues to do with literature, as well as interviews with writers, musicians and film-makers.*

The first biographical book about Sławomir Mrożek to be published after his death is not strictly speaking a biography. Małgorzata I. Niemczyńska's *Mrożek: Striptease of a Neurotic* is more like a brilliantly written, superbly documented atlas of the constellation where Mrożek occupies central place, with a large number of other planets, moons and stars orbiting him at greater or smaller distance, while their influence keeps repositioning Planet Mrożek within the map of the heavens.

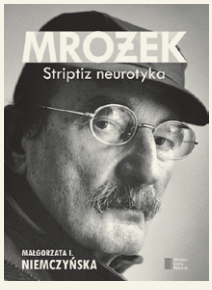
The objects in Mrożek's constellation are people and places, starting with Borzęcin, just outside Kraków, where he was born and lived through the war. As *Striptease...* proves, although Mrożek's own recollections of this point of origin were rather casual, it had a vital effect on him. However, as with almost everything in his life, it was a paradoxical effect, because, unlike other writers of his generation, Mrożek did not try to come to terms with his memories of the war through his writing, or through the characters in his plays. He kept quiet about his experiences, and did not present his personal image of it until 1980 in *On Foot*, though perhaps with the aim of striking up a delayed conversation with his own father, rather than with history.

This is typical of *Striptease...* too, which tells us about Mrożek's life, but also searches for biographical evidence in his work, as well as in the lives of other people whose personalities, emotions and intelligence left a mark on him (and vice versa). As a result, various other characters occasionally come into the foreground in this book, such as Witold Gombrowicz, whose spiritual guardianship Mrożek spent a long time trying to escape, which was essentially an impossible mission, considering that for both writers their "life's work" was a struggle to find the unique nature of their own "self". There is also Stanisław Lem (it is worth reading *Striptease...* in parallel with Lem and Mrożek's collected letters), with whom despite belonging to completely different literary worlds Mrożek had a surprisingly large amount in common as far as their attitude to people and to the world was concerned (to be frank, it was close to misanthropy, perhaps with the exception of a love of motor cars). But Niemczyńska's major concern is to provide an emotional portrait of the author, which emerges clearly, especially when she writes about his wives: the almost forgotten, and as it turns out extremely interesting painter Maria Obremba (whose twin sister was Andrzej Wajda's first wife, and thus Wajda and Mrożek were brothers-in-law for some time), and the Mexican Susana Osorio Rosas. This emotional portrait is the gloomiest part of Niemczyńska's book – already familiar, of course, to those who have ploughed through the whole of Mrożek's diaries.

However, there was another woman of vital importance in Mrożek's life who knew him better than many of the people who thought of him as a close friend. *Striptease...* starts with an extraordinary reconstruction of Mrożek's recovery from aphasia, or to be precise the difficult work involved in "refashioning" him. The leading lady in this part of the book is Beata Mikołajko, Mrożek's therapist, who here becomes a silent heroine. The book ends with an interview with its subject, one of the last he ever gave, after leaving Poland once again, this time for good, to live in Nice. It is a powerful record of the departure of a writer who had managed, apparently, if not to sort out, then at least to invalidate the arguments about himself which he had conducted for decades with his own person.

Apart from accounts of the writer, those who were close to him, and his never permanent places of residence (e.g. a fabulous chapter about the Kraków Writers House, whose residents at various times included Wisława Szymborska, Stefan Kisielewski, Maciej Słomczyński, Konstanty I. Gałczyński and Tadeusz Różewicz), this book provides many interesting discoveries and reminders of Mrożek's early work, such as his cartoon strip about a superhero, or the novel about Senator McCarthy which he co-wrote with Bruno Miecugow (which is not in his *Collected Works*). It also recalls Mrożek the film-maker and his cinema version of *Love in the Crimea*, which is now completely forgotten (there are no entries for his films on Filmweb or IMDB). Although the Mrożekologists and Mrożekophiles are sure to produce many more biographical books, right now *Striptease...* is required reading for them, an essential point of reference.

Paweł Goźliński
Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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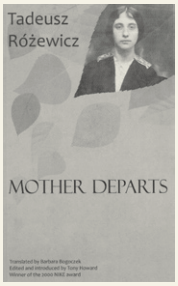

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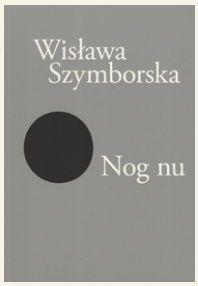

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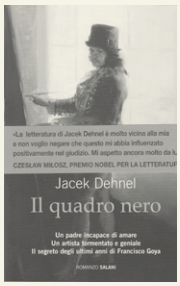

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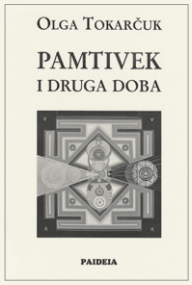

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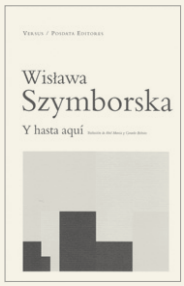

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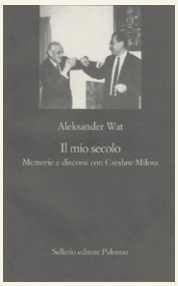

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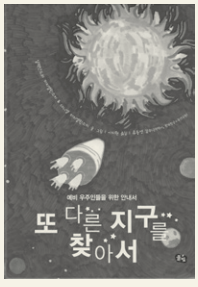

TU JESTEŚMY

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DANIEL MIZIELIŃSKI

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Seul: Pulbit Publishing

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