

NEW BOOKS FROM POLAND

DOROTA MASŁOWSKA

JOANNA BATOR

WOJCIECH JAGIELSKI

ZYTA ORYSZYN

IGOR OSTACHOWICZ

SYLWIA CHUTNIK

ŁUKASZ ORBITOWSKI

INGA IWASIÓW

TOMASZ ŁUBIEŃSKI

ZOŚKA PAPUŻANKA

JERZY FRANCAK

MANUELA GRETKOWSKA

PAWEŁ SMOLEŃSKI

ANNA BOLECKA

KRZYSZTOF ŚRODA

ANNA JANKO

WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA

POETRY NEWS 2012

THE POLISH BOOK INSTITUTE

The Polish Book Institute is a national cultural institution. We were established by the Ministry of Culture to promote Polish literature worldwide and to popularise books and reading within the country.

We try to do everything we can: we inform, encourage and convince translators of Polish literature to translate Polish books, foreign publishers to publish their translations, and the organisers of all sorts of literary events the world over to invite Polish authors to take part in them. And when they are prepared to do so, we help them to make it happen. Thanks to the financial support which we provide through the **©Poland Translation Programme**, in recent years more than 1200 translations of Polish books have been published abroad, including works by Czesław Miłosz, Wisława Szymborska, Ryszard Kapuściński, Olga Tokarczuk, Andrzej Stasiuk, Andrzej Sapkowski, Marek Krajewski and many others.

However, that is not all: the **Biblioteka+ Programme**, the strategic aim of which is to transform community libraries into modern centres of access to knowledge and culture, is our answer to the need for a radical improvement in the state of public libraries in Poland. For Poland's libraries we have also developed the new **MAK+** system for cataloguing their collections, enabling them to carry out all sorts of operations to do with cataloguing and lending. Finally, we have helped to establish **Book Discussion Clubs** all over Poland, and to date there are now 1000 of them!

For the past seven years we have been administering the Ministry of Culture's grant programmes in the sphere of literature, and since April 2010 we have also been the publisher of some of Poland's oldest and most highly regarded cultural periodicals, including *Nowe Książki* ("New Books"), *Twórczość* ("Creativity"), *Literatura na Świecie* ("World Literature"), *Dialog*, *Ruch Muzyczny* ("Musical Movement"), and *Odra*.

As well as that, we provide Poland's biggest source of information on books and literature. On a daily basis our website, **www.bookinstitute.pl**, publishes the latest literary news from Poland and abroad, information about new and forthcoming books and regular reviews, as well as the biographical details of more than 150 Polish authors, information about more than 1000 books published in recent years, extracts from them, critical essays, and the addresses of publishers and literary agents – all in Polish, English, German, Russian and Hebrew.



SELECTED BOOK

INSTITUTE PROGRAMMES

©POLAND TRANSLATION PROGRAMME

The Programme was established in 1999 and was modelled on similar programmes in other countries. Its aim is to increase the number of foreign translations of Polish literature by providing financial support to foreign publishers to pay for translation costs. The Programme is administered by the Kraków-based Book Institute.

Preference is given to works fiction and non-fiction that fall within the humanities category.

The Programme may cover:

- Up to 100 % of the costs of a translation from Polish into a foreign language
- Up to 100 % of the costs of purchasing the publishing rights

SAMPLE TRANSLATIONS ©POLAND

Financing is given for 20 pages of a translation (1,800 characters per page). The translator submits an application, including: the motivation for choosing the applicable book, the plan of action, his/her bibliography, information concerning the translation costs.

Full information on the ©POLAND Translation Programme and Sample Translations ©POLAND, including a list of grants awarded to date and a funding application form can be found on the Polish Book Institute's website, www.bookinstitute.pl

"KOLEGIUM TŁUMACZY" TRANSLATORS' PROGRAMME

Based in Kraków, this programme provides study visits for translators of Polish literature and is run jointly with the Jagiellonian University and the Villa Decius. During three- or one-month stays, the translators are provided with suitable conditions for their work and assistance with their translations. They also conduct some classes for students at the Jagiellonian University. Eight candidates are accepted each year, from March to May and from September to November.

THE TRANSATLANTIC PRIZE

The Transatlantic prize is awarded by the Polish Book Institute to outstanding ambassadors of Polish literature abroad. Its aim is to promote Polish literature on the world market and to provide a focal point for translators of Polish literature and its promoters (literary critics, scholars and organisers of cultural events). The prize is awarded annually and is worth € 10,000. The winner is chosen by a special committee including leading literary scholars, organisers of cultural events, translators and the head of the Book Institute. The winners from 2005 were Henryk Bereska, Anders Bodegård, Albrecht Lempp, Ksenia Starosielska, Biserka Rajčić, Pietro Marchesani, Vlasta Dvořáčková and Yi Lijun.

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TITLE

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<u>Dark, Almost Night</u>
<u>Scorching the Grass</u>
<u>Saving Atlantis</u>
<u>Night of the Living Jews</u>
<u>Hustlers</u>
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<u>For a Short Time</u>
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<u>A Domestic Charade</u>
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<u>An Arab Fires and a Jew Delights</u>
<u>The Tzadik and the Girl</u>
<u>Travels to Armenia and Other Lands</u>
<u>The Passion According to Saint Hanka</u>
<u>Enough</u>



FROM THE EDITOR

If I had to define what's different and special about the new literary season, I'd say that it's a great time for the women writers. It has been a while since so many interesting novels by female authors were published simultaneously. This has come at the same time as the foundation and first presentation of the Gryfia Literary Prize for Women Writers. The winner was Magdalena Tulli, whose work has often appeared in *New Books from Poland*, and the award was for *Italian Pumps*, which was featured in last year's autumn edition of this catalogue.

But getting back to this edition, first of all we have some long anticipated books, including a new one by Dorota Masłowska, who made her debut at the age of eighteen with the controversial *Snow White and Russian Red*, an experimental novel which sold 100,000 copies, a record number in Poland at the time. All the critics were stunned and impressed by Masłowska's amazing ability to reproduce common speech overheard on the Polish street. In her new novel, *Honey, I've Killed the Cats*, she takes us to New York, though the hipster world that she describes also reminds us of life in Berlin, and Kraków too. In the process she makes us cry with laughter, as well as weep tears of emotion. Here we find screwball hairdressers, off-beat artists, yoga practitioners, private views, journeys, friendship, love, envy and sorrow. I can highly recommend surrendering to Masłowska's charms again.

We've also been eagerly awaiting Joanna Bator's new novel, *Dark, Almost Night*, which provides more proof that she is one of the most intriguing Polish writers of her generation. As in her last two novels, *Sand Hill* and *Cloudalia*, she takes us to the place where she grew up in Lower Silesia, but this is no sentimental journey. The plot centres on an inquiry into the mysterious disappearance of some children, which is conducted by a female investigative journalist who has come back from the capital to her hometown for this purpose. However, once she's there, she turns out to have far more to resolve than just the case of the missing children.

By contrast, Sylwia Chutnik's *Hustlers* is like the sort of big-city ballad sung in pre-war Warsaw by the popular entertainer Stanisław Grzebiuk. It is the story of a gang of girl-avengers aiming to bring an evil developer to justice after he murders a woman representing a tenants' rights organisation, who has tried to stop him from threatening and illegally evicting the residents of a housing estate. Celina, Halina, Stefa and Bronka have been friends since their days at the estate's primary school. Now that they are adults, they can see that life is very different, but they still abide by the noble, though nowadays not so fashionable principle of "all for one and one for all". The snappy tone of the novel and its rowdy humour are highly entertaining, making it hard to put down.

In *Saving Atlantis* Zyta Orszyn shows what happens when major historical events encroach on the lives of ordinary people. Her central characters are not aiming to achieve any great social or political score-settling, but are merely trying to find their place in the difficult time in which they happen to live. Through skilful writing, Orszyn has them describe their fortunes with startling naivety, producing a powerful literary effect.

We also have the superb *A Domestic Charade* by Zośka Papużanka, which tells the story of several gruelling decades in the tortured life of a Kraków family, and *The Agent* by Manuela Gretkowska, an adeptly written novel about the double life of Szymon Goldberg, an Israeli businessman who passes himself off in Poland as a Mossad agent.

The male writers are represented by some excellent reportage, including *Scorching the Grass* by Wojciech Jagielski, an account of the collapse of the apartheid system in South Africa as well as

a study in ideological insanity, and *An Arab Fires and a Jew Delights* by Paweł Smoleński, which is a fascinating description of the complex relationships between the Jews and the Arabs. Then we have the speciality of Polish literature: new poetry books. First and foremost among them is the final volume of poems by Wisława Szymborska, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996. She compiled this collection in the knowledge of her own imminent death, and she has left us with a moving set of thirteen poems, supplemented by a commentary from the publisher. The title was chosen by Szymborska herself – *Enough*. That's not what we want, but now that she has gone we'll have to live with it.

Last of all we have a literary first that has caused quite a stir – a novel by the Polish Prime Minister's speechwriter, Igor Ostachowicz. He has given the whole country a big surprise by producing a satirical novel called *Night of the Living Jews*, with a plot as crazy as a Tarantino screenplay. The action takes place in Warsaw, where to our total amazement absolutely anything can happen. The main character is a 40-year-old tiler who has a university degree, a fanatically New Age vegetarian girlfriend as well as a rather vulgar bit-on-the-side whom he cannot resist, and... a minor problem. It all starts when some zombies turn up in his flat – dozens of living dead Jews who have been lurking in his cellar ever since the Second World War...

There isn't enough space here to mention all the books featured in our catalogue, but I hope that among the items on offer you'll find something you want to add to your list of publications.

Izabella Kaluta

DOROTA MASŁOWSKA (BORN 1983) IS A NOVELIST AND PLAYWRIGHT. HER FIRST BOOK, *SNOW WHITE AND RUSSIAN RED*, APPEARED IN 2002 AND WAS FOLLOWED TWO YEARS LATER BY *THE QUEEN'S PEACOCK*, WHICH RECEIVED THE NIKE PRIZE. HER PLAY *A COUPLE OF POOR, POLISH-SPEAKING ROMANIANS* HAS BEEN STAGED IN AUSTRALIA, THE UNITED STATES, ON SAKHALIN ISLAND, AND ELSEWHERE. HER AWARD-WINNING PLAY *NO MATTER HOW HARD WE TRIED* HAS ALSO TOURED INTERNATIONALLY.

Photo: Marcin Nowak

Honey, I Killed the Cats

This novel is a revelation! It was hard to believe that anything could outdo *Snow White and Russian Red*, yet here Dorota Masłowska, the most capable writer of the younger generation and winner of the Polityka Passport and Nike prizes, has given us what may be her best novel yet.

Everything we encounter here is a surprise. The story is set not in Poland, as her previous work has been, but in New York. The narrative style, marked till now by wild experimentation, has been trimmed and polished; the storytelling moves competently and honestly, at the same time losing none of its expressive power – that is, its magnetism. The sentences give the impression not of strain, but of having written themselves, though on the other hand their elegance and precision, the accuracy of their similes and metaphors, as well as of their jokes, stand as evidence of the writer's serious labor. The story focuses on a single heroine. The one thing that has not changed is the accuracy of the author's observations and the explosive sense of humor to which she – once again a character in her own book! – has accustomed us. The protagonist here is Farah ("Farah Fawcett," her acquaintances call her derisively), single and approaching thirty, though spiritually she seems more like an old lady. Farah spends her time reading spiritual self-help books, mulling over her unsuccessful life and generally trying somehow to kill time while also in the grips of a passion for healthy living, which she takes to such absurd extremes that she disinfects her razor before attempt-

ing self-mutilation. She also survives a personal tragedy when her best friend Jo finds herself a boyfriend. We also meet an entire pleiad of her (more distant than close) acquaintances, who take antidepressants and try to make it in the world of avant-garde art...

Honey, I Killed the Cats is a send-up of the Western, big-city lifestyle and of all the contemporary trends that go with it: of cheap spirituality shoddily copied from the East, of the pressure to look good, of healthy eating, but most of all of being ostentatiously happy. As usual, Masłowska makes us laugh, only so that we will freeze a moment later with that laughter in our mouths as we look upon our own shallowness, poor judgment, and stupidity. And finally at our solitude, for in this book, the most mature from the author of *The Queen's Peacock*, one of the main themes is the constant, desperate, and doomed effort to reach another human being. What is more, this solitude is described in an explosive mix of language in which the American sitcom meets the inner-city street, Google Translate, and the poetic registers particular to its author. A marvelous book.

Patrycja Pustkowiak

Yeah,

you meet all kinds here, priest and pauper both. And Emperor No-Clothes, what with one of those nutty designers just having announced that the most fashionable duds this season are sewn out of air...

Light, somewhat diaphanous, ultrasexy, but the main thing is that they don't need to be washed... The down side: They're not so good at covering up deficiencies of one's figure. That, and other people are breathing your clothes. On one corner, someone is pressing you with hip-hop recorded in the john at McDonald's, or else an original "Chenel" handbag, though the sack it's packed in looks like a better value for the four bucks they're asking. On another, a legless wino convinces you to surrender your life to Jesus and your money to him, because there's no profit in being a prophet... And right then, the third corner, in a boutique hotel, on a golden sofa, beneath pictures by Kyovebgir Anogiv, who now happens to be fetching ridiculous prices, the daughters of senators and various VIPs are sitting and drinking themselves stupid like it's no big thing, looking out over the "All this disgustingly rich pussy"...

*What's Best for Throwing at a Plasma TV? We Test Champagne Glasses.
Look Hot Five Minutes after an Abortion? It's Possible. Makeup Paramedics.
Sexy in Detox. Ten Tricks for Looking like a Million Bucks When You Feel like
Fifteen Old Deutschmarks.
Daddy, I Crashed Your Helicopter! Taking Advantage of an Amusing Accident.
Did You Know? Dogs Are Mammals! Interesting Facts from Science.*

You gotta say, these young folks may not have much knack for science, but when it comes to fashion they really know their stuff. Just take a look at the latest collection from Zach de Boom they're wearing, called "Holy" – take a guess why. "Pilgrim Girl," she's the one inseminating the imaginations of the designers this season. Louboutine put out a series of brain-twisted pumps inspired by non-pinching orthopedic sandals, and Vivienne Westwood says they go great with thick white tube socks with an emblem of crossed tennis rackets at the ankle, or else just bare feet covered in leprosy and bound in a checkered handkerchief. This season, hair is supposed to be unwashed, "unattractive"; obligatory: makeup that "gets greasy," dry lips (swollen, if at all possible, from kissing a crucifix), slight self-mutilation. From a distance you'd think these are some crazy-ass broads who've come here on their knees from Lourdes to announce the word of Christ, but, as you look a little closer, from between their polyester lips you see pearly teeth worth more than your soul, nay, than your entire shitty existence.

Now it seems to you that their sole occupation is screaming: Oh my God! Oh my God! and looking around to see whether the great impression they're making is spread evenly across this vale of tears. But just try to drag yourself over to them, like a bag of trash that nobody needs: Don't count on their pity, they'll eat you alive. First they'll say that, since you don't have bread, you should eat cake, and then that, since you don't have cake, you should eat sweet-cream pastry with organic raspberries. "I don't have any pastry like that," you whisper, painfully swallowing your saliva. "So tell them to jet you some from Switzerland." Whatever you need, they despise learned helplessness: No one ever coddled them, either. They, too, were once without a home, but did they moan about it? No, they bought themselves a palace in Florence. They, too, were once without a Porsche, so they bought themselves a Ferrari. So if you're one of those worn-out folks who isn't worth shit, then have mercy and take a hike, because they're calling security. They don't know from Mercy, there's no plastic surgeon in town by that name.

That's how things are at The Bohemian, no way around it; the only thing democratic here is the blessed, distant din of the city and that stink that you can ultimately learn to love, a mix of garbage, fresh-baked muffins, the most expensive perfume, human caca, and scrap from the guts of the subway. The obsessive life of this district never lets up, illuminated through the night by the petrochemical glow of nearby brokerage houses.

It is here that Joanne Jordan worked, between Chase and the store that sold ayurvedic cosmetics.

The salon itself was familiar to a lot of people because of its fairly clever name: "Hairdonism"... Oh boy... It had been thought up by the owner, whose name is Jed; he's big on art and likes to get in good with artists, or rather he has an unconsoled, ever-intense grudge against karma for his not having been born one of them. As well as for a couple other things. Like many, he endeavors to kill this resentment that won't leave him alone, with the aid of ethyl al-

cohol; in this he is consistent, patient, and impervious to his constant failures. Thus this grudge never seems to die but, on the contrary, as happens, basted in liters of wine, in undiluted whiskey and Stoli, it swells and issues these sort of buds, one new thread after another, it finds new objects and sweeps over successive planes of its rather lonely mode of life.

Jed is a large, fat fellow with a nice enough face that tends to flush with all shades of red, by which one can judge accurately enough the degree of his unreality, from the slightest blush to the scarlet of an undercooked steak, full of melancholic flecks. In decent jackets and Italian shoes, he tries to lend his place of business an artistic chic, stuffing every nook with incredibly random books bought in bulk (*Moby-Dick*, *How to Love Your Osteoporosis*, *The Life and Death of Stalin*, *Weekend Decoupage*, *How to Be Like Elton John*). He claims that he once wanted to study comparative literature, but then it seems he fell into drug addiction, which he's fortunately completely come out of, which doesn't happen that often... While he was going over all this, totally drunk, hand on his heart, it was impossible not to believe that he would make quite a good essayist. When she doesn't happen to have a client, Joanne sometimes looks into that odd book collection, reading random sentences aloud, using them to tell her fortune or else, in a pretty nonsensical manner, relating them to her own views on a given conundrum, such as:

"Look, Candy," she read. "This ol' dog jus' suffers himself all the time." To which she immediately added, putting Steinbeck back on the shelf: "Poor dog. I hate when animals suffer."

Or else what she was reading now: "Fortunately, I have what's left of my career and wonderful children." Whoa, is that a sign? I've missed my period!

"Again," Mallery sighed, just on her way to get decolorant from the back.

"Again," Joanne says, sticking her tongue out at her, and picks up another book: "For regions do not suddenly end, as far as I know, but gradually merge into one another."

That was too much for her.

"Nonsense," she said, turning up the radio (they had on Beyoncé, whom she adored). "Beckett. Isn't he some kind of tennis player? One thing's for sure: Dude's pretty batshit."

It was just as she was saying this that some girl walked into the salon.

Translated by Benjamin Paloff

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10 / JOANNA BATOR

JOANNA BATOR (BORN 1968) IS A NOVELIST AND JOURNALIST, AS WELL AS A UNIVERSITY LECTURER ON FEMINISM, POSTMODERNISM AND PSYCHOANALYSIS. SHE HAS WRITTEN TWO PREVIOUS NOVELS, *SAND HILL* AND *CLOUDALIA*, BOTH SET IN HER HOME TOWN OF WAŁBRZYCH, AND AN EXCELLENT TRAVEL BOOK, *THE JAPANESE FAN*, WHICH SHOULD BE REQUIRED READING FOR ANYONE INTERESTED IN JAPAN.



Photo: Krzysztof Dubiel / The Polish Book Institute

Dark, Almost Night

With her new book Joanna Bator proves that she is one of the most interesting Polish writers of her generation. Like her very well received novels *Sand Hill* and *Cloudalia*, this one, *Dark, Almost Night*, takes us on a journey to the town of Wałbrzych, in Silesia. This time, however, it is a more sinister trip. In the company of the central character, Alicja Tabor, who is a newspaper reporter, we will learn the painful history of her family and those closely connected with it, which goes back to the Second World War.

Alicja travels from Warsaw to Wałbrzych, her home town, in order to write an article about the mysterious disappearance of three children called Andżelika, Patryk and Kalinka. The case also involves some other unexplained events, including several incidences of cruelty towards animals, and people who turn up and declare themselves to be prophets. Alicja takes up residence in a large, old, formerly German house, and as she gathers material for her report, she starts talking to the locals, who are behaving strangely. From their tangled tales she discovers the truth about herself and her own tragic childhood, over which a shadow was cast by her mother's madness and the death of her sister, who was obsessed with the legend of Książ Castle and its beautiful resident, Princess Daisy, who was under a curse...

As in her previous books, here too Bator weaves her unique tale out of several literary genres. She makes bold use of the Gothic novel, but also of the psychological and crime genres. However, *Dark, Almost Night* as a whole is

not just a playful way of parodying various literary genres; the curious thing is that, despite referring to the Gothic, which these days is highly prone to comical interpretation, the book offers serious thoughts about a world that is permeated by evil (which here becomes personified in the mysterious "cat-eaters"), suffering in the historical past, madness and the tragedy of those who are too sensitive to bear the weight of it all.

The past turns out to be a difficult, if not insuperable burden, history likes to repeat itself, and the demons can reawaken at any moment. And somewhere beyond these reflections of a general nature, the story of the heroine's loneliness is being told too, a woman who is incapable of entering into a deep, satisfying relationship with another person. Bator describes it all in language where simplicity appears alongside lyricism, and legend alternates with raw modernity. This is an interesting, original book.

Patrycja Pustkowiak

As I closed the door behind him, I slammed it too hard, knocking off the horseshoe that was hanging on its inner side for good luck, which had evidently ignored this sign of encouragement. It wasn't the last thing to fall down that day, to disintegrate or turn out to be broken beyond hope. The house was dying before my very eyes, as if wanting to take revenge on me for having abandoned it for so long. In the light of day I could see patches of peeling paint on the ceilings, swollen bubbles of damp under the wallpaper, warped floorboards and carpets so badly eaten away by moths that in some places there was nothing left but the white backing. The transfer with violets on the bathroom door had lost its colour, and the once purple petals and green leaves looked like the wings of dead insects now. I was standing in the rust-coated bath tub, waiting for the ancient boiler to come on so that I could take a shower, but when the hot water finally began to flow, the shower hose couldn't cope with it and snapped in two. "We'll put in tiles and a terracotta floor," my father used to promise, "or maybe instead of boring old terracotta we'll have a cedar-wood floor? And a jacuzzi too – you'll be splashing around like the baby seals at Wrocław zoo – what do you say to that? Or maybe we'll get a brass bath tub from France with lion's paw feet?" he would wonder, generously squandering imaginary money. Compared with such wonderful plans, running repairs didn't seem to him worth the bother. I filled the dreadful bath tub with water and immersed myself, head and all, as in childhood, when my sister used to sit alongside to make sure I didn't drown. In those days I was fascinated by the underwater noises: knocking, the grate of metal against stone, a voice calling in various languages, hooting sounds and groans. That was the world our father had gone down to, and for which he eventually paid with his life. Regardless of where we actually happened to be, he would point downwards, under our feet, and in the tone of someone who believes, would say: it is here somewhere. Somewhere. Here. It's Hitler's treasure. When I find it – and now I have a map of unique value, definitely real – our life will change out of all recognition. It will make us so happy that we will have to get to know each other all over again. Somewhere under the old bath tub, in which the noises of the underground city resounded, there was treasure, which our father used to look for in his shabby Czechoslovak shoes, lighting his way with a miner's headlamp. I tried to understand why he preferred to be there, rather than here, with me and Ewa. "Ladies and gentlemen," my sister would joke, "here's Alicja Tabor, the water Camel, explorer of seas and oceans, which she tours when she's tired of the desert! The only Camel in the world with fins and gills. A rare species. Highly protected. Today she's going to tell you what she has seen and heard in the underwater kingdom of our bath tub." The game involved me telling the truth, that today I had heard knocking, a voice counting in German and in a language like German, where instead of *ein* there was *eins*, and the sound of a glass being dropped on a stone floor, and Ewa would add the rest. She'd think up a story, because she was best at that. I was good at listening.

I thought perhaps I'd been wrong to think I was strong enough by now, and that this house full of death and ghosts couldn't hurt me. I knew I couldn't give in to fear, so I was staying here, and not at the hotel booked for me by the newspaper, where no one had a clue I was the owner of an old house in Wałbrzych. I was reluctant to talk about the past and rarely came into close enough contact with anyone for them to expect me to open up. "I have no family," I would reply, whenever the question about parents and siblings was asked, the question my friends were so fond of, because they could go on for hours about the wrongs and traumas they had experienced, as well as their ways of coping, or rather not coping with them, at therapies that went on for years. Throughout my adult life I had been gathering strength, like stocking up supplies for a long winter, and I reckoned I was quite well prepared for this journey. When the children began to disappear in Wałbrzych, I knew the right moment had come, and that it was I, known to my work colleagues as Ironclad Alicja, who must write about them. Now here I was, and the house whose key I always carried on me was snapping its decaying, ex-German jaws at me.

After the shower and the underwater concert I decided to do a tour of all the rooms, to convince myself what this old ruin was good for and what I, Ironclad Alicja, was good for. Upstairs there were two bedrooms; one had once belonged to me and Ewa, and here, on the old double bed with an oak frame and an ancient mattress, I planned to go on sleeping during this stay. A small table, at which we once used to do lessons, two chairs, an empty wardrobe, a rug made of rags, nothing else. The other bedroom had been empty for years – there was nothing in there but a metal bed with no mattress, sad as the wreck

of a boat left on a sandbar. Once, in times I don't remember, my parents had shared it, but later my father had moved downstairs, and from then on the study acted at the same time as his bedroom, dining room and hiding place from the world. That was where I went next, down stairs that creaked so badly I was afraid they would cave in under my slight weight. I was annoyed by the banality of decay, because maybe in the depths of my soul I had been expecting this house to be dying in a more curious, less predictable way. As I opened the door of my father's room, condensed time hit me in a wave. Through the window, Książ Castle rose out of the beech forest, and whenever my father worked at his desk, still heaped with piles of dusty papers and books, he saw that building every time he looked up from his historical essays, maps and plans. Now I, his younger daughter, was gazing at Książ Castle, at the mist billowing beneath its stone walls, and it was one of those few things that still seemed to me just as large and beautiful as in my childhood. I set the old wall clock going, and as the pendulum began to swing, I felt imprisoned time get moving. Something clicked, as if my time and this house's time had only now come together. The sofa covered in deerskin on which I used to sit as a child, in the rare moments when my father was not busy looking for treasure and felt ready to face up to being a father, emitted a sighing noise under my weight. For a while I sat still, trying not even to breathe, but I felt nothing but sadness. I peeped into the kitchen, plunged in grey light, as if it were full of water, and water really was dripping into the sink non-stop, flowing from a small stalactite which had formed over the years. From a door leading into the garden came a chill, and the mist was pressing against the window panes. The table and four chairs looked like the skeletons of long dead animals that no one had got around to naming or growing fond of.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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WOJCIECH JAGIELSKI (BORN 1960) IS A JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR OF REPORTAGE. HE HAS REPORTED ON MAJOR WORLDWIDE POLITICAL EVENTS AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, AND SPECIALISES IN AFRICA, CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS. HIS BOOKS HAVE BEEN TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH, SPANISH, DUTCH AND ITALIAN, AND HE HAS OFTEN BEEN COMPARED TO RYSZARD KAPUŚCIŃSKI.



Photo: Krzysztof Dubiel / The Polish Book Institute

Scorching the Grass

This is an account of a country which – fortunately – no longer exists in this form. But the whole concept of the way it was organised was so obnoxious, and the lives of its citizens were so meticulously ordered that while the regulations went in one direction, everyday life went in another; everything seemed to have changed, but in such a way that almost nothing really did change at all. As proper changes take far more time than anyone would suppose, they cannot be dictated, and arbitrarily appointing a date for the changes to begin does not determine the point when they really start to take root.

We are in the Republic of South Africa, in a town called Ventersdorp in Transvaal province. It is run by Eugene Terre'Blanche, a Boer, the descendant of Calvinist settlers from Holland, a populist and poseur, most certainly a fervent speaker and mythomaniac, above all an ardent advocate of the concept of apartheid, which forbade inter-racial love, communal schools, hospitals, beaches, sports fields, park benches or bus stop to be shared by blacks and whites, not to mention the actual buses. The rules relating to people appear to have been applied to animals too – Friesian horses could not be cross-bred with Arabs. So writes Wojciech Jagielski in this book, *Scorching the Grass*.

Although he did not perform any official function in the town, Terre'Blanche was its king. He had a large number of supporters all over the country. His

dream was to have an independent Boer republic where the racist rules would be kept in force forever. He was battered to death by some black workers from his own plantation, but the reason for the killing was a quarrel over wages. The day on which the white tribune was murdered is the starting point for Jagielski's book.

However, it is not a murder mystery with a social slant, nor is it reportage of the kind for which Jagielski is famous. Here he has set himself a more ambitious task. His highly detailed analysis of apartheid shows up the sinister aspects of human nature which on the one hand bid one to despise others, and on the other never to forget about revenge. It is more a study of ideological madness based on an erroneous understanding of the truths of faith than classic reportage. But the language of reportage is ideally suited to this sort of study.

Paweł Smoleński

All afternoon Martha Terre'Blanche kept trying to call her husband. Eugene had always led his own, separate life to which she had no access. He was capable of vanishing for days at a time, or shutting himself away in his own thoughts. They even lived separately, he on the farm and she in town. She was accustomed to solitude and silence. She herself was surprised by the alarm which her husband's absence prompted in her that particular day. With every telephone call that he failed to answer it was growing, becoming stifling and incapacitating.

Through the window she had seen some black men waiting by the fence. She had recognized Chris, whom Eugene had hired six months ago to graze the cattle on the farm and to do the gardening at the house in town. He was standing by the gate with a boy whom she had also seen on the farm.

Then Eugene had driven up in his white pick-up truck. He had told the blacks to sit in the box, behind the driver's cab, and gone back to the farm at Ratzegaai, about twelve kilometres out of town. Since when he hadn't picked up any more calls.

Towards evening, now seriously worried, she decided to call the van Zyls, who lived at the neighbouring property across the road from the Terre'Blanche farm. Dora answered the phone, Eugene's beloved sister.

"No, I haven't seen him today," she said. "But he's meant to be dropping by this evening."

That evening, on the Saturday before Easter Day, the feast of Resurrection and Redemption, they were holding a party to celebrate their oldest son's birthday.

"He's probably gone out on horseback, and left his phone at home," said Dora. "I'll tell Dan to go and check what's happening over there."

On the veranda Dan van Zyl glanced at his watch. It was coming up to five.

The shadows were gathering and growing denser in the valley. Dan van Zyl sat down on the veranda outside his house to watch the dusk fall.

It wasn't how he usually spent his evenings – he had no time for such things. But that day he sat down and watched, just as if he felt he ought to.

From his house on the hill he had a good view of the field road in the green valley and some thick copses growing on the farm situated on the opposite slope. It belonged to his brother-in-law, Eugene Terre'Blanche. In recent years Eugene's farm had badly fallen into decline. Van Zyl sat on the veranda and mused on what was happening to that piece of land. How if you don't have the heart or the head for it, it won't be kind to you either, and it'll stop producing.

Eugene's life was filled with major politics. His world consisted of never-ending debates about how appallingly things were going in the country, and how they would get even worse when the blacks finally took power. He would summon his supporters to meetings and marches, and rack his brains over how to deal with it and how to prevent the blacks from taking over. Meanwhile the land had been going to seed.

Eugene's world involved nocturnal rallies with flaming torches. He would arrive at them on horseback, dressed up in his best uniform, and amid fluttering flags he would deliver fiery speeches and threaten war. Could people like him take care of the land?

Eugene was flattered when the newspapers referred to him as a Boer commander, a general, the last defender of the white race. Although he did not hold any official post in his home town of Ventersdorp, he was regarded as its most important citizen – immune, not subject to any laws apart from the ones he established himself. He inspired real terror in the blacks, and the whites did not dare to oppose him either.

"What a waste," sighed Dan van Zyl heavily, as he cast a glance at the Terre'Blanche family farm, which Eugene had inherited from his father. From year to year the weeds had grown to form tall, uncut grass, on which Terre'Blanche had his cattle grazed, and here and there on the pastureland clumps of young trees and bushes had sprouted.

Lost in thought, Dan van Zyl gazed vacantly at the shifting shadows in the valley. He didn't even shudder when the phone in the parlour rang. The ringing stopped, but a little later it rang again, even louder and more insistently.

He heard his wife's voice. Terre'Blanche's wife Martha had called. She didn't live on the farm, but in town. She didn't feel safe at the farm, which was in an isolated location. In the last few years there had been an increasing number of attacks and killings at the farms scattered around the town, and many of the

farmers had bought houses for their families in Ventersdorp. Each morning they drove to their farms as if going to the office, and at night they came back to town.

The sun was starting to set, and Dan was ready to go back to town, when a black horse appeared from the direction of Terre'Blanche's homestead on the hill. It crossed the meadow that lay on the hillside, cutting a trail through the tall yellow grass, galloped up to the fence along the dirt road, then turned around and raced back towards the house.

Van Zyl knew that horse well, and that was why he immediately knew something bad had happened.

Chris Mahlangu and Patrick crept into the bedroom through a half-open window. The room was shrouded in semi-darkness. The farmer was lying on his back on a large bed, with his arms spread wide, in his clothes, but with his trousers undone. He was asleep.

For a while they stood there, staring at the snoring man. The very first blow, inflicted by Mahlangu with a metal bar, deprived Terre'Blanche of consciousness.

Chris Mahlangu went on hitting, over and over again, putting all his strength, hatred, rage and fear into each blow as they rained down on the farmer's head, arms and chest. Mahlangu heard the crunch of breaking bones, and could smell blood in the air.

When he ran out of strength, he handed the bar to Patrick, who was just standing there, watching the killing. Now without a word he took a swing and struck the white man three times on the head and chest. Each blow made Terre'Blanche's body jerk upwards, as if restoring it to life.

It was almost dark and very stuffy in the bedroom. Panting heavily, they stared at the blood-soaked corpse, which looked nothing like the terror-inducing white farmer. Completely smashed, his face was unrecognizable; one of the blows had shattered his jaw, perforating his cheek and his tongue. There seemed to be blood everywhere – on the bed, on the pillow and the victim's body, on the walls, ceiling and floor, on the killers' hands and clothing, on their faces and in their hair.

Chris Mahlangu took a knife from under his belt. He was leaning over the exposed corpse when from the pocket of Terre'Blanche's loosened trousers a mobile phone and some car keys fell to the floor. The metallic jangle broke the silence alarmingly. Mahlangu shuddered. He took another glance at the mutilated face, but then without a word he put his knife away in his trouser pocket and bent down to pick up the phone and the keys. The phone rang the moment he touched it. He stuffed it deep into his pocket and signalled to Patrick.

"Let's get out of here."

As they left, they slammed the kitchen door behind them.

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ZYTA ORYSZYN (BORN 1940) IS A WRITER AND JOURNALIST. IN THE 1980s SHE WAS THE EDITOR OF SAMIZDAT JOURNALS AND AN OPPOSITION ACTIVIST. SHE PUBLISHED HER FIRST NOVEL, *THE NAIAD*, IN 1970, AND IN LATER YEARS HER BOOKS HAVE INCLUDED COLLECTIONS OF STORIES ENTITLED *BLACK ILLUMINATION* (1981) AND *MADAM FRANKENSTEIN* (1984). TO DATE, HER MOST ACCLAIMED PUBLICATION HAS BEEN THE NOVEL *A HISTORY OF SICKNESS, A HISTORY OF MOURNING* (1990).

Photo: private

Saving Atlantis

Saving Atlantis is not a novel in the classic sense. To some extent this book is a summary of Oryszyn's writing to date, completing and supplementing themes that are present in her earlier work. The stories in *Saving Atlantis* essentially centre on one particular issue: how major historical events encroach on the lives of ordinary, colourless people. Oryszyn has always been interested in the destructive power of the winds of history – from the outbreak of the Second World War to the martial law era in Poland. First of all she takes us to eastern Sub-Carpathia, where in a shelter, or rather a hideout dug in the ground, a Polish family are hiding, along with some war refugees from the deep countryside. Outside, there are armies rolling past and partisans on the prowl. Oryszyn focuses on her main characters' simple, innocent emotions; fear predominates, and the situation is compared to a never ending hunt. Later on we find ourselves in the era immediately after the war. The family moves from the east to Lower Silesia, and occupies a flat in a formerly German tenement building. The traumas of the recent past seem to pile on top of present-day traumas – Poland is shifting into the era of Stalinism, lack of trust is intensifying, denouncements are becoming more common, and those arrested by the apparatus of repression are disappearing. The very place (Leśny Brzeg on the river Oder, until recently the German town of Waldburg) is marked by the drama of expulsions and the wrongs done to the former inhabitants, who had been supporters of Hitler,

and after 1945 came in for reprisals. Oryszyn writes about all these matters through the medium of a naïve, as if blinkered perspective. The main characters in this book do not try to square accounts with history or to analyse the world according to any moral or socio-political criteria – they simply say what happened to them or to someone in their immediate environment. This is a view from below, set within real experience and concrete fact, far removed from the sublime, and thus it is authentic and moving. In the final chapter of the book references to the paradoxical title appear – life has been saved, though under pressure from extreme violence, and in such unfavourable circumstances that it ought to have been lost forever, like Atlantis.

Dariusz Nowacki

The railway track disappeared in the woods around the bend. Around the bend the world began. Crossing the world by train took you all the way to Wrocław. Wrocław was where the universe began.

The universe was divided into two unequal parts by the iron curtain.

The capital of Olek Walewski's universe was Moscow. Which city was the capital of the other universe was not entirely clear. The Americans claimed it was Washington, but they walked upside down. The French declared that it was Paris, but they ate frogs and snails on a daily basis. The British insisted that it was London – enough to make the cat laugh. Olek Walewski could cover up their little islands with a single small inkwell.

The world was obscured by beech trees, hornbeams and oaks, as well as pines and firs. One time Olek Walewski scrambled up the highest oak. The air was crystal clear, so his grandmother claimed. The coking plants weren't putting out smoke because they'd had a breakdown. Olek thought that thanks to this favourable state of affairs he'd be able to see not just Gedymin's Hill or Sobótka, but also Śnieżka mountain, over which the border ran. And once he saw Śnieżka, he'd see the iron curtain too, for surely that sort of curtain must reach up to heaven.

It wasn't at all clear whether or not the iron curtain reached heaven, or just came up to the first feeble little clouds. Mietek Szczęsny said it only came up to the first clouds. For if it had reached right up to heaven, there would have to be some sort of airlocks in it or something, so that the planes could keep flying.

Nor was it clear how far the curtain reached downwards – whether it just touched the ground, or was dug deep into it. For if it was dug in, they'd definitely need a sapper's shovel to make a tunnel under it.

Olek Walewski's granny reckoned the curtain didn't reach all that high and could be climbed like an iceberg, so she urged him to equip himself with a rope and climbing hooks.

She had spent her honeymoon at Chamonix before the First World War, and there she had seen mountaineers climb to the top of the Bosson glacier, tied together with ropes. They had special boots, with sticking-out nails on them. Granny insisted that before the journey to the other side of the curtain everyone should fit nails to their shoes. And that the nails should stick out specially.

Mietek Szczęsny and Franka Salatycka had voted for the sapper's shovel, and against the ropes and specially hobnailed boots.

Firstly, they didn't have any boots, just rubber-soled slippers.

Secondly, they wondered how old Mrs Walewska was going to climb up the iron curtain, even if it wasn't entirely smooth. It probably was a bit rough, because it didn't reflect the sun's rays well enough for the flash to be visible in Leśny Brzeg. A flash like that would have been dazzling, it would have shone like snow or something, but there was nothing dazzling Olek Walewski or shining in his eyes as he sat in the highest oak tree.

*

The iron curtain had come down a few months before the referendum. On exactly the fifth of March 1946.

Just then, Olek Walewski had been squatting by the building site, observing the early spring. The early spring had looked like Mrs Pitkova in her dressing gown, when she came out to throw ash onto the rubbish heap each morning. Her brown, cracked heels and her torn grey night shirt protruded from under her dressing gown. Scorched by a permanent wave, her hair stuck up in the wind like crisp, dry, faded stalks. Mrs Pitkova breathed through her mouth. In her half-open mouth the teeth had gone black. That mouth and those teeth looked like the pit dug at the building site.

The building site was some heaps of earth and a hole next to the tenement house. It was some trees that had been ripped up by the roots and tossed onto the embankment. Some bricks and bags of petrified cement. Fag ends, dried grass and a rusty digger with its scoop raised up. The scoop was like a gallows.

Under the gallows stood two kennels. A dog kennel and a man kennel. In the dog kennel a black mongrel kept barking for days on end without coming outside. By night the mongrel howled and apparently chewed at her own paws. So said the watchman, and he called her Loopy.

The watchman lived in the man kennel. He had a rifle and a radio. The kennel had no windows. Just chinks between the boards. Inside there was a couch, and the man kennel was supplied with electric light.

The watchman often used to sit outside the man kennel and listen out for Loopy's barking. Sometimes he grabbed his rifle and promised her: "I'm going to see the day when I kill you, you son-of-a-bitch."

He also listened to the radio. He claimed that all the tenants in the tenement house should listen to the radio. Because you could find out from the radio who was an outsider and who was one of us. And outsiders were forbidden entry to the building site. Spies, for instance. And every spy is an outsider. He was to point his rifle at outsiders the way he did at Loopy and shout out loud: "Stop, who goes there, you spy!"

Nobody knew what the watchman was called. It was silly to ask an official person his first name, surname and place of birth, like at an interrogation.

When on exactly the fifth of March 1946 Olek Walewski was squatting beside the man kennel and observing the early spring, the nameless watchman was tuning the radio. Loopy was barking, and the radio suddenly began to boom – boom, boom, boom, boom – and presented itself: "This is Radio London." Olek was surprised the watchman had an English, not a leftover German radio, and when he stopped wondering, he heard from the English radio that an iron curtain had come down on the Earth. More or less right across the European continent.

It roughly emerged from this that capital cities such as Warsaw, Berlin, Sofia, Prague, Budapest and Bucharest were in front of this iron curtain, on the same side as Moscow. And the rest of the universe was now behind it.

Olek Walewski sprang to his feet, because it was woeful news. He raced head-over-heels to Granny's, to communicate this woeful news. On the way he kept telling himself who had revealed that the curtain had come down and where: namely somebody Churchill in a place called Fulton.

Unfortunately, Granny was hiding again. He looked for her in the usual places – behind the galvanised bath tub in the corridor, in the flat under the bed, and behind the wardrobe, but he couldn't find her.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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IGOR OSTACHOWICZ (BORN 1968) GRADUATED IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS. HE HAS WORKED AS A PARAMEDIC AT THE INSTITUTE OF PSYCHIATRY AND NEUROLOGY, AS A MANAGER AT A NUMBER OF COMPANIES, AND FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS AS A CIVIL SERVANT. AT PRESENT HE IS SECRETARY OF STATE IN THE POLISH PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE, WHERE HE WRITES THE PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECHES AND ACTS AS HIS ADVISER AND PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGER.

Photo: Maciej Śmiarowski

Night of the Living Jews

Night of the Living Jews deserves attention for at least several reasons. Above all Ostachowicz has succeeded in giving a literary reworking to a topic that is important for the Polish collective imagination, and to tell a story which has demanded to be told for years. Here we see Warsaw, which was razed to the ground during the Second World War, as a wild, dormant graveyard, where the people killed at the time have suddenly materialised as phantoms. Here we have face-to-face encounters between the living and the not-living. Who is really at home in Warsaw, in Poland – a place branded by genocide? This novel, excellently written in a shocking, unsettlingly “inappropriate” genre, seeks the answers. The piquant, comical style of pop-culture horror fiction would seem at odds with the topic of the Holocaust. Even the title, paraphrasing a classic horror film, by juxtaposing the word “Dead” and the word “Jew”, may cause concern.

An avalanche of events is set off by an amulet – a silver heart stolen from the Jews – whose possessor is guaranteed success. The main character, who as the action develops will become more and more like a comic super-hero trying to save the world from annihilation, lives with his girlfriend in the Warsaw district of Muranów, which is built on top of the ruins of the ghetto. One day, through an open trapdoor in the cellar, out come... deceased Jews in tattered coats. Gradually it turns out their favourite way of spending their time is in Arkadia, the nearby shopping mall.

And yet *Night of the Living Jews* is a very well thought-out, mature piece of writing. Ostachowicz lucidly explains the principles of the world he has created. The Arkadia shopping mall, a place of non-stop happiness thoroughly sustained by trade turnover, gets mixed up with the Muranów district's ghost world. The commonly held, though locally taboo truth about an alien threat that hovers around the modernised, Europeanised Warsaw city centre actually becomes reality. The idea of writing the novel in the style of horror is both lyrical and strikingly apt, dictated by historic facts. The Jewish history of non-existence has to be completed through menace, through the materialisation of things nobody wants to know about or remember. The way in which the main character becomes aware of this process (and also of the power symbolised by the amulet) forms the profound, intriguing drama of the novel.

Kazimiera Szczuka

We started with ice cream – I thought corpses didn’t eat, but they do; only Skinny just had a Diet Coke, while the rest of us had a large portion each.

“So how does this deal work?” asked Chirico, shooting straight from the hip. Skinny tried to kick her under the table, but there was no need, because Rachel answered for herself, with a slight shrug, the way children talk about their parents’ fancy ideas.

“They’ve got to do something to make me smile.”

Chirico pondered this remark.

“So what’s the point? Some sort of obligation to smile? Why should you have to smile?”

Rachel gave a deep sigh and stared into her ice-cream cup, aimlessly poking the long spoon into it. “Daddy would like me to go to heaven, but at the entrance you’re supposed to smile, and I can’t do it. Because of me he’s stuck too.”

“And what about the others, that whole underground city?” I cut in. “What are they still doing here?”

“It varies. The only people who are left under Warsaw are the ones who’ve got something wrong – most of them are in shock. They can’t pull themselves together, some of them are angry with God and refuse to take another step forwards, some are horribly afraid they’ll never understand it all, or even worse, that they’ll have to be forgiving. There are also some people who worked for the police or were in the Sonderkommando – those ones have yet other reasons, but either way, they’re all stuck here. They’re waiting for some time to go by, and once you’re dead time passes in a different way. My father is quite a different story – he’s a tough guy, he’s not in shock at all, he was in the Jewish Uprising, then the Polish one, and everyone respects him. He just stayed behind for my sake, because he doesn’t want to leave me here on my own.”

As I listened to Rachel, I became more and more convinced that something inevitable was going on. She explained that our troubles were occurring because something strange had happened, and lots of the dead people had been woken up – hardly anyone had been able to lie in peace in the earth for the past few days, they were all fidgeting, tossing and turning like somebody who can’t get to sleep. The most badly warped of them had formed a group. This lot had taken a fancy to the idea of liquidating anyone they didn’t like. They had seen the people they had once loved being exterminated, so now they wanted to see the extermination of everyone they didn’t like. It was all starting to fit together in my mind. The fear came back to me that I had felt while I was down in the underground, and there was nothing I could do to restrain it – there were evil thoughts seething away in thousands of minds, both living and dead, and even if I were yet more indifferent than I already am by nature, and by the strength of my convictions, I was just as likely to cop it as anyone else, so I came up in goose bumps, though maybe it was the ice cream, plus the A/C.

“And there’s magic too,” Rachel went on. “Something’s been disturbed, the order’s been upset, it feels as if an immense force could end up in evil hands.”

“But why aren’t you smiling now, Rachel?” said Chirico, who liked the story, but on whom it hadn’t made a major impression, because one, she hadn’t been down in the cellar, and two, those weren’t the sort of films she downloaded off the Internet. “You’ve had some ice cream and it’s great here in Arkadia. I always smile when I come in here.”

Rachel winced slightly.

“Because they’re giving me strange looks.” She was right. The customers at other tables were glancing at her with disgust, worse yet, the staff were staring at her with indignation and a sense of duty, and then finally I saw two security guards coming our way. Well, yes, it’s not their fault, I justify them mentally – Arkadia isn’t for tramps and scruffs, their job is to throw those people out of here, and Rachel happens to look the way she looks. So they come up and inform us that this lady must leave, because she’s upsetting the other customers, and they’re going to escort her to the exit.

“But why?” said Skinny, with a note of hysteria in her voice.

“Because she’s upsetting the other customers,” they repeated their stock reply.

“This lady has paid for her ice cream and she has a right to finish eating it,” I remarked in a tone only mildly spiced with adrenaline. In theory it was a good idea, but the ice cream was almost entirely gone, which one of them pointed out with a stubby finger.

“Good grief!” exclaimed Chirico very loud. “Excuse me, but do we look like hooligans?”

“You don’t, but this lady...” he said, pointing at Rachel, “...is upsetting the other customers.”

“But this lady is a girl guide from a historical reconstruction group! Only an hour ago she was at the state commemorations! She shook hands with the Lady Mayoress, and now you want to throw her out?”

At that they were rather bewildered. That Chirico’s really smart.

“It’ll be a terrible scandal,” I added. “Not just you, but your boss’ll have to explain himself to the media too.”

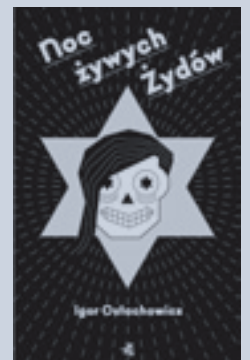
“I’ll just go and get changed, I don’t want to upset anyone,” said Rachel with a sad look on her face.

What a good actress – she immediately sensed what that was about, I thought in admiration, and at once realised she must have had to pull off some tougher tricks than that one in the days when she’d been in hiding. One of the security guards went off for a brief consultation over his walkie-talkie.

“All right, we’re sorry.” He even managed to force a crooked smile. “But once you’ve eaten your ice cream,” he said, glancing meaningfully at the empty cup, “please go and change – we have to look after our customers’ welfare.”

And they were gone.

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SYLWIA CHUTNIK (BORN 1979) IS A WRITER AND A WARSAW TOUR GUIDE. SHE STUDIED CULTURAL STUDIES AND GENDER STUDIES, AND IS ALSO A SOCIAL ACTIVIST AND PRESIDENT OF THE MAMA FOUNDATION FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE SITUATION OF MOTHERS IN POLAND. *HUSTLERS* IS HER THIRD NOVEL.

Photo: Mikołaj Długosz

Hustlers

“There’s no bigger hustler than a Warsaw hustler,” sang Polish bard Stanisław Grzesiuk, the songster of the prewar Polish capital, the undisputed patron of Sylwia Chutnik’s latest novel. It is the rhythm of his ballads, quoted throughout, and his personality – and he is mentioned here by name – that lends the whole tale its tone, its charm, its hipness. Chutnik successfully demonstrates that the world of *Barefoot but in Spurs* (Grzesiuk’s 1961 autobiography), or rather the underworld – indeed, underground, intermingling only occasionally with the so-called great big world – has sufficient strength to conquer the contemporary, disenchanted, whitewashed, modernized Warsaw of today. You just have to know your literature, your history, and have an ear for the rhythm of the tales of Stasiek Nożownik, Antek Son of the Streets, of lovers, drunkards, and harlots, and lastly, about the executioner at the gallows. Sylwia Chutnik has proven herself to be in possession of an exceptional ear. And of exceptional ingenuity. Inspired by Warsaw city ballads, by *The Girls from Nowolipki* by Pola Gojawiczyńska (the cult novel about the life of young women in the capital between the world wars), by punk-anarchist feminism, she has achieved a self-standing, original quality, a story that is as entertaining as it is moving. Highly dramatic, brutal, and political. Because – as she demonstrates – there is a bigger hustler than a Warsaw hustler: the hustlerette. The lady hustler. The girl-bandit that no one can conquer. That always fights the good war. Well, almost always. Sometimes

it’s just for the fun of it. Above all – the hustlerette never works alone. Chutnik’s novel sings the praises of the accomplishments of a whole band of lady avengers – a band uniting social classes (because of a class shared long ago at school), neighborhoods, generations. Celina, Halina, Stefa, and Bronka now play first fiddle, they themselves measure out justice. The main plot – vigilante justice for an evil developer that set an activist woman from the tenants’ movement on fire – comes from the real, most recent history of the Polish capital. Such a thing took place, although those responsible were never found, and the guilt of the developer remained symbolic. In the novel, the girls take the matter into their own hands, and it’s only thanks to them that justice prevails. It all begins in the Bródno Cemetery, and in a way it all ends at the cemetery, too, because such is the fate of the lady warrior. And such – sad, cruel – is the end of the ballad.

Kazimiera Szczuka

Halina

Żyleta got to daydreaming, and her hands started to move a little. It was only when the fork she knocked down hit the floor that she came to from her trance. She glanced around and then suddenly, like it wasn't her, she began to talk. First quietly, and then louder and louder and faster and faster.

When I was a kid, they used to give me a badge every year for being a model student. And it actually really made me mad, you know? I would think, come on, model, how could I be a model, model of what? Model for these little girls here, all the same, in their identical pinafores from the state-run department store, with their ponytails, with their pigtails, in their tights. We're brought up on Ala, who busts her ass in the kitchen like a little engine, who has a brother that's an astronaut, that's a firefighter, who knows what he is. But what kind of model am I for the other children? Oh, I'm such a hard worker, such a good girl? God, I hated being a good girl. I used to try so hard to be bad, to spit, to cuss, to tear up my little patterned notebooks. Nothing ever came of it.

Then one time there was this guy that leaped out from the stairwell. I was sixteen, without a thought in my head, and all I did was go to concerts in my tight army-style boots, go to concerts and go right up by the stage and woohoooo!! But this guy puts a knife to my throat and shouts, "Take off your clothes!" "Take your underwear off," he screams. And I'm like, I'll yell for help, and he's like, shut up or I'll kill you. And I'm like, I'll yell for help, and he's like, no one's going to hear you – and he was right, nobody was going to want to hear me in an apartment block with two thousand people in it, windows open, and all of those fuckers gone stone-deaf at the same exact time. So I holler, but real feeble. Kind of like deep down – there came a shout from the outside, but on the inside it was quiet. And he's rummaging around my fly, panting, in an absolute frenzy. It got so stuffy all at once, there was a fly hovering over my head, but I was already someplace else in my head, I had already opted out of this unpleasant scene, and I'm just thinking to myself, ha-ha, I'll go and rest at home, I'll pull the covers up over my head, and nobody'll be able to get at me anymore. But meanwhile, all of a sudden – this neighbor comes up, taking his trash out, and he looks over in our direction, and the guy runs off, he just did have time to push me, though, and so, I fell. It really hurt a lot, because I kind of hit my hand in this really unfortunate way, I just fell on top of it with all my weight.

And I lay there with my underwear half pulled off, totally in shock. And that neighbor just stepped right over me, took a big step, because I was just lying there for no reason in his way for him to get to the trash, and he banged the flap on the garbage, bang, and then he left. I had no way to stand up, I had thought he might help me somehow, but he didn't want to hear me, notice me, he had his own problems, goddammit, of the wife type, the kids type, done.

I mean, really, they just don't have any place of their own anymore, these hormonal teens, they sunbathe and pop their pimples all over people that are actually, legitimately tired. Why is no one taking care of this, why is no one talking about it on TV, where are the parents with their committee on education, where?

The neighbor went off, but not me.

Ferajna dances, I don't dance.

After a while, the pain a shrill hiss, I got up and went home. And then it was just noggin under the faucet and cold water.

I thought how he hadn't raped me. How actually now there was nothing wrong. I was shaking all over when I went out to the stairwell to smoke.

I ran into a friend of mine and she was like, "What is up with you, you look so pale." And that hand that I had smashed down on had swollen up on me, had ballooned out so much that a minute more and it would have burst the skin. I don't know why I had thought it was okay to hold my cigarette in that hand and not say anything, just tears kept coming out, but I didn't say anything, and that friend of mine said, "Hey, did your dad hit you?" And I didn't say anything, and she probably thought that meant yes, I was just being awkward about it, and probably she felt sorry for me.

In the evening I thought I'd get over it. That the growing feeling of dull fury was like a passing paroxysm. One week later, I slit my wrists, for the first time.

There was this cool nun at the hospital, and I told her everything, what happened, and how I would rather kill myself than the guy that'd hurt me.

I remember that at first she looked away, and then she was quiet for a long time. And when she looked back over at me, she wasn't the nice lady in the wimple and habit anymore. She stopped stroking my hand and humbly sitting on the stool. She was now Xena, Hothead Paisan and the goddess Kali all in one. She spoke, or rather hissed into my ear, torrents of words, driving them into my head, like you would drive in mathematical paradigms and religious commandments.

She was my Muhammed, making a special appearance at that moment in order to transmit a single truth:

Revenge will free you. Only revenge, kid.

And that was the kind of life lesson you're not going to get in school. The kind of life lesson that gets taught in secret, by the initiated.

Another vodka, please. Of course, for the girl sitting here.

Halina sat up in her chair and stopped biting at the skin around her nails, braiding up her hair, muttering under her breath, sweating. It's okay now, the bad story went away into the "done and gone" drawer. Things are fine now, now it's a karate chop and a sharp instrument she can feel beneath her skirt.

In the world of the future there's no time for reflection – we shut the decorative chest that holds the trauma, and we take a deep breath. Hey, setback, tomorrow's another day!

Girls' stories also have this to them: they love sudden plot twists. For instance: You think you're participating in basic gossiping, but suddenly you're served a portion of confidences. And once more the conversation sets off in a different direction, the roller coaster glides up, and down it falls. If you can't keep up, keep your mouth shut.

And Halina changed the subject to new exhibitions and her broken bicycle, which Marek had fixed for her. Oh, you wouldn't believe it, bam, bam, what a tempo, what a melody. The story chest was now locked up, and there was a special girls' combination. It won't be opened up again for a long time, because the combination is hard to remember.

"Overdoing it a little with the vodka, aren't we?" muttered Celina, finishing up her food.

"But alcohol is good for you, it's good for your digestion, pregnant women have to drink because it prevents the baby blues, and flatulence. It was American scientists that discovered that, looking at rats. So the females had their choice between two water dishes: one with water and one with alcohol. And they would choose the second one. I think rats know what they're doing. And so now it's like proven that all over the world pregnant women have to drink. Even in delivery rooms, instead of an oxytocin drip you sip on some spirits and right away the kid is a ten out of ten on that... you know, that Abigail scale.

Celina looked at her friend and felt somewhat troubled. She attempted to object that what they probably meant was a symbolic glass of red wine, but she wasn't certain anymore, and she was desperately sleepy.

Translated by Jennifer Croft



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ŁUKASZ ORBITOWSKI (BORN 1977), WRITER AND POPULAR NEWSPAPER AND MAGAZINE CONTRIBUTOR, AUTHOR OF REALISTIC WORKS OF HORROR AND SCIENCE FICTION, IS ALSO LOVED BY READERS FOR HIS COLLECTION OF FAIRY-TALE STORIES *THE CHAIRMAN* AND *THE LINE: HOW CATS UNDERSTAND THE WORLD*.

Photo: Bartłomiej Kwasek

Phantoms

In *Phantoms*, Łukasz Orbitowski shows himself to be the type of writer who can deftly combine an unfettered, fantastic storytelling imagination with the attentiveness of the penetrating psychologist and observer of reality. This sprawling novel begins with a disquieting scene involving a small girl and a soldier. There is also a mysterious box, which will appear again and again as a leitmotif throughout the entire tale. The actual commencement comes, however, only a dozen or so pages later and is set just before the planned Warsaw Uprising of August 1, 1944. The hero, Krzyś, who is heading for his assembly point, expects to take part in it (the model for the character is Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński). His fiancée, Basia, is supposed keep the box a secret from her future husband. But the Uprising does not break out. The weapons do not work. A different history of Poland begins – an alternative one, for Krzyś as well, who in Orbitowski's book does not perish in battle during the war. It turns out that Krzysztof lives on into socialist Poland and attempts to write a novel in the service of current political needs. It is tremendously difficult for him. Moreover, he experiences problems in everyday life, in relation to himself and to others. Meanwhile, in the background of Krzysztof's adventures, the story of the militiaman Victor and the political prisoner Janek plays itself out. Orbitowski's tale shines with many colors. Fantastic narration is interwoven with realistic narration (and vice versa), themes draped in historical cloth-

ing suddenly turn out to be identical to contemporary ones, and the large-scale portraiture of the characters intersects directly with psychological observation of human relations. Orbitowski thus perfectly juggles styles, perspectives, and moods. It's a solid piece of work, at moments almost cinematic, and situates itself superbly among the most important examples of contemporary Polish literature rooted in the fantastic.

Marcin Wilk

Krzyś

scooped aside the papers atop the hidden pile, there were a few underground publications, crumpled copies of the *New Sparrow*, military textbooks from before the war and one written under the Germans, a clandestine edition of Petrzycki's *Emotional Psychology*. Beneath this were maps and training materials, all covering the real treasure: a long-butt Thompson, two Sten guns, a Schmeisser, plus a pair of grenades and a little ammunition. General Monter said that anyone who was unarmed should pick up a stone and go try and seize a weapon. But Krzyś was armed.

He hunched over the chest for a moment, but not because an asthma attack had choked him, who could worry about asthma on a day like this? Krzyś was thinking over what he should take, after all the weaponry did not belong to him, on the other hand it made no sense to show up on Foch Street with bare hands. But what if a patrol stopped him?

The day was warm, one of the Stens could be hidden under his coat, except that a coat on the first of August looked suspicious. That day, however, there would be plenty of people in coats on the streets of Warsaw. Krzyś knew that besides coats and Stens soldiers also needed boots and he still had to find a pair. There was little time. He felt a strange, unpleasant taste, as if this requirement amounted to an order for him to remain in the rear and serve those who were fighting, as if you could see in his eyes that to fight meant to kill, but Krzyś gave the impression of someone who could die beautifully, but would have trouble with the killing part. He rejected those thoughts, comforting himself that everyone in Warsaw right now was bogged down in doubt and everyone wished they were somewhere else, in a different platoon, in a different townhouse or entryway than the one in which they happened to be sitting, and there were certainly some who at that moment were kneeling over a chest of weapons.

He placed two grenades on the bed, returned the papers, and put the floorboards back in. He shoved the fold-out chair over the spot and sat on it, out of breath. He missed Basia, her words and lips the most, but also a certain simple thing she would do: until now whenever he had closed the hiding place, Basia would come in with a broom and rag, unbelievably cautious for such a beautiful girl. He could never understand why Basia did something like that, there was no need, after all if someone denounced them or if some German came in by chance, he would immediately think of the foldout chair and the floorboards beneath it and no amount of sweeping would help. But Basia would sweep, she swept patiently.

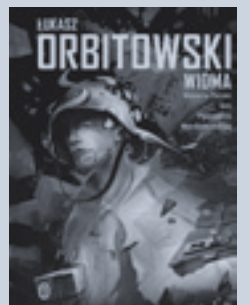
Now he wondered where she was, whether she had already arrived on Pańska Street, and if not, then would she arrive before everything began, after all you didn't have to be a general to know what was afoot. The mobilization had already been going on for several days, Soviet artillery was blasting from Praga, from Radzymin, from Otwock, and at Fischer's call to dig trenches only a few sons-of-bitches showed up instead of the entire city. So Basia, who had never wanted to know, knew, it would be worth it to ask her what she would do with that knowledge, would she hole up somewhere or come after Krzyś? That question stung him and spread over his entire body, just as poor and thin as he was.

Krzyś washed his face, stuffed the grenades into his pants and covered them with a faded blazer that was too large for his narrow shoulders, his skinny wrists protruded from the voluminous sleeves, his boyish head with its frightened eyes jutted from the starched collar. He glanced out the window, at his watch, out the window again, people were hurrying along the cobbled sidewalks, moving in unordered groups to destinations known only to them; if a face appeared in the window, it did so only to disappear again, a barefoot kid ran out of a dark entryway, but then immediately disappeared into another one. Poetic imagination added the rest: Now the walls of the townhouses of Hołówka were being torn open like freshly scarred wounds, wet, red bricks were peering from beneath the plaster, the tall, narrow entryways, shaped like ancient monoliths, were empty reflections of pagan circles, those whom Warsaw had devoured were dashing from them, those tossed onto the dinner plates of the Muscovites, the Soviets, and the Germans, gobbled up by the silverware of the Volksdeutsch, torn apart and chewed – now, once again whole, they fled for freedom, boys butchered during the slaughter in Praga, killed by the frost of Siberia, shot on Szuch Street, the living ashes of the recent ghetto rushed in a gust of wind from the bowels of the city. A second picture placed itself over the first one, surprising even Krzyś: peace had come, the Germans had been destroyed, the liberated phantoms were greeting one another, finding

old friends and lovers, they were hurrying to victory celebrations in columns of black cars, where ghostly orchestras were playing cheerfully, people in love were seeking places for themselves on stairways or even copulating in public, convinced that since they were dead, they could get away with their debauchery. Killed legionaries were playing poker and skat, slaughtered whores were flirting with them, children summoned from the dead were joyfully breaking the windows of buildings, windows that had already been shattered five years earlier in September.

And then, something even more beautiful, the ghosts were gliding in the direction of the Old Town, to Marszałkowska Street, where they merged into a cadaverous procession illuminated by the glow of victory. Everyone had a funny cap or colorful clothing on, red confetti shot into the air, laughter rang out, the songs of accordions, guitars, and barrel-organs resounded, and the happy, victorious dead were pulling the living into joyful madness, they raised the handicapped from their wheelchairs, they knocked the crutches out of the hands of the elderly and drew them after them, they grabbed hold of soldiers, their women, mothers, they fired salutes into the air, ever more quickly, the living and the dead, kings and corporals, entwined in a dancing, snaky line along the streets of Warsaw. And no matter where you looked there wasn't a sad face to be seen, unless it was the mug of a blackmailer of Jews, or a Volksdeutsch, or the furious grimace of a blue policeman, frozen in a standstill, tied by a string to a lantern post. Warsaw was laughing, Warsaw was dancing, animals and buildings along with people, the city leaped for the sky in the holiest days of August. At least, that's how Krzyś saw it, clearly surprised at himself, he thought yet whether or not he should write it all down and get it to Basia somehow as a sign of good fortune – if you could only slice open a poet's head and read the future from it, life would be simpler. He smiled at the thought – the sight of priests presiding over the cracked skull of some bard or another – he decided he wouldn't write it down after all, because he really had to go. Wherever Basia was, she would certainly wait for him.

Translated by Christopher Caes



WYDAWNICTWO LITERACKIE, KRAKÓW 2012
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INGA IWASIÓW (BORN 1963), A WRITER, LITERARY CRITIC AND PROFESSOR OF LITERATURE, IS A DRIVING FORCE IN THE CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL LIFE OF SZCZECIN, WHERE SHE WAS BORN AND HAS ALWAYS LIVED. *FOR A SHORT TIME* IS THE THIRD BOOK IN A SERIES OF NOVELS THAT BEGAN WITH *BAMBINO* AND *TOWARDS THE SUN*.

Photo: Marta Eloy Cichocka

For a Short Time

Inga Iwasiów's latest novel transports us into the near future, to a provincial city in a country which has withdrawn from the European Union and is trying to swim against the current in resisting globalisation. Some of the characters from *Bambino*, the first book in Iwasiów's trilogy, reappear in this pensive novel: first and foremost amongst them is Sylwia, the Polish Studies professor who suffers from a memory disorder and seeks temporary escape from her work. Going abroad to carry out research for her university as part of an EU project forms a pretext for examining her own life, reviewing her own experiences for indications of the direction she should follow, and weighing up her life in a way that is typical of middle age. Sylwia observes the development of a regional culture in this ex-European country and slowly becomes involved in the lives of a few of the city's residents, exchanging her hotel room for rented lodgings. A local hairdresser called Ruta also finds herself at a turning point. Just like the Polish professor and the other characters in this novel, she struggles to make a definitive decision: in Ruta's case the decision is whether to stay in her home city, where she feels she fits in, or to emigrate to America following in the footsteps of her more enterprising husband. In the meantime she runs a small retro hairdressing salon, an unofficial meeting place and talking shop for both younger and older women, an inconsequential women's utopia, where they discuss family issues, relationships with men and career choices. To that extent this

university-focused novel (an uncommon genre in Polish literature) also examines social norms and human psychology as it focuses on the characters' thoughts and experiences. Sylwia tries to cope with a technologically mechanised, soulless approach to life, which requires her to communicate by filling in tables and giving points, and shuts off culture and the arts into a museum zone; Ruta shies away from abandoning her home city and hairdressing salon; her brother dislikes the thought of leaving his library collections behind for the sake of making his way in America. The main characters of *For a Short Time* are disillusioned and weary of the deluge of information and the relentless rush of new technology: they feel torn between the flexibility and modernity of Europe and attachment to their own locality and life at a pace to which they are accustomed. Iwasiów's novel describes attempts to escape the limitations and requirements of rationality, while at the same time warning of what awaits us just ahead. The calm tone of this novel, the sensuality in many of the episodes and the amusing and perceptive observations of day-to-day life work in perfect harmony with this vision.

Beata Kozak

72. Sylwia

She took the flat belonging to the hairdresser's brother for a month, or rather part of the flat, excluding the bedroom which was under lock and key, succumbing to the absurd idea that she would scrupulously fulfil her obligations under the contract. She knew it was silly and she was extending her stay there unnecessarily: she wouldn't gain anything of interest; she wouldn't squeeze anything interesting from life there; she wouldn't get down to writing the book she abandoned three years previously about writers travelling across the globe and the literary consequences of it. It probably wasn't going to be long before someone else successfully produced an academic treatise of that type about the turn of the century. It struck her that renting part of someone else's flat without the owner being present was foolhardy. "Perhaps he is lying there in his own bedroom and waiting until I fall asleep," thought Sylwia in the evening, disarming herself with fear, defenceless on account of her own impulsive decision. Her suitcase lay in the middle of the room, but she was afraid of moving and knew she would be able to rely on a sleeping pill to save her. Indeed, without that the hours of darkness would have been a nightmare. Who knows, maybe she would have gone running back to the hotel?

The sofa turned out to be soft. That first night she kept her suitcase close to her feet, as if in a railway sleeping compartment, ready to do an immediate about-turn, to protect her belongings. She placed her toothbrush next to her unpacked toiletry bag in the bathroom. She also laid out the toiletry samples she had taken from the hotel. She had been aware they were of poor quality but took them anyway. She had wanted to have the single-use miniatures in her possession just in case, to avoid buying anything she might later have had to leave behind or lug around with her. The hotel selection ought to last for a few days until she made her up her mind as to whether she should return. She paid for a month up front.

73. Tomek

"She's gone nuts," he thought. "She really is ill. Renting a room, a room in the city? Out of the question!" Here was their perfectly kept flat, which he was now trying to mess up. "Yes," realises Tomek, "this is the third week I've been exerting myself to dismantle the order which prevails here." He had even laid off the cleaner for the holiday period. He knocked her neatly folded underwear off the wardrobe shelf in anger.

"Get a room in a hotel! You've got the money. If you must stay there – although I don't understand why – at least avoid making yourself worse."

He recalled the times they had rented rooms in the past. She did not like to live in that way, even in Croatia, where the living conditions hadn't been that bad, for hell's sake, and a private beach had compensated for the feeling that you were sleeping in your grandparents' bedroom, lace bedspread and all. She had been disgusted by it and used two pairs of mules – one for the bathroom and one for the rest of the living quarters. She had put up with it for their son's sake: the small, rocky beach leading straight down to a small bay could have been taken from a film set and little Tomuś spent whole days swimming and diving in safety. In the evenings they sat on the terrace separated from their landlords by a woven screen. She had grumbled about it. Privacy, comfort. A sterile bathroom. Of course he knew that since she had started going on business trips she had got used to hotels that didn't necessarily have any stars – the impoverished version of international consumerism. But a flat with someone else's junk?

Years ago he used to travel to Poznań on his father's business. Poznań had a very developed network of private lodgings, probably more so than any other city because of its trade fairs and the shortage of hotel accommodation. New hotels were being built, but the economy expanded even faster and the hordes of men and women travelling on business sought cheaper places to stay.

A room in the upmarket residential district: small, dirty, with two lopsided sofa beds, a table, a locked-up wardrobe and chairs that didn't match. There was also a dresser with china teacups, or maybe not. The landlady would keep an eye on you even when you went to the toilet; she would have been anxious about her teacups and would have made sure not to leave them in an open display case. There was no hot water in the bathroom, but despite that the landlady would prick up her ears to check whether he was making excessive use of it. She would sit on a stool and knit. A weak lightbulb made it impossible to shave at the gloomy break of day, so he would leave the house furious, hungry, unshaven and unwashed. The memory of it overwhelms him now: that particular room in the Garbary district won the mini competition for

the most awful accommodation over that place in St. Petersburg. He imagines Sylwia creeping out to get a cup of boiling water, lying on someone else's grey, rough bedsheet and sitting at a table covered with a washed-out tablecloth.

"Darling, there's no need for you to remain stuck in some filthy dump," he shouted as he knocked over the teddy, which little Tomuś must have dispatched to the bedroom, treating the soft toy like a spy planted by his grandparents.

He realised he was afraid for her. He was afraid of her going off the rails, of her strange ideas, her bizarre journeys. He was afraid of his feeling of liberation.

"Are you feeling well?" He soothed his voice, if nothing else.

"Yes, fine. Fine. Better – as far as my ability to concentrate goes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I can remember all the street names, even though the language isn't easy. Everything's alright, believe me."

"What street are you living on?" he asks, unintentionally grilling her.

"What street?" She searches for a receipt with the address on. "The street is... it's hard to pronounce. I'll send you the address."

"Okay, but just say it. I want to hear the name."

"What is this – an interrogation? You want to know, so I'll send it to you. I definitely won't get lost, it's in the city centre, not in the outskirts and the city's not a metropolis," said Sylwia resolutely. She was persuading both him and herself because she didn't expect him to come to the rescue and arrive there shortly. She didn't need help.

"Your wife needs your support," the volleyball-playing doctor had said, "but no need to overdo it. Her memory is a bit variable; she has trouble concentrating. As if she were twenty years older. It's not progressive in the same way as dementia or Alzheimer's. It's a much slower process; it might not develop. Nevertheless she does need support."

"Support with what?" thought Tomek as he looked into the steamed-up mirror after the match: the doctor had played for the opposing team. She didn't want to talk; she packed her case and announced she was leaving on a business trip, at the drop of a hat. He was beginning to forget what she needed him for. He was beginning to forget why he had wanted her, whatever the cost.

Translated by Kasia Beresford



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TOMASZ ŁUBIEŃSKI (BORN 1938) IS A WRITER OF PROSE, ESSAYS AND DRAMA. HE HAS PRODUCED A NUMBER OF ACCLAIMED BOOKS OF HISTORY AS WELL AS EQUALLY ACCLAIMED BOOKS ON THE LIVES AND WORKS OF THE POLISH ROMANTICS. HE IS THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF *NOWE KSIĄŻKI* (NEW BOOKS), POLAND'S OLDEST MONTHLY MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO BOOK NEWS. IN 2004, HE PUBLISHED HIS FIRST NOVEL, *EVERYTHING IN THE FAMILY*. *THE SHIFT* IS HIS SECOND NOVEL.



Photo: Stanisław Łubieński

The Shift

This novel is the monologue of Persi, a simple young woman. Our heroine uses this pseudonym (coined from the name of the goddess Persephone) at work – she's a resident of Crete, and a tour guide there. And it is on the Greek island that *The Shift* takes place. Persi speaks volumes about herself, and it's not a happy story. In fact, before becoming involved with the tourism industry, she suffered a variety of humiliations, including sexual humiliations. She even got her job on Crete by sleeping with someone. Her monologue, though bitter and sometimes fiercely direct, gives a picture of an underprivileged environment Persi escaped from, and it contains a wealth of penetrating observations on social mores. That monologue, a stream of memories and reckonings with her fate, begins about halfway through the novel to blend with what is happening now. A tourist comes to Crete from Poland, a distinguished older gentleman, a mysterious professor. We don't know what he teaches or whether he is really even an academic at all. Persi was the one who called him "Professor," she who singled him out, seeing him neither as a kindred spirit nor as a mentor, but rather simply the first person to take her seriously.

These two talk and talk. They meet every day in a coffee shop and talk over life's most basic questions – the meaning of life, destiny, death – as well as the history of the island and its culture. The older gentleman obviously plays the role of the educator, while the sweet but silly Persi takes on the

role of Galatea. Professor Pygmalion thus leads her into subtle metaphysical and cultural topics, fashioning from her not only a good conversationalist, but also a subject that provides feelings. The young woman genuinely takes a liking to the Professor; she agrees to go on an ambitious mountain climb with him. The older gentleman wants to climb up to Psiloritis, the highest summit on Crete. Before they go up, they spend the night at a mountain lodge. In the name of friendship, Persi gives herself to the Professor, upon which event – the very morning after – a series of strange occurrences befall her. Just before the summit, the man literally vanishes into thin air, and a succession of spirits proceed onto the stage of the novel, people Persi was in relationships with before coming to Greece. Meanwhile, the Professor is dead, which the local police have been alerted of. After her meeting with the mysterious man, Persi will never be the same again.

Dariusz Nowacki

Usually

we go to the Galero Cafe to talk, the Professor and me, Persi. But also there's something happening between us. We really look at each other. It's unavoidable now. But we also observe the guests that appear at Galero just once and then disappear forever. I understand, life is short, there's no time to have coffee twice at the same spot. They also have their regulars. A transvestite shrouded in rainbow-colored silk. Shaved head, with tattoos on his biceps. Christ-like locks, shirt unbuttoned, flashing an Orthodox cross. Two women in black, and a wreath of children. A colorful girl that talks with her body – I'm not sure whether she has a good heart. Yes, when the cafe and the little square empty out in the afternoon or at midnight, they take possession of their territory. Again. And no one can understand what's happened lately between them, what they've been debating so animatedly in their local language.

Although I don't really stare at the Professor all that much. He is obviously not especially young, to put it gracefully. I'd rather listen to him. He says that the future and love are like fire and water, meaning always at war. Like freedom with equality, which I don't understand as much. That's why I quote word for word. And he's always criticizing the word "passing," which I don't like, either. What sort of animal is that, the Professor asks himself. What can that mean? I definitely won't answer, but I do suggest that instead of getting bogged down in "passing" he imagine two big dusty dogs. On Crete, as everybody knows, all the dogs are dusty dogs. For example, the ones at the entrance to the ravine under my triangular peak. Imagining these two bitches, Boredom and Routine, who lustily lick each other up and down, watching while we dance, maybe not on a wire, that would be an overstatement, but on some school gym's balance beam, holding on with our hands so as not to fall. But all of us have our stones in our rucksack that drag us down. And then you also have to duck when the whistling gets louder. That's not Cupid's arrows before the flood, that's new-generation pheromone missiles. The contents of our rucksacks or our handbags are in disorder, and so they move forward, backward, a little to the side. Worse, let us imagine not stones but rather plastic containers for a special meal for two. Each person is carrying something different, and we're supposed to share, feed, indulge each other. Seafood is recommended, one person reacts well to a rare steak, the next to Greek yogurt, not to mention dietary supplements. Spicy seasoning, strong scents, no doubt. The love glands nibble, prick, tickle. Wine is usually that way, but let us recall that Bacchus argues often with Venus. And unfortunately, sooner or later, something in the rucksack or the handbag breaks – just like what happens between people. On one side or the other. And always unequally. Somebody always dies first, somebody second. And a third lives on with a chip on their shoulder. Future together, what future together, I think you mean death together. Come on. To make a date to die just because it was fun? Sorry, death is my business. Unless we happen to be in a plane crash. But that's not our department. You have to be especially unlucky, or especially lucky, for that.

The Professor doesn't only talk, he looks. Just the fact that I know and can feel when he follows, without any shame at all, my slender fingers as they wrap around my slim glass and grasp it lightly in order to raise it to my parted lips. Or when I draw frozen iced coffee up through my straw. He wriggles a little, or to say it more politely, he straightens up in his chair, I won't be so conceited. These waitresses in the little "This way or that way" shirts might also have something to add.

Haven't I said too much about myself? I must have, because the Professor suddenly starts telling all his secrets. He belongs to the mountain veterans' club. Maybe he's a little afraid of me, and this is like an insurance policy so that I don't count on too much from him. That's fine, that actually suits me. There is no shared future! Bravo! My motto. Let just today smell and taste. The future, just like the past, doesn't mean anything. What's the point of worrying ahead of time how to part without pain and what kind of anesthetic to use. Time will take care of it – that's time's specialty. It's important to remember that it's the same racecourse of life for everyone, it's just that a lap is not the same for you as it is for me. And you don't argue with the top judge.

Briefly, then, a propos, tell me, Professor, about the veterans' club.

Okay, well, not army veterans, of course, although there were those among us, too. But they were there in their capacity as veterans of the high mountains, like us. Our successors, kind, dignified, offered us a little room in the heart of an enormous prewar apartment, probably a salon or a family dining room in its time. They train in the first room on the climbing wall that goes up to the ceiling, and with a jump rope and with weights. They don't think

about the future. It's too bad, because the window is open, even in the winter, and per the custom of warm countries, the girls have their kidneys exposed, and even the outline of the groove between their buttocks is visible. But that really won't be our problem anymore.

We meet monthly, for two hours. At two tables pushed up together, where you can set out the glasses and the cookies in an orderly fashion. Wine, perhaps? Everyone has to know what and how much he can handle. Along the walls a row of chairs so that everyone can rest comfortably. Time: six in the evening, every first Thursday. It's easy to remember, said our head atheist, with a resounding laugh, because tomorrow, on the first Friday, everybody races to confession. Who knows about that Friday, who knows if a single veteran, in the name of the entire club, is actually practicing. But on the club Thursdays, without regard for the weather, for our health, for our grandkids if we have them, the meetings begin, as little else in our lives ever has, punctually. Even at the heavy gate of the old building. And one of us must remember the code exactly, for us to get into the courtyard with the holy shrine. Just in case, some have those numbers written down. There's nothing to be ashamed of, especially because there's a second code, too, to the stairwell on the right. With an elevator. Six o'clock, sixth floor, simple.

Translated by Jennifer Croft



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ZOŚKA PAPUŻANKA (BORN 1978) IS A THEATRE STUDIES GRADUATE AND WORKS AS A POLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER. SHE IS CURRENTLY STUDYING FOR A DOCTORATE IN LITERATURE. *A DOMESTIC CHARADE* IS HER LITERARY DEBUT.

Photo: Dawid Kozłowski

A Domestic Charade

This story is like a tightly coiled spring. It is composed of short scenes which tell the story of life in a Kraków family over a few decades. It is full of tension and conflicts; in essence there is a lack of mutual understanding so fundamental that it begs a question that haunts the reader throughout the book – how does this family carry on, why doesn't it fall apart? Of course there are hints throughout the novel, which lead us towards a number of different answers to this question, but none is entirely convincing: perhaps the sacrament of marriage keeps the family together; perhaps it is weighed down by past events and becomes – at least for the husband – a form of penance; perhaps it is the attraction of opposites and so on. However nothing is fully explained and we are not dealing here with a straightforward journalistic report about a hellish experience of family life. This is simply great literature, and serious literature at that. It is written with verve, intensity and great literary skill. Zośka Papużanka uses language boldly; she freely engages in word play; she has an ear for the particular speech of different individuals, which brings the characters to life better than any narrator's description could do. She does all this superbly and her discernment in planning the story is admirable. I suspect she was guided by something you might call "authorial self-restraint", so instead of constructing the expansive narrative which this subject seems to call for, instead of giving us a protracted family saga, she records episodes from

various periods in the family's life in an almost telegraphic style, changing the point of view and the narrator, along the lines suggested by the first paragraph of the novel.

This work could be seen as the essence of a novel, a "concentrate" as it were, which would have to be diluted by "adding water" if you wanted to turn it into an ordinary novel. I doubt such dilution would improve the book, as it might well weaken the powerful impact it has on the reader – as it stands this novel pulls no punches.

Leszek Bugajski

It always happens. Children get lost in the woods, the same old story. Nothing can be done about it. In spite of any efforts to disrupt our habitual reactions, we will go down well-trodden paths. Such effort is a waste of time and won't save anything. In spite of our effort to try and remember a particular moment, it always turns out it didn't happen quite as we remembered; no telling who did or said something; we are left with only a few shreds, dirty streaks on our plates, which don't relate to anyone. It will never be clear which person is the narrator and which person a character, who has a cameo role and who is a central figure, whose are the words forming on the page. What is clear is which person is going to lose: the loser is always evident from the start.

It was impossible to find any explanation for that marriage. Any. Rational or irrational. No feelings, for sure. There weren't any particular circumstances or twists of fate, not even any money behind it. They neither liked nor suited each other. No one was able to say why he married her. For her part, she had already been married once before. It's true her spouse was six feet under but surely she could've stopped with one in the grave? Not much was known about her first husband. She herself readily mentioned his fine singing voice, but was less keen to mention that he went looting, in other words he broke the law and that was his way of providing for her.

After her first husband, who developed legendary status like the outlaw Janosik, got dirt in a leg wound and died, she returned to her family home bringing a single suitcase and partly dragging, partly carrying a three-year-old nipper with grazed knees. Her mother sighed, opened the front door and carried on with her own business, not even giving the returning prodigal daughter a second look. "Well, there you are. I only just got the yattering din out of the door and back it comes multiplied." The prodigal daughter wasn't bothered by her mother in the least; she sat the child down in the corner, thrust a slab of bread into its hand, rolled up her sleeves and got down to work.

She made no demands on anyone: she helped everyone a bit and hardly took any care of herself at all. Autumn turned into winter, winter into spring; her old dresses started to fit a little more tightly around her stomach; her hands became worn from doing the laundry and working in the fields. She put her hands on her hips, planted her legs wide apart so as to block the view as much as possible and held her head cocked slightly to one side, like a hen pretending to understand something or other. She always told everyone the truth and at once, even if it was something the person didn't want to hear. One man was too thin, another spotty; that woman would never get herself a bloke, certainly not in daylight. Everyone showed her respect, no one liked her: that was just what she wanted. When she was selecting seedling potatoes from her basket, she would bend down over the flat strip of land and position her big, hard backside on the stable scaffolding of her legs and everyone knew that her stuck-up rear end showed exactly what she thought of them.

So why, oh why, did he marry her? She was a widow with a child, spiteful and eternally dissatisfied. He can only have felt sorry for her.

*

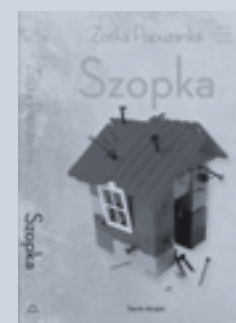
"Dear brother," wrote Bronek, "Warmest greetings from Kraków! The city is huge. There are so many historical buildings here! When I have time to spare, I take a walk and look at them. I've already been to Wawel Castle and in the Dragon's Cave. Everything is different here. I've got a good job: it's in a shop. I'm living with a mate for now, but I'm putting money aside to get my own place at last. I met a girl, you see, when I went to the café for a coffee. She works there as a waitress, but she comes from the country and we plan to get married. So that's my news – lots of changes. Don't shilly-shally, pack what belongings you have and join me. I'll help you find work and you might meet even meet someone at the wedding. How long can a man live on his tod for goodness' sake? With brotherly love, Bronisław."

"Dearest brother," ran the ready reply both in his thoughts and on the sheet of paper, "I've been thinking of doing that for a long time now. Mother is packing the house: she had to sell the cow as things are going downhill at home. Stasia and her husband are still living with us because they've got nowhere else to go and a third child is due in the spring. Walenty is also going to take a wife and where would they live other than our family home? Jan, on the other hand, acts the landowner through and through: he's settled on his hectares of land, which came as part of the dowry, and won't let anyone past the threshold. Nobody needs me here and it'll be one mouth less to feed, so I've packed already. Jan, the dear fellow, will lend me the money for the ticket if I promise not to come back."

He was barely off the train when he was pushed into his place like a sheep amongst wolves, halfway between the vodka and the appetizers, half the time between Bronek in his new suit and Bronek's bride with her thick plaits and token maiden's garland, because Bronek had plucked her real flower a week earlier in the barn – he had been dead set on doing it even though the hay was jabbing him painfully in the arse while he was at it. So he was given a seat betwixt the lord, the village elder and the parson at this unpoetic wedding reception on the outskirts of Kraków: without Rachel, without any golden horseshoes, but amongst a whole bunch of Straw Men. Bronek repeatedly returned to keep his brother well watered with vodka, as if he were an exotic plant. The bride's aunts took him under their wings, engaging him in their cold-sausage-and-cucumber chatter.

Someone's granddad, who knows whose, but he was certainly at least a hundred years old, was ruffling the tablecloth with his mighty snores, when he suddenly woke with a cry, "Who said I was a gullible old stag?" and then he dropped into blissful slumber once more, holding up an impressive set of antlers with his hands. A merry cousin who had been drinking dejectedly for an hour, suddenly got up her courage and decided to publicly announce the whole truth about her husband, at which he decided to publicly spank her bottom and then it publicly transpired that her bottom was bereft of underwear. All the girls kept a careful eye on the groom's brother, a guest from afar, who was announced loudly, which made him feel very self-conscious. All the girls watched the movements of his slim hands, busy handling the cheesecake and the cabbage and meat stew; all the girls including those who were dancing with others, gleefully exposing their chubby, bulging knees from beneath layers of skirts and petticoats; all the girls including the one Bronek had put him next to, the one who laughed the loudest, danced the most and drank the most; the one who had just sat herself down beside him and leaned back against the wall as if she wanted to knock the whole house down. She was now fastening her hair, which had come loose, into a bun, revealing the round stains of sweat on her white embroidered blouse. She was the woman next to whom Bronek had intentionally seated him, intentionally because it was high time he stopped living alone. "This is my brother. He's come from the Pomeranian region. He's going to work with me in Kraków. He's a good bloke, but all alone in the world." "Well let him have some vodka then, he'll get to like it here in no time." "I've taken a fancy to this place already. Won't you have a drink with me, miss?" "I'm no miss," said the two rows of strong teeth, biting the pink, juicy flesh of her tongue. "No, I'm no miss. I'm a missus – a widow." "So young, yet widowed already?" "Yes, a widow." She sounded proud rather than sad. "My husband passed away two years ago, so I'm a widow. But what's the point of being upset about it? Life's crap anyway, why should I make it worse by getting upset? Death comes to us all. Will you be staying in Kraków for long?" "Probably for good, dear lady. Probably for good."

Translated by Kasia Beresford



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JERZY FRANCAK (BORN 1978) A PROSE WRITER, POET, AND LITERARY CRITIC AFFILIATED WITH THE JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY, FRANCAK'S PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE THE NOVELS *CHANGING ROOM* (2008), *THE INHUMAN COMEDY* (2009), *DA CAPO* (2010) AND *NN* (2012); THESE WERE PRECEDED BY SEVERAL COLLECTIONS OF SHORT STORIES.

Photo: M. Korta

NN

The acronym of the title pertains as much to the plot (a nameless victim of a road accident appears in the exposition) as to the key words – Nobody and Nothing – with which the author marks the novel's two parts. The beginning seems ordinary enough – in Kraków, in the middle of a rainy night, three random pedestrians stop by a man lying on the road, obviously hit by a car. Each of the characters has a monologue concerning both the accident at hand and the speaker's own situation. As such, the reader is given a baton race of storytellers – and it soon turns out that there are more than three. The latecomers are not tied to the initial incident, but they have various relationships with the protagonists who have spoken. The first to speak is Artur, a medical equipment salesman. He hates his work, and to some degree, himself as well. The same goes for Mariola, a simple woman tormented by her alcoholic husband, who, to keep the pain from driving her entirely mad (the loss of her child), keeps a blog filled with fantasies of a better life. Just when she's about to slip away from a police patrol, a boy named Heads appears – an eternal student, something of a left-wing anarchist, a bit of a rebel without a cause. We hear his stories a little later on – it is he who introduces us to the remaining characters who will monologue. Among them is a figure who shares the author's biography – Franciszek Jerzak, an employee of the Jagiellonian University. These protagonists differ in terms of their social status and their cultural competencies, the author has given

them different states of awareness, he has tied them to different communities. What they have in common, however, is a crucial thing – alienation, a sense of not understanding, the experience of inauthenticity. In moments of sincerity the protagonists of *NN* understand that their lives are less absurd than entirely conventionalized, subject to unbearable routine. They correctly suspect that someone or something has forced them to play their roles in society, to participate in the tedious, barren play called life. It is also significant that, in describing their place in the world, the protagonists speak only to themselves, with hope of neither comprehension nor communication.

Dariusz Nowacki

Hang on a moment here, what's that... A sack? Some kind of cellophane, or rags maybe, but why's it so long? And shoes, or soles of shoes maybe, a sack of clothes, fell out of a truck... A sack of clothes?

I went over there, right up to it, you could see some white runners, a jacket, a hand... Some guy lying here, what the hell, some homeless guy, but why here on the street? And why so contorted...

"A corpse," I thought, or maybe I even said it out loud, and only then did I really come to my senses. A corpse?

"Maybe it's not a corpse, maybe he's only wounded," I swallowed hard, and the wind blew in my face, as if looking for a fight.

If it's a corpse, I'll have to do something, you can't just walk on by a corpse, and if it's alive, all the more so. Better flip him on his back and put a finger to his neck, check his pulse, but not with the thumb. Or maybe better not to move him at all? Or best to ask someone who might know.

I looked around, but didn't see anyone. Small wonder – it was night time. As if out of spite. I was getting sober so fast that my mouth felt dry, as if I was getting a hangover. The guy was lying there, maybe dying, he didn't look so bad, not like a bum, though he had a scruffy beard, and dirty fingernails, all in all he could have been a mechanic or something...

Or call an ambulance! Call emergency, idiot!

I took out my phone, but first, for no reason, I popped some gum in my mouth, for fresh breath, I'm not up to anything, just out walking my dog.

He was lying on his stomach, one hand tossed to the side, a dirty-green jacket, cap all askant, definitely breathing, right, one leg tucked in under him, the other one straight.

"Jeepers!" I turned when I heard the squeaky voice, instinctively jamming the gum between my cheek and my gums, and I switched off the phone. No need. A girl in a herring-bone coat, knee-high boots, and a scarf headed toward me and stopped dead.

"Is it a body?"

You wouldn't have called her ugly, but there was something stupid written all over her face, her jaw slack and eyes open wide, painted up, wearing a beret with an antenna.

"I don't know. He might be breathing," I explained, articulating carefully, overemphatically, by which Ola always could tell that I was tipsy. "I wanted to check the pulse, but I'm afraid... I mean, I don't want to harm him."

"We'll have to call in an ambulance. Have you got a telephone?"

"What and you don't?" I wanted to ask her, everyone's got a phone after all, I'm sure you've got one too, you stingy ditz! But I didn't say anything – I was holding the phone in my hand, after all, so what was there to say, but really, people can be so cheap! And that phrase "call in," she was really trying! So without another word I dialed the ambulance, or I guess I didn't really "dial" it... Obviously, anyway I turned my back to her, to them, and waited for an answer, chewing my gum again.

The wind picked up and then died. As soon as I call in the ambulance, I'll ring Ola, maybe she's still awake. You wouldn't believe what's happened, honey! On the way home, you know, near Krupnicza Street...

"Emergency speaking."

Suddenly a guy jumped out from around the corner, wearing a suit jacket with the collar flipped up. Why wasn't he freezing? And sneakers, on top of it all!

"A doctor's what we need!" he said, putting his hand to his forehead, as if he were too hot, but in that jacket? He was quite a specimen: sneakers at this time of year, red pants, long hair, maybe my kind of guy, just a drifter? "Where's he calling?"

"He's calling an ambulance." The girl covered her mouth with her hand, wound up, terrified.

"Emergency speaking!"

"I'd like to report an accident, I mean a casualty... I found him on the street."

"What seems to be the problem?" The voice was sober, bloodless, electrical it seemed.

"He's just lying there, I don't know, he's not moving."

"Where are you?"

"The corner of Krupnicza... Ah, no, actually it's Wenecja Street." I too was sober and bloodless, I was only passing by, not with a dog, but anyway, I was doing my civic duty. The guy in the jacket was bustling about the body like

a paramedic, checking his pulse and bending his head, yes, there's the pulse, took off his bag and tried to slide it delicately under his the head, but then he changed his mind.

"Your name."

"Kochanowski... Artur Kochanowski," I corrected myself, but too late, it came out like "Bond, James Bond," oh well.

"The ambulance is on its way."

The electric voice fell silent, thank God she didn't ask: "of the famous Kochanowski family?"

"Has he been lying this way for a while?" The guy unexpectedly put out his hand. "My name's Heads."

"Heads?" I grinned, but not maliciously, not too much, though of course I was tempted to say: "And I'm Tails," and anyway, it was strange doing introductions in this situation. "Artur."

We shook hands. The girl took a small bottle of mineral water from her purse and drank it, I was utterly parched, but I wasn't about to ask her for a sip.

"You guys think a car hit him?" Heads folded his arms on his chest and declared point-blank: "Hit and run."

What were we, Miami Vice, were we going to do some kind of investigation? I was waiting for the ambulance and *genug*, I'd done my good deed.

"Or he just fell down, fainted," Heads continued, put his hands on his hips, as if turning into a different policeman, at a loss, because I wasn't saying anything. "A heart attack maybe?"

"I can't deal with this, here," the girl was squirming anxiously, pussyfooting around us in those knee-highs of hers. "Even if I wanted to, I can't deal with it."

Heads was also pacing about, but with measured steps, back and forth, scratching his head, until I gave it to him straight, or actually didn't give it to him straight, because it was a bit like I was justifying myself... Anyway, I eventually got riled up:

"Listen, man! I'm waiting for the ambulance, they'll pack him inside, then so long, I'm in a rush to get home."

"Everyone's in a rush." He gave me an accusatory glance. "The dickhead who ran him down was also in a rush."

I got riled up again and waved my hand, showing I'd just remembered I had smokes. I reached in my pocket for cigarettes, there was one left.

"Got a light?"

The girl started ferreting in her purse, her hands were shaking, she was nervous. Then we heard the hum of an engine, no doubt the ambulance on its way, but why weren't there sirens? OK, the streets were empty, but why so slowly? The headlights lit up the front of a building, and then slowly, ever-so-slowly, a car came round the corner. But it wasn't an ambulance, just a normal Audi, with lights on the hood... Cops!


"Where'd they come from...?" I was surprised for a second, maybe the emergency network has an alert system or something?

"Oh fuck!" Heads blanched, or so I imagine, because you couldn't see so clearly, but he got all stiff, tense... Anyway he was scared, which surprised me, because he didn't look like a crook, and he jumped at the corpse... Or not at the corpse, he just snatched up a bag lying on the curb and made a break for it.

Translated by Soren Gauger



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MANUELA GRETKOWSKA (BORN 1964) IS A BESTSELLING POLISH WRITER, ESSAYIST, SCREENWRITER AND FOUNDER OF THE WOMEN'S PARTY. TO DATE SHE HAS PUBLISHED TWELVE BOOKS, MOST OF WHICH HAVE BEEN TRANSLATED INTO SEVERAL EUROPEAN LANGUAGES, INCLUDING HUNGARIAN, SPANISH, GERMAN AND FINNISH. SHE HAS ALSO WRITTEN SCREENPLAYS FOR A TELEVISION SERIES AND FOR FILMS.

Photo: Anna Włoch

The Agent

Manuela Gretkowska's novel, *The Agent*, is a simple, and at the same time not-so-simple story about love and relationships with a difficult final scene and some original conclusions. The simple features are that it is very easy to sum up the plot, involving a love triangle, that it is not hard to shrug off the romantic set-up (a young woman and an older man) as a platitude, and finally that you don't need perfect knowledge of the Polish-Jewish context to regard the weakly constructed Polish-Jewish themes as too formulaic. What makes it not-so-simple is that the conventional nature of the denouements is not in fact a way of taking the easy option. Gretkowska puts an extremely sparing amount into the narrative construction, never overloading it with superfluous conflicts, extra characters or lengthy commentary. She takes us into a world of bourgeois propriety: of betrayal, fidelity, religious fundamentalism, and then takes us out of it by means of a clever, though not necessarily perverse, reshaping of the relationships between the main characters. They are: a married couple called Goldberg, who are contending with their Holocaust experiences of the past, and with the tragic death of their adult son, which is ruining their peaceful, mature, mutual life; their daughter Miriam; and a young Polish teacher called Dorota. This is an intelligent book that guides us into the inside of a conflict in a way that never lets us take on the role of accuser of any of the main characters. At no point does the narrator show us any sign of having adopted the viewpoint

of any one of them. And it is not that Gretkowska is trying to achieve the detachment of a quiet thinker, showing the partial rightness of each of the characters in this ethically controversial arrangement. It is more that this time she treats the bourgeois world, at which she always aims her blows, in such a way that we cannot accuse her of resentment, which provides a good lesson: you don't have to do a "last tango in Paris" to say something about narrow, restrictive bourgeois principles.

We can regard the entire fictional pattern as metaphorical. *The Agent* offers the opportunity to think about conditions in which the relationships between people do not have to be resolved according to the logic of revenge, as dictated to us by wounded ambition.

Anna Kałuża
Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

“I’ll offer you a riddle,” Szymon said, polishing off the bottle. “The father of two children who died in a war that didn’t happen.” He swayed on his widely planted legs. “You know who? Who that is? It’s me, Szymon Golberg. My first child, my son Saul was... and still would be, a violinist. A jazz violinist. A comrade shot him in the barracks, an accident cleaning his gun, a brother in arms.... Were any of you cowards in the army? Well, who?” Waving the empty bottle, he staggered after the Orthodox, who were backing away.

“And the second child, Miriam!” he cried desperately toward the curtain. “She’s also dying in a war – it’s written in the Talmud.” He waved the bottle at the pudgy guy and shouted: “Not because Miriam is getting married. True love is not a war. No, because she’s marrying a frummer, one like all of you! The mohel cut off your balls, and you won’t go fight any war, will you?!”

Before anyone could overpower him, Fisher dragged Szymon outside.

In the taxi, Hanna sat as far away from Szymon as she could. “You bone-head!” she said. “You wrecked the wedding party of your own daughter. You totally destroyed it!”

“Wedding party?”

“In any case, it was her celebration – hers.”

She heard from Fisher all the details of Szymon’s performance. He was supposed to keep an eye on him, but he didn’t. They had known each other for years, and he should have sensed when Szymon had gone too far. He could have one drink. One – no more. Szymon wasn’t supposed to drink because he was on Prozac.

“Vodka and depression are no excuse.” She could have ripped up his ridiculous Panama and him with it.

When he put it on, before they left home, she should have guessed that he would play the buffoon. For a clown to be funny he has to be pathetic.

“Yes, I was drinking, but I’m not depressed,” Szymon said. “I danced – you didn’t see. Four years ago I wouldn’t have budged. It’s the best proof that I’m not depressed and I know what I’m doing.”

After Saul’s death he had fallen into a stupor. The drugs didn’t work. The only thing that helped was electroshock. A spark jumped through Szymon’s brain somewhere and brought him back to life.

(...)

Below, outside the walls, they had reserved a room at the Hotel Zion. The path by the Western Wall was shorter. They passed guards. At two in the morning it was almost deserted. American Hasidim were praying on the men’s side of the wall. Walking about and conversing in hushed voices, they were trying to get over their jet lag in this holy place.

Szymon also wanted to make it through this night. To end it with something more than the disgust of the wedding catastrophe. Hanna liked to walk here. Out of affection for tradition, they walked to the wall after their wedding and when she was pregnant. They did not treat the place religiously. It was something that had survived. A rock emerging from the parched oceans of war and hatred. The altar of Jewish time.

The prize in the Six-Day War was access to the Western Wall. It ceased to be on the Arab side. Hanna visited it then with her sick parents. They needed indestructible proof of their right to be on this earth. They didn’t speak or even think in this way, but touching the remains of the temple gave them, old atheists, historical reassurance.

“Are you going?” Szymon asked. He was seeking reconciliation. A sign that Hanna forgave him. She nodded. They split up at the plaza. Szymon remained, and she hesitated by the well. He didn’t know if she was led to the pot of water by her medical habit of clean hands or a desire to repeat a ritual gesture bringing her closer to Miriam.

She leaned her head against the cool wall. Twenty-something years ago she had pressed tiny Miriam to the same light, creamy stone, still carrying her in her belly. Giving birth to a child meant forcing it out of her own body. A child also died through her body. When she learned about Saul, she shrank and heaved up something that the mind could not accept. She did not cry. If she had tears, or any words of pain, she expelled them. But she was sickened not with nausea, but with the piercing contractions of birth. When Szymon learned of Saul’s fatal accident from an army messenger, he froze, catatonic.

Dr. Weiss had an explanation for this. “Your husband...” he began, and grasped his bald forehead with his hand, spotted with age. “Your husband, my

dear Hanna, has taken Saul upon himself, his death. He has become dead to us, and dead to himself. It will pass, but it will take time. A long time.”

Hanna tried to believe. Not to believe in Weiss or his explanations. She knew that in such cases psychiatry is helpless. She tried to believe that Saul was not a corpse. She waited for him to return. In their life beyond the grave, the dead came to believers and comforted them. Only a corpse came to her. With her medical precision, she observed it in successive stages of decomposition. The same precision with which she had observed the stages of Saul’s childhood, his gums soothed with chamomile when he was cutting a tooth, his first crooked steps.

“Why didn’t I go mad?” she wondered. From her parents she had inherited endurance. They survived the war. You had to be tough to establish a kibbutz under the Golan Heights. Szymon had never known his parents. His grandfather had been a photographer in Przemyśl. Supposedly he took photos for the imperial court.

Szymon’s resurrection was spectacular, almost heroic. He was transformed from a quiet computer scientist into a businessman. He was constantly on the phone, or between meetings. He began to travel on business to Poland. He used frenetic activity to mask his depression, to escape from its immobility and death. His maniacal busyness, even aggression, were easier for Hanna to bear than his ghastly apathy.

She sighed and stroked the Western Wall.

A round moon beamed amid the white disks of the spotlights illuminating the courtyard. “Served on the platter of the moon” – that was what they used to say of children born on the full moon, Hanna recalled. “Miriam is one of those children. Born on the full moon of May, sensitive and unpredictable.” She moved her fingers along the wall, bidding her farewell.

Szymon anxiously groped his coat, his trouser pockets. He was the fastest-moving man on the plaza. The others stepped with dignity, deliberated over something in concentration, prayed. He ran.

He found his wife beside the well. “Do you have a pen and paper?”

“Couldn’t you write in your telephone?”

He was touched by her obtuseness. “Chamuda, am I going to stick my phone in the wall? Come on.”

She handed him her bag – the same black envelope clutch she had bought to match her dress for their wedding anniversary. He took out an old discount coupon, tore off a clean bit of it and quickly wrote. He went to insert his supplication between the stones.

He stood among the other men in their black frocks. He bowed humbly. He touched the cool wall, its indentations. (...)

Maybe he was still drunk, and that explained the irrational fear that there is something, there was something, that planned it all. Better to stuff the throat of destiny with this slip of paper, seal it up with a prayer jammed between the stones.

Translated by Christopher Smith



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PAWEŁ SMOLEŃSKI (BORN 1959) IS A FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT, FEATURE WRITER AND JOURNALIST. SINCE 1989 HE HAS WORKED FOR POLAND'S LEADING DAILY NEWSPAPER, *GAZETA WYBORCZA*, AND BEFORE THAT HE WORKED FOR THE UNDERGROUND PRESS. HE WON THE POLISH-UKRAINIAN RECONCILIATION AWARD IN 2003 FOR HIS BOOK *BURIAL OF A BUTCHER*. *AN ARAB FIRES AND A JEW DELIGHTS* IS HIS TENTH BOOK.

Photo: Krzysztof Dubiel / The Polish Book Institute

An Arab Fires and a Jew Delights

For some years now the *Gazeta Wyborcza* reporter and journalist Paweł Smoleński has been continually examining issues related to Israel. In his ironically titled book *An Arab Fires and a Jew Delights* he focuses above all on the Israeli-Arab conflict.

Smoleński's story begins symbolically, with the perusal of an album of old photographs. The pictures belong to the Kahvedjian family, Armenians from the Christian section of Jerusalem's old city. The images depicted are very telling, illustrating the strange interweaving of cultures. But in *An Arab Fires and a Jew Delights* it is not just culture or the political consequences of its functioning that interests Smoleński. The most important stories here are told by the people – each one having a different take, but thanks to that every one of them is real, and together create a comprehensive, diverse picture of the situation in Israel.

The book is divided by cities. In each of the chapters, we meet various characters. In Akko, local theatre artists – whether Sephardic Mordechais or Arabic Khalids – reflect on the essence of the conflict. In turn, the character featured in Beersheba, Riad Abarii, is a professor of pharmacology at the Ben-Gurion University, which until recently employed a total of 2,500 Arab professors (this figure now being reduced to just 20). In Jaffa we meet Khalil, who conceals his Arabic origins and is, as Smoleński writes, "macho, but lacking the Arabic panache." Many comments on the conflict are provided by

Wadi from Haifa, who says: "All of us – Arabs and Jews have the same lousy character deficiency. We all talk about ourselves. We only talk of the harm done to us."

In Smoleński's book every antagonist – regardless of social status or commitment to one side of the conflict or the other – is given his allotted "five minutes." The book creates a mosaic of attitudes and emotions, as well as individual stories. The quality of these stories lies in single, simply expressed sentences, the author's appropriate distance, and at times his perverse sense of humour – which lends Smoleński a style reminiscent of the Israeli writer Etgar Keret.

Marcin Wilk

Let's start with a photograph that in my opinion is symbolic of Israel. The stone blocks of the wall are the same as today; even some of the plants growing in its cracks look the same. But there's a surprising lack of space, with houses almost leaning on the wall while the pavement is narrow and crowded. In a word – a wall, like any other wall, no big deal. Yet we see people praying right next to oblivious bystanders, donkeys carrying goods, some shopkeeper and ecstatic faces. This is the Wailing Wall, which today looks out on a large square. It's the Back of Beyond, but for some – the be all and end all. If this ancient wall had been erected somewhere else, there wouldn't be all this hullabaloo today.

We see a photograph of sages. They look like desert sheiks: grizzled, with white hair and beards, in long robes that in the photograph look dignified, but in fact could be worn-out rags. As I remember, they are leaning over some great book, their fingers tracing the letters; they have wrinkled foreheads and deeply furrowed cheeks. In fact, these are no sheikhs, but some Sephardic Jews studying the Torah.

Let's take a closer look at these poignant photographs of blind men; it's taken in the years when that incurable disease known as glaucoma used to gather a terrible harvest. They are sitting on the white pavement, beneath the Wailing Wall, so we can tell they are Jews. Or else – on the white pavement in the courtyard of the Al Aqsa Mosque, so they must be Arabs. They are fondling stones, whispering something, raise myopic eyes to the sun, maybe praying, or maybe cursing. In appearance, and most certainly in their disease, there is no difference between them; the brotherhood between these people is written into their misfortune. If these photos had no captions giving the date and place, you would think they were different shots of the same scene.

Or – sailing boats, plying the mouth of the narrow and shallow river Yarkon, today separating the downtown area from the wealthy northern districts of Tel Aviv. They are shaped like trunks and carry spars like the boats in the oldest Arab etchings, beating a maritime path to the Indies and the Maluku Islands. It would be hard to guess what goods these dhows could be shipping, but we know from other photographs that the then port of Jaffa, probably the largest port in this land, was once a haven for dozens of fishing boats and its quay and pier looked just as they do today.

And as for the port in Tel Aviv? In the next photograph this is something that has yet to become a proper port, which in time will drown the one in Jaffa, just as Tel Aviv itself submerges Jaffa. Today, this is a place where you can party until dawn in crowded bars and clubs. You can spend a fortune in chic boutiques. The port is long gone. Though not so long ago, without it there would have been no Tel Aviv.

Photographs of bootblacks at the Jaffa gate in Jerusalem captivated me. Likewise that of an Arab man selling coffeepots. Four ladies making yogurt – Arab women, or maybe Jewish? Dancing gypsy women (I know, because the photos are signed), flirty, exposing their fulsome hips and raised arms. Bedouin women with their faces concealed, only their silhouettes visible under their baggy dresses, with black eyes and fringes of old coins instead of thin curtains of muslin.

But I was also seduced by a Bedouin girl carrying on her head a basket of herbs, or maybe freshly washed laundry. She is young, beautiful and simply shameless, her unbuttoned dress revealing small naked breasts. How did it happen that Elia Kahvedjian found such a model in that place and time? Did he wait for the right moment to arrive? Did he persuade her to pose? I have no idea.

Among these photographs there's just one that can be considered as the root cause of all these stories. So sad that it hurts. It shows two old people, probably husband and wife, or maybe siblings, in any case they must love each other very much, because they are so supportive of each other. They have wrinkled faces and white scarves on their heads. They wear grubby, wrinkled rags. They are barefoot, which is no surprise. And, believe it or not, they are up to their knees in heavy, slimy mud: On top of all their other miseries a downpour had to come along, accompanied by piercing cold (we see it and even feel it physically). The woman is holding a thick staff in her hand. The man is propped on his cane. They are looking at the ground. The only thing in front of them is an empty, mournful landscape soaked by the rain.

Who is this couple? The Armenian photographer forgot to ask. Where are they going? We have no idea. The photograph is so powerful that it becomes obvious: They are going into the unknown, misery, doom, exile. They are go-

ing where they neither want nor should go. But they go because they have to. The caption under the photo says: "*An Nakba*". And the date: 1948. That tells the whole story.

For the Jews that year was the war of independence: Several Arab countries ganged up and attacked the land of Israel in order to ensure its destruction before it came to fruition, and to drown the Jews in the Mediterranean. For the Arabs living in Palestine (no one was called "Palestinian" then – that nation, but not only that one, appeared later, and I have a feeling that no one could have guessed then that it would), An Nakba was a catastrophe. Then came the end, the final moment. If it hadn't been for An Nakba, everything would have been different.

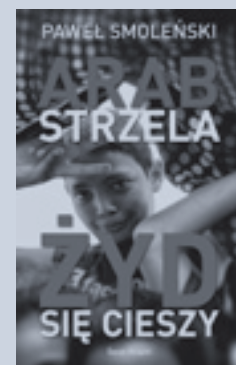
Every war has its symbols, probably different ones for each of the warring parties. They explain how what happened came about. I have no doubt that for the Palestinian Arabs, that symbol is the village of Deir Yassin. Early one morning in May 1948, the Irgun – extreme right-wing Jewish paramilitary troops – surrounded the village. A hundred guerrillas (also justifiably called terrorists) killed more than a hundred Arabs, regardless of whether they were women, infants or old men. For every Jewish fighter involved there was just over one Arab corpse. It all took just a few hours and, apparently, was of no military consequence. The war brought more weighty and even more dramatic events. But it was after Deir Yassin that the cry rose up throughout Palestine: Arabs, you must flee, because that will be your fate too.

Some Jews shouted that threat, but also politicians from Amman, Damascus, Cairo, Baghdad, Beirut and Riyadh. Were it not for fear of the Jews, but also Arab persuasion, some 700,000 Arab inhabitants of Palestine would not have abandoned their homes. That is not to suggest there is any justification for the massacre in Deir Yassin. Besides, Israeli history books refer to the event as a massacre that throws shame on the birth of the Israeli state. Arab schools in Israel commemorate Nakba Day. True, time after time (and unfortunately more often in recent years) there have been politicians calling for a ban on this remembrance day, because – in their view – they can't have Israeli citizens remembering Independence Day as a disaster. But as we know only too well human memory is not subject to injunctions and prohibitions.

Following the butchery in Deir Yassin, David Ben-Gurion, the Jewish state's first prime minister, publicly called Menachem Begin – the Irgun's commander, and years later the prime minister and a Nobel Peace Prize winner – "Menachem Hitler." It is hard to think of a more powerful slur, considering that the crematoria ovens were still warm. Arabs murdered a convoy of the wounded making its way to Jerusalem, sparing no one. Anti-Jewish pogroms swept through Cairo, Rabat and Tunis. Not a single Jew was left in Jerusalem's Old Town and all its synagogues were destroyed.

But in the end it was the Jews who won the war, although they shouldn't have. Apparently, victors are never brought to justice. Actually, I'm not so sure about that. I know many citizens of Israel – Jews and Arabs – who think alike. Anyway Ben-Gurion himself once said that happiness can't be built on the misfortune of others.

Translated by Richard Biały



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ANNA BOLECKA (BORN 1951) IS A WRITER, ESSAYIST, AND LITERARY HISTORIAN WHOSE WORK IS ROUNDLY ACCLAIMED AND TRANSLATED INTO DANISH, FRENCH, DUTCH, GERMAN, AND PORTUGUESE. *THE TZADIK AND THE GIRL* IS HER SEVENTH NOVEL.

Photo: Elżbieta Lempp

The Tzadik and the Girl

Anna Bolecka has never gone in for easy topics. In the wonderful *White Stone*, she returned to the lost paradise of the past in the eastern marshes of the old Republic. In the intriguing *Dearest Franz*, she brought Franz Kafka to life in order to deal with the major themes of his prose in her own personal way. In her new book, *The Tzadik and the Girl*, she sets the bar even higher: she decides to describe the fate of several people involved in the painful events of World War II, in a Warsaw occupied by the Nazis.

Her task is made especially difficult by the fact that Bolecka, who was born after the war, cannot rely, as many of her illustrious predecessors have done, upon her own memories. Thus she makes extensive use of the literature on the topic, drawing particular inspiration from the memoirs and letters of Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman from the Netherlands who became the prototype for the main character of the book, Pola Rubin. It is the story of this troubled, confused girl, whose Jewish identity was issued to her by higher-ups under the Nuremberg Laws, that serves as the departure point for this story about other characters facing life's most important decisions. Among them is her friend Chava Muszka, whose father is an Orthodox Jew and who is hiding from the Nazis, her family trying to escape occupied Warsaw and get abroad and hoping that the German Major Brock, risking his own life, will help them in that escape. Another important part of the plot is the love that connects Pola Rubin and the old Jew Stein, an expert palm reader.

The Tzadik and the Girl is the work of a born writer. Bolecka knows how to maintain the pace of a story perfectly, gradually increasing tension, leading her characters up to the proverbial wall, making them figure out who they are from scratch. The truth is blended with fiction in different proportions, and the characters' fates are so dramatic that it's hard to put the book down. You sometimes get the impression that this Hollywood-style triumph means more than the psychology of the characters, though there is no lack of fellow-feeling for them. Bolecka's language is also intriguing, as she vividly describes wartime Warsaw and its surroundings in a way that is both stripped-down and literary. All of this makes Bolecka's book worthy of reading – and, no doubt, of filming.

Patrycja Pustkowiak

When they finally got outside, they couldn't believe what they were seeing. You could see by the light of the fires. The stench of death hung about the streets, filled the courtyards of houses that didn't exist anymore. Those who survived and did not lose their minds, came out onto the surface. They wandered now amongst the ruins and the spared shreds of homes, not recognizing the streets where they had spent their entire lives. They walked, brushing aside curtains of thick, swampy smoke. A bloody reflection moved down the surviving walls and every so often a stronger gust of wind would strike at the unimaginably blue window of the distant sky. Burn victims and the sufferers of other injuries had gathered at medical care points and around provisional hospitals. Some wine casks had been rustled up from some bombed-out cellar. There were so many of them that drunks soon appeared on the streets. The dead were lying on the pavement. People cut out pieces of meat from the corpse of a horse. German leaflets had fallen on the streets of downtown. If you do not surrender, the city will be gassed. The terrible word "capitulation" was circulating around Warsaw.

Many of the houses downtown and in the Wola district had been demolished. Rubble, clouds of twisted wires, torn-up tracks, and broken street lamps barred the passage from street to street. People had to walk through broken glass, among strips of burnt curtains and charred window frames. Whole sections of the city had changed their appearance. Nowy Świat Street was almost completely gone. A fire that had been burning for a few days already was slowly digesting the last remnants of the ruins. In the smoke, as the walls that jutted out over the debris threatened collapse, people pried bodies out from amongst the rubble. Sometimes a scream would resound, and a wounded person who had survived beneath the stones would rise to the surface. The barricades were hurriedly dismantled. Women were selling pickles in great big jars at the gates. Leaning against a doorframe there was a board reading "Herring sold," pointing into a courtyard where a long line had formed. People with buckets looked for water. Swastika flags hung on balconies and on the walls of houses. People tried to steer clear of them.

Pola went down Marszałkowska with Stein, who was still in the city. What had happened and what was still happening around them fueled feelings that had never abated and that they didn't try to fight anymore. It was a love that appeared at the absolute perfect time. Right now, while the world was so thrown off, while it lay at the bottom of a dark, icy abyss. While directions were all mixed up, and the night gleamed with explosions, and darkness fell in the day, that man become the only source of hope amidst the ruins.

"What we've been through has changed us," she said.

"Yes. We won't be able to go back to how we were before the war."

"I was thinking about our love."

He looked at her and laughed. There was a young and carefree gleam in his eyes. They were walking down the tunnels of streets toward the Saxon Garden. At the corner of Królewska Street, an old woman was sitting with her back up against a wall. In a broken jar she had a bunch of roses.

"The last roses, and what a scent," she said. "Go ahead, buy them."

"You see how when we ask for nothing, we always get something," said Stein, handing Pola the little bouquet of still-closed yellow roses spared miraculously in the flowerbed of some city park.

Those flowers in the wounded city struck her as something that had no right to exist, and yet it existed, and it gave its scent off with timid delight. We'll have to learn to take joy in the tiniest little things, she thought. Otherwise we won't be able to survive what's coming next. The life we had before can't be restored. For better or for worse. Until just recently, she felt as though reality were hanging on her like ill-fitting garments you had to still grow into. Now, walking next to Stein, she felt strength and confidence. No hesitation, no evasion, no questions like, "Do I love him? What do I want from life? What is the point of all this?" She was ashamed of her old doubts. She had once thought things – how long ago it seemed now! – like whether Stein wasn't too old for her, whether he would be good in bed, how often he would cheat on her. She had even said to him once, "We have become fond of one another, but we can't nurture any hopes for the future." And he had replied, with a hint of irony, "If you understand the future in such materialistic terms..." And then just like that, all of that had become the past. She pressed her shoulder to his and slid her hand into Stein's warm hand.

"When do you have to go back?" she asked.

"I was supposed to be there a long time ago. But," he hesitated, "I don't know how they're going to receive me. I am a German citizen. They might actually consider me their enemy."

She looked at him in a panic. She hadn't thought about that. She reflexively lowered her voice.

"But that's impossible."

Stein stayed in Warsaw for some time longer. They would meet in a room that Pola rented with some friends of hers. The girls weren't there, and she didn't even really know what was going on with them. The house had survived, although the landlady said that they had all run out along the bombarded street as though down a never-ending tunnel of fire. She had survived, but the neighbors had perished. Pola heard stories like these from everyone. She didn't wonder why she had survived when others hadn't. She would shut the door to the room she went into with Stein and forget about the world beyond the window for a long while. They would make love or lie next to one another. She would rest her head on his chest, listening to the peaceful beating of his heart, and she would feel safe, as though she were in the arms of some powerful being that would never die.

"What are you thinking about?" she would ask.

"About the demons that torment humanity. When I was young, I thought I would eventually be able to change something in this imperfect world. Don't laugh, I was young."

"But nothing will change if we stay the same. We have to seek out the sources of evil within ourselves. Isn't that what you taught me?"

"One thing is for sure, this war will have changed us. But the question remains: for better or for worse?"

On one of the first days of October, Stein got into the same truck that had brought him to Warsaw, and, along with a shipment of linens and medicines for a hospital in Otwock, he left. At that time, refugees had started to return to Warsaw, and there was always traffic on the roads leading into town. The telephones were working again now, though not as they were supposed to, and everyone wanted to know why some people could make as many calls as they wished at no charge, while others couldn't even hear anything through their receivers.

Translated by Jennifer Croft



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KRZYSZTOF ŚRODA (BORN 1959) IS A WRITER, TRANSLATOR AND HISTORIAN OF PHILOSOPHY. HE HAS WORKED AT THE INSTITUTE OF PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIOLOGY WITHIN THE POLISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, WROTE A PHD THESIS ON PHENOMENOLOGY IN THE WORK OF EDMUND HUSSERL, AND HAS TRANSLATED OVER A DOZEN BOOKS ABOUT PHILOSOPHY AND ECONOMICS. HIS PREVIOUS PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE *AN UNCLEAR SITUATION ON THE CONTINENT* (2003) AND *A PLAN FOR TRADING IN KABARDIAN HORSES* (2006), AND HE IS A PAST WINNER OF THE GDYNIA LITERARY AWARD IN THE ESSAY CATEGORY.

Photo: Tomek Paczkowski

Travels to Armenia and Other Lands, with a Focus on Nature's Most Interesting Phenomena

Krzysztof Środa's works might be termed simultaneously (very particular) travelogues and sophisticated quasi-novels with a first-person narrator. They are philosophy meets journalism, the result being a crystal-clear, distinctive, unique effect. The kind one wishes to return to, to keep in mind. All of Środa's books talk about the author-narrator's travels, while also being nonlinear tales in which, in the blink of an eye, we switch from the Caucasus or Armenia to Chicago, the Polish countryside, or wherever else. In *Travels to Armenia* we find, once more, this familiar intensity in experiencing the visible world, which does not, however, manifest itself in literary ecstasy, but rather an attentiveness of description, a savoring of detail, and finally the eponymous "interesting observations of nature," a phrase that may appear ironic, but which in fact is taken totally seriously in the book. Portraits of people the author meets "on the road" are also extremely important. Środa uses these frequently intercultural meetings sparingly, but distinctively, and – and this is of vital importance – without a trace of kitschy excitement at making contact with "the Foreigner" or "the Other." Środa's avoidance of obviousness comes from his – and his book's – inconclusiveness, so to speak. The reader would seek in vain the "morals" or "lessons" of the wanderer (or the writer), easy evalua-

tions, hastily made conclusions, cheap exoticism, the sniveling, the facile. A risky project for today's day and age? "It's often the case," writes Środa, "that where there's a risk, there's also a reward." Środa's books, including this latest one, are a testament to the fact that this is, indeed, the case.

Marcin Sendeki
Translated by Jennifer Croft

I thought

I'd see buzzards at the very least. When I drove across Lithuania a year ago – just as now, it was late December – you could see them on either side of the road from Kaunas to Klaipėda. They were ambling about the white fields like slightly superior hens, listening out for voles bumbling around under the snow. The noise of the highway clearly didn't bother them at all, but when I stopped the car and rolled down the window to take a closer look at them, they flew away. Only when they took off into the air did the dark patches become visible on the underside of their wings, roughly two-thirds the length of them, by which people who know about these things can distinguish rough-legged buzzards from the other kind, which are simply called common buzzards.

This year there is no snow, nor are there any buzzards. There are farm cats strolling about green winter crops and only slightly greyer meadows. It's hard to say what the voles are doing. I know why this happens. The winter is worryingly mild, not just here, but also in places where the buzzards come from – in Scandinavia, the Urals, and maybe even in sinister Siberia. So there's no need to fly south. Maybe it's simply that the favourable weather has encouraged the lemmings, which up there in the north are the buzzards' substitute for voles, to produce an extra, fifth or sixth litter. It's a known fact that when these animals multiply to excess, they take off on chaotic migrations, during which they lose their innate vigilance and become easy prey for winged predators. It looks as if that is exactly what has happened.

I spend the night in the now traditional way at a hotel in Palanga. In the morning, on the way to the beach, I stop at the edge of a health-spa park to inspect some bushes, in which exactly a year ago a small flock of plump bullfinches had found refuge. But they are not here either. As I recall their colours – particularly vivid in the case of the males and more subtle in the case of the females – I try to imagine them now, flitting about in the branches of some anaemic-looking birch trees somewhere in the tundra. I try, but I'm not sure if the white trunks simply vanish against the snow that's protecting the already unhappy, eternally frozen ground from the frost, or whether they turn white gracefully above grasses that have only just gone grey.

The wind, which was blowing from the north-west in the night, died down at dawn, leaving a clear sky and a calm sea behind it. "It's hard to imagine a better day for amber hunting," I say to myself, but having learned from experience I do not allow this thought to stir me up needlessly. And rightly so. Thanks to which I am not disappointed when after walking a kilometre or two I find nothing apart from a few dead sticklebacks. The first and the second little fish don't really grab my attention, but when I notice more of them, I start to suspect I'm on the trail of yet another anomaly – all the more because two of them have oddly swollen bellies. It's the end of December, so it's hard to believe they're carrying roe. I don't know much about sticklebacks, but in my childhood I often used to see them in the shallows of small rivers, and so – correctly or not – I live in the belief that they are freshwater fish. And even if that is not the case, even if they are able, like roach, perch and many other species, to adapt to salt water, it's still harder to understand why so many of them have let themselves be tossed up by the waves onto the beach in Palanga, an inhospitable place from their point of view.

I forget about bits of amber, but I do not forget about my penknife, with which I intend to dig them out of the frozen sand. I fetch it out of my pocket and squat over a dead stickleback. I prod the fish to make sure it isn't alive, and then I cut the tiny body in half. A grey substance emerges from inside, arranged in lengthwise, pleated strips that look more like brains than fish entrails. And once again, as usual, there are more questions than answers – almost like in the case of whales which swim onto the shore, only to die there for lack of water. So I wipe the blade on the sand, fold the knife and walk off.

I am ashamed of the results of my own inquisitive nature. I can only count on the fact that by the time I come back this way the sad halves of the stickleback will have been eaten by one of the terns which – exactly the same as a year ago – are walking about at the point where the sea meets the land, and as I approach them, they take off into the air, only to come down twenty or thirty metres further off. Just as if they didn't believe I would keep walking ahead, and that in a short while I'd force them to make a pointless effort again.

(...)

At one time there used to be an ordinary market in this square. Speaking for myself, I would have preferred to come here before the large covered market was built on the site of it, but there's nothing to be done about that now. Luck-

ily, on its northern side a long row of brick-built stalls has survived. There are about twenty of them, in every one of which without exception they sell meat, and as they are all standing in a single line, joined together by walls and turned in unison towards the sun, they are covered by flat roofs that protrude above the pavement. As I look at them from a distance, standing on the sun-baked steps in front of the covered market entrance, I see something that looks like a horizontal crack in the grey-and-yellow surface of the city. At the edge of this shady cleft there are people moving about – slowly and inconsequentially – and a little further in, enclosed in irregular rectangles, the meat salesmen's faces are visible.

Most of the rectangles are almost black. Only some are foggily illuminated by single light bulbs, and in these one can see more – the walls, some objects hanging on them, small pictures or pieces of paper, and sometimes the silhouettes of other people moving behind the salesmen.

It's impossible to stand in the sun like this forever, so I walk across the surviving bit of the square and shelter under the roof of a meat stall – the first on the right – and at once turn left, to take a look at the carelessly displayed chunks of dead pig, lamb and sheep. Although in a way they are picturesque, there is nothing about them to hold the attention of the casual passer-by for long. Far more interesting are the faces of the butchers watching over them.

It looks as if women are not admitted to the meat trade in Armenia – as if the understanding here was that they shouldn't be made to deal with matters to do with death and killing. From behind counters coated in tin or covered with other, less costly materials the heads, arms, and sometimes also the bellies of men protrude. Some are well-built, or even handsome, others are old and ugly, but I am incapable of imagining any of them in any other sort of shop – unless it were a shop selling car parts. I get the impression that they perform the work of a butcher with satisfaction, if not a sense of pride. In front of them lie knives, cleavers and other tools for chopping up meat, and hidden in deep shade, their swarthy faces look strangely pale.

There are also a good many men among the buyers. Only when you take a closer look at them do you notice that many of them are not interested in the meat at all. On the whole they're standing still, gazing towards the square, or they're holding conversations with one another that are incomprehensible to me. Some are just friends of the salesmen, whom a lack of any other occupation has driven to this spot where life is going on, admittedly even more languidly than anywhere else, but also more boldly revealing its double face. Evidently I too am yielding to its charm, because as I reach the final stall, I don't walk on, but turn around to take another peep at the faces of the guardians of the miniature abysses. Even though I do it shyly and as discreetly as possible, I fail to avoid drawing attention to myself. One of the men interrupts his conversation, smiles, and asks in Russian the natural question in this situation: "Where are you from?" and when he gets the answer, he goes on to ask: "On business?"

"No, I'm a tourist," I say, for what else am I to say?

Translated Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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ANNA JANKO (BORN 1957) IS A WRITER, POET AND LITERARY CRITIC. SHE HAS PUBLISHED SEVERAL VOLUMES OF POETRY AND A NOVEL ENTITLED *THE GIRL WITH MATCHES* (NOMINATED FOR THE COGITO MEDIA PRIZE 2008 AND THE ANGELUS), WHICH WAS VERY WELL RECEIVED BY CRITICS AND READERS ALIKE, AND WAS DESCRIBED AS REQUIRED THERAPEUTIC READING FOR ANY WOMAN. SHE CURRENTLY CONTRIBUTES TO POLISH RADIO AND TO A NUMBER OF JOURNALS.



Photo: A. Herman

The Passion According to Saint Hanka

In her latest book, poet, writer and columnist Anna Janko combines all the genres in which she writes. *The Passion According to Saint Hanka* is extremely bold erotic literature, unique in the Polish tradition, written from a woman's point of view. Disciplined, concise, at times ironical, but ever full of genuine, erotic passion, this prose is a radical affirmation of a woman's sexual freedom. The story appears to be plotless, fragmented and not linear. In fact it is very carefully composed, rather in the style of Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Through micro narratives, analyses of individual ideas and newspaper-column-style texts, Janko tries to get to the heart of what may be mankind's greatest mystery: erotic love, in all its intoxicating and destructive manifestations. How does it work? What effect does it have on life, on the chemistry of the human organism, and on writing? How is the choice of our object of desire connected with our childhood? What are the typical behaviour patterns for men, and what are they for women? In what way is this woman in love similar to all other people in love, and in what way does she defend her individual persona against passion, as it bids her to undergo the cataclysm of love in her own unique way? Janko provides the answers to all these questions as a poet. For her, the decisive factor is the language in which one talks and writes about love. Only language allows a person's integrity to remain intact as he or she is flooded by a powerful stream of sexual impulse and enchantment from an unknown source.

Woven out of bits and pieces, the plot appears on the surface to be an everyday story. A pretty, talented girl becomes a wife and mother. Gradually her capacity for sexual arousal closes down, and her brightness begins to fade. But then a man appears, simply referred to as He, who is not her husband, but a lover. The world starts to spin and to sparkle, as inner and outer barriers crumble. On this wave of elation, all the moods of this kind that she has experienced in the remote past and long since forgotten come back again as the most important thing in her life. The desire to create also returns; betrayed and abandoned, her loved ones become at the same time even more present and important. What happens when this mood passes? Nothing. The world turns out to have carried on in the same way the whole time.

Kazimiera Szczuka

Love goes round among people looking for lovers. It's all the same who they are and how deeply involved in life, how old they are, how much strength, money or time they have, what views, plans, obligations or duties they have.

It will start in the spring. For now it is still winter, there's already something trailing like a wisp of smoke above the snow-coated shingle, but it will start for real in spring, in Kazimierz on the Vistula. And it will erupt in summer. This eruption will cause great turmoil, immense disruption, and the world will stand on the brink. But for now I know nothing about it. I can sense something, because inside me everything is already ripe for change. For Change, with a big C. I'm waiting for the big Now. Because love is the only opportunity for a person to be able to sit back, and then immediately take control of the here and now. Because having an actual experience of the here and now gives one a taste of eternity.

Those who are truly in love are creatures from nowhere. With no roots, no mothers, fathers or grandparents. And always heirless, even if they have a dozen children. They are people with no past and no future. The fact that they tell each other their life story and that they make plans to escape together doesn't mean a thing. Those are just inevitable elements, stage props, points in the game. In reality (as far as love is any kind of a reality) they have nothing to hold onto. Light and darkness play with lovers, taking them from each other by turns. And the lovers, like avatars, desensitised automata, pretend to be the same familiar characters as in their life until now, but inside they are made of crystal and dark silt, they are endlessly creating something out of nothing, and nothing out of something...

It is still winter. Hanka (that's me) is 37 years old. To those over twenty, that's a lot. To those over forty, that's not much. She is slender, quick in her movements, has long hair and wears baggy jeans. She gets up early in the morning, sends the children off to school and her husband to work, and then stares out of the window. And is getting ready to jump...

After coming home from Kazimierz I was as if drunk. Not sober, not sane, not serious, but strange. I was drunk on love. There was a smile wandering about my face. There were thoughts wandering about my head. I seemed not fully conscious of the reality of my existence in a real-life family. I shut myself in my bedroom. I closed the golden blinds in both windows and sat there in a golden box. I didn't eat a thing for a week. I just drank water, by the litre. And listened to Schubert. "Death and the Maiden" round the clock. As performed by the Travnicek Quartet. I waited for the heart-wrenching *andante con moto*, then I would wind back the tape and steep myself once again in this resounding pain, trying hard to understand what was up, what had happened to me. And I did understand, as I wrote letter after letter to my beloved. I wrote to him: It's not you that I love you, but through you something that's bigger than us, life itself, the wonder of it and its transience, and freedom from all this.

I drank water, I wrote letters, I listened to Schubert, I laughed and I cried by turns, and over and over I died away into semi-sweet non-existence. As I did so I wrote dozens of bad poems. Bad both in terms of literature and ethics, because they were in praise of infidelity, they extolled the innocence of betrayal, they expressed my readiness for ANYTHING, right away...

That was the beginning. Like flying towards the sun. And then it was impossible to come down to land any more. I had to keep flying, on and on, because I no longer had a nest. Until finally the earth came to an end too, and the abyss began.

People believe that in the depths of love there is hidden treasure. That the meaning of existence is contained in an ardent relationship between two beings. They believe that if they surrender to love with the greatest determination, boundlessly and definitively, this meaning will be revealed, they will touch the core, they will be pervaded by the truth. People believe that at that moment the four points of the compass – always and never, everywhere and nowhere – will merge into a single, comprehensible time-and-space continuum.

And they are filled with a thrilling sense of peace. At last.

Tell me about your lovers. Tell me about your women. What were they like? How much did you love them? For how long?

Did they have breasts like apples, or like pears? And what colour was the hair at the juncture of their thighs?

What did their necks smell like in the heat? And how agile were their tongues?

And their bellies, were the bellies of your women silver in the moonlight, did you lay your head on them to cry for the unattainable point of origin?

Were those women good to you? Did they feed you with hunger and water you with desire? Did they give themselves to you without shame? Did they shout louder on the night of the full moon?

Did they know the song which I sing to you?

What prayer did they whisper at dusk, as the city went to the bottom like a carved stone relief?

What did they hum at dawn in the green rays of the rising gardens?

What were you trying to catch up with as you ran together, panting and shouting, across the sparkling desert of the night?

How badly did they break your heart when they left?

My curiosity is like a victory, after all my name is Now.

Tell me about them – we shall kill them together.

The anatomy of betrayal. Betrayal is love. It is justified. It does not hurt. It is beautiful. It gives a foretaste of transgression. It has an aftertaste of freedom. It is innocent. Even if it keeps repeating the Ten Commandments to itself by heart, it doesn't understand any of them. It is love. It is love. It stakes everything on one single card, to win one single night. And it does win.

What happens the next day is quite another story.

Being in love is like a dream about flying, and when you wake up from it, you can't believe in gravity, but everything has its weight again – you can remember exactly what it's like to break free of the ground, but it simply doesn't work any more.

It's like when you wake up from an easy life. One day something dreadful happens, and you wake up from an easy life into a hard one. The old life seems unreal, as if you just dreamed it; you can long for it, you can try on the forgotten emotions, but they are like dummies, they can't be made to move, and you are like someone else who has taken himself off to a different consciousness.

The schizophrenia of a double life. The symptoms: mixing up the names of the two lovers. A lack of coherent vision of the immediate future – every plan has two versions, just in case. What is said and what is done are perfectly separable, and yet if need be they can cover each other like a sandcastle mould. Further symptoms of a split personality: a total lack of social sensitivity – being so absorbed by details that determine the character of both realities that there isn't enough room for other people's problems. They only count in as much as they take part in the game, as "one of ours" or "the enemy". Moreover, communicating with one's actual self is greatly encumbered. Because the crack is getting bigger...

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA



WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA (1923-2012) WAS A POET AND ESSAYIST WHO WON THE 1996 NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE. WORLD FAMOUS THANKS TO TRANSLATIONS INTO LANGUAGES INCLUDING ENGLISH, FRENCH, GERMAN, DUTCH, SPANISH, CZECH, SLOVAK, SWEDISH, BULGARIAN, ALBANIAN AND CHINESE, SZYMBORSKA WAS BOTH PHENOMENAL AND ENIGMATIC: MODEST, SELF-CONTAINED, DISCREET AND UNDERSTATED, SHE ELECTRIFIED HER READERS. *ENOUGH* IS THE LAST COLLECTION OF POEMS THAT SHE PREPARED FOR PUBLICATION.

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Photo: The Polish Book Institute

Enough

The final collections of famous poets are a special kind of literary work. This sort of book is expected to crown the great author's oeuvre in a suitable manner, by recollecting the main features of that author's style and repeating his major themes. Above all, the critics want to see some filling in, summing up and rounding off in them, all sorts of account-settling, forgiving or farewell gestures true to the nature of this kind of volume. Does Wisława Szymborska's posthumous book of poems, *Enough*, fit this bill?

I think it goes a long way beyond those limits. It is a superb offering, even though it is actually unfinished, which I shall say more about below. Nonetheless, the poems which were ready to be published and have been included in the main part of the collection are almost all absolutely perfect. They have been put in chronological order, i.e. (to quote Ryszard Krynicki's closing text, *Instead of an Afterword*): "in the order in which Wisława Szymborska passed the corrected manuscripts to her secretary to type onto the computer". This was not Szymborska's usual practice, because she was known to compile each individual collection carefully and unhurriedly, but in this case it was dictated by necessity. Moreover, it confirms the familiar, frequently proposed thesis that Szymborska should be regarded primarily as a writer of individual poems, not lyrical collections, however excellently put together.

In many places *Enough* turns out to be a tribute to human individuality, but it also seems to be an apologia for humanity as a whole. In "Confessions of a Reading Machine" typical questions are asked by a linguistic robot which knows all the languages in the history of mankind and is capable of extracting them from under layers of catastrophe; it can recreate every last symbol in its original form, can even "read lava" and "leaf through ashes", and corrects the spelling mistakes in private letters, but it cannot understand concepts as integral to humanity as "emotions", "the soul", or maybe most aptly, most profoundly defining our self-awareness, the phrase "I am", which looks "like an everyday function, / practised universally, but not collectively". It is worth stressing that humanity reaches its full extent whenever we are dealing with a lack of perfection rather than a show of it, for the poem "There Are Those Who" should be interpreted in just that way, by applying negative values.

But surely no one would be able to imagine the shape of the whole collection if not for the superb editorial input, which includes supplementing the publication with facsimiles and a description of the manuscripts of the unfinished poems, as well as some incisive, thorough, and at the same time brilliant and fascinating explanations by the publisher, Ryszard Krynicki. Krynicki displays and comments on Szymborska's editorial input, shows a series of deletions, additions and corrections, and reveals the process whereby each individual poem was produced; he has risked his own creative instinct by adding or guessing missing words, and pointing out the poems' affinities, proximities or counterpoints. This makes us feel like confidants who have been let into the secrets of Szymborska's workshop as we commune with fragmented or nearly-whole poems that have been saved from non-existence to emerge out of nonentity, like Leśmian's creatures that longed to exist. We can never have too many creatures of this kind.

Piotr Łuszczkiewicz



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In the first half of 2012, three books enjoyed great popularity amongst poetry fans.

The first is *Bach for My Baby* (Biuro Literackie, Wrocław 2012) by Justyna Bargielska, author of three volumes of poetry and prose poems, and two-time Gdynia Literary Prize winner. In her latest book, Bargielska concentrates on love stories. We get the impression that their backdrop is the erotic triangle, the dream of ecstatic intimacy between two people, the more unattainable, the more exciting. The poems' heroine tells us of betrayal, separations, longing, waiting for her lover, his absence, and the catastrophe that is love. All of this becomes a test of her strength: getting to know herself and exercising in emotions of various kinds. It also results in a number of terrific punch lines: language subjected to attempts at force triggers rhetorical effects that are distinct from the ones we have experienced in Bargielska's prior works. Expressive surrealism and the sensual phrase disappear, replaced by colloquialisms; heavy, sometimes awkward syntax refuses to turn into vivid images, this time Bargielska does not provide the attractions of the visual arts. All in all it works more toward its endings. It is in the poems' resolutions that Bargielska's remarkable ingenuity can be seen. For example: to address her heroine's yearning, Bargielska guides us with bravura through childhood provocations up to religious provocations. *Bach for My Baby* may thus be called a tale of love's fatalism, which nor does the poem's heroine wish to run away from, for without it the world would lose some of its intensity.

The second new book of poetry this year was *Bird's Resurrection (Poems and Dreams)* (Biuro Literackie, Wrocław 2012) by Bohdan Zadura, recipient of a 2011 Wrocław Silesius Prize for his book *Nightlife* (2010). The order of his latest book is also one of night and dreams. In vain, however, would we seek out the oneiric, the visionary, the undefinable – the aspects characteristic of the common conception of dreams. Zadura's phrase here is rationally ordered, based on calculation: conscientious, almost analytical. It captures the most external phenomena of life. On one hand, the writings here are accompanied by bitter irony, skepticism, and outright mockery. These appear whenever the author comes to issues like so-called current affairs in society, politics, and culture. On the other hand, there is a kind of neutrality in the presentation of reality in these poems. The most striking feature of many of these texts seems to be the attitude of the subject – retiring, separated from the world by an invisible pane of glass, stocking up on the most ordinary, common events of life: no extremes, nothing unexpected, no violent upheavals. Both registers – the ironic and the neutral – get complemented in the collection with an allegorical tenor of the poem on resurrection. It takes place several times over the pages of this book and refers not only to the bird of the title, but also to other animals, other people, other times.

The third most anticipated book of the past six months was Krystyna Miłobędzka's *twelve poems in color* (Biuro Literackie, Wrocław 2012). This is a poet who still, after all these years, experiments with form, language, and with the medium that is the book. *Twelve poems in color* is literally a box of cards that can be put together in any way and made into a whole, although we can also be faithful to the order proposed by the author. Miłobędzka's minimalist notes also attract attention because of their use of colors – brightened or darkened words that invalidate the flatness of the paper. They cause us to begin thinking about our limitations, our defects, and our weaknesses: seeing, hearing, and being in the world. Miłobędzka writes about the most basic experiences (breathing, touching), synchronizing writing with life. The poet pays the most attention to so-called weak existence, to disappearing, to becoming more and more see-through, rather than turning to a strong, distinct presence. She likens her writing, too, to this disappearing act: she scratches out more than she supplements, resigning from metaphors, introducing the whites of the pages, introducing, too, silence. But this is not an expression of resignation and despair in the power of human language; it is rather an attempt at humility, at working on the aggressive ego, a resistance to the desire to overpower others, a slow and systematic dispensing with one's own name.

Marcin Baran's *The Almost Total Loss of Fluency* (Wydawnictwo EMG, Kraków 2012) ought also to be mentioned. The author's previous volume of poetry, *Rotting Cherry and Other Incarnations*, came out in 2003. This latest collection, a comprehensive, multi-narrative, and – so to speak – multi-lingual volume, ridicules to a large extent something that might be called cultural

provincialism. Baran parodies here different new languages of the world, unmasking the mock ultra-modernity of this world, capturing the falsity and hypocrisy of modern political and social communications. These gestures, of course, do not define the whole at any fundamental level: here we find poems with a subject that describes, with characteristic (based on the author's previous poetry) ambivalence, the sensual-erotic experiences of the world. Physiology and biology, the literality of anatomical language, blends here with refined idealism. In addition, confessions about the sexual experience of the world also cast light on the subject himself as he seems to part with his youth in these pieces. But it must be stated that there are many players in Baran's book: each of them has a differently calculated rate, and each leads us to a different part of the world. His protagonists differ enough that each introduces his own language and context, and only in the framework of that context is the meaning of their statements established. Thus it can be said that that it is above all upon a multiplicity of voices, worlds, meetings between an old man, a young girl, a typewriter, movie actors, and a spectator, that *The Almost Total Loss of Fluency* is written.

Tomasz Pietrzak's *Records* (Wydawnictwo Mamiko, Nowa Ruda 2012), the author's second collection, is also an interesting option. Arranged in thematic cycles, on Frida Kahlo, Silesian Jews, German soldiers in World War II, etc., the poems from *Records* span an extraordinarily broad geographic and temporal horizon. We move from New Mexico to Silesia, from the symbolic sea to the symbolic forest, from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first, from galaxies and space expeditions to Silesian painter Erwin Sówka's paintings of interiors. The author himself says that his book shows the future from today's perspective. Historians call this approach post-memory – there is in *Records* also an idealization of occurrences past, as well as the dream of another version of them; the archive is not expected to help unravel the mysteries of history, which here becomes, instead, a nebula of diffuse impressions and emotions.

The most interesting debut collection thus far was Bartosz Sadulski's *Post* (Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna i Centrum Animacji Kultury w Poznaniu, Poznań 2012). This book is made up of poems that are totally dominated by the male perspective. His confessions, reflections, and commentaries demarcate a game of self-making. In addition to masculinity, the elements of the game are youth and the language of arrogance. Sadulski tells us with improvisational ease about girls, soccer, economic systems, politics, literature. But the fundamental value of his story is mainly due to its tenor: sober criticism, ironic distance from himself, and a quite unusual wit. The result is that the world that Sadulski portrays is a purgatory, but, as Camus would say, we are told here that we won't actually ever even make it to hell.

Anna Kałuża

Translated by Jennifer Croft

JUSTYNA BARGIELSKA
Bach for my baby



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BOHDAN ZADURA
**Bird's Resurrection
 (Poems and Dreams)**



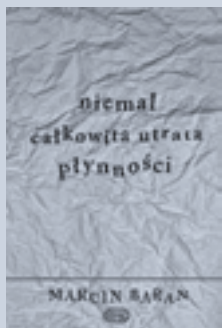
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KRYSTYNA MIŁOBĘDZKA
Twelve poems in color



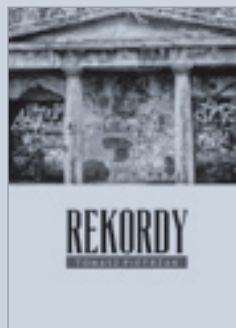
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MARCIN BARAN
The Almost Total Loss of Fluency



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TOMASZ PIETRZAK
Records



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BARTOSZ SADULSKI
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