New books
FROM POLAND

Nº 56.

OLGA TOKARCZUK
PAWEŁ HUELLE
MAGDALENA TULLI
JANUSZ GŁOWACKI
IGNACY KARPOWICZ
PATRYCJA PUSTKOWIAK
ŁUKASZ ORBITOWSKI
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ZIEMOWIT SZCZEREK
WOJCIECH JAGIELSKI
PAWEŁ SMOLEŃSKI
WITOLD SZABŁOWSKI
KATARZYNA BONDA
MARCIN WROŃSKI

NEW BOOKS FROM POLAND
FALL 2014

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FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the latest edition of New Books from Poland, the annual catalogue in which we present some of the most interesting new books to have been published in Poland in the past few months. Once again we have some impressive novels for you, some amazing true stories, intimate confessions and colourful reports from various parts of the world. Altogether there are twenty books, all highly recommended.

We're starting off with a long anticipated new novel by Olga Tokarczuk, whose original imagination and superb writing skills have won her critical acclaim and huge popularity in Poland as well as abroad – her earlier books have been published into thirty-three languages to date. This major new novel, *The Books of Jacob*, is sub-titled: "A great journey across seven borders, five languages and three major religions, not to mention the minor ones". Full of surprising twists and turns, it tells the fascinating story of Jacob Frank, a real-life Jewish mystic and heretic who was regarded as the last Messiah. But that's not all the novel has to offer. It is also an extremely successful attempt at taking history to task – it makes room for the Jews, for women, and for some metaphysical nostalgia, in short everything (and everyone) that gets left out of the traditional history books. As Tokarczuk demonstrates, multiculturalism, which seems to be such a modern occurrence, actually has a very long tradition in Polish culture. This is a great book, not merely in terms of its impressive size – a cool 900 pages.

Another recent novel was an instant best seller in Poland. With three interwoven plotlines and multiple layers of meaning, *Sing Gardens* by Paweł Huelle is steeped in the cultural traditions of the early twentieth century. Not only does this novel feature an unknown opera by Wagner, but here we have something to appeal to every fan of the modernist canon – debates about High Art, an attempt to reconstruct the lost world of childhood, and an original, intricate narrative, through which we are guided by the author acting as narrator. This is an extremely enjoyable read.

How do you live in a world that turns out to be a trap? This is the basic question posed by Magdalena Tulli's new book, *Noise*, a moving tale about living in the shadow of the Holocaust, and also an attempt to regain the right to one's own life, one's own voice, and one's own personal story. This intimate confession is woven into the tragic history of the twentieth century, and brings up so many extremely strong images that it reads like the ready-made screenplay for a stunning, Oscar-winning film. Time will tell if it does actually become one; for now we have a unique opportunity to appreciate some sophisticated writing by an outstanding author gifted with great sensitivity.

Andrzej Stasiuk's new book, *The East*, is in a form we have come to expect from him – by all appearances it is another book of travel writing, but in fact it is not the classic diary of a journey. Stasiuk takes us to the East – once again we travel with him across his favourite, provincial parts of the world, this time within Russia, China and Mongolia – but we also explore his childhood and his parents' youth, the days of his personal beginning, his own "rising in the East". Asked recently about the reasons for the journey that inspired this book, he joked: "Well, I'm not going to Switzerland, am I?" Certainly not, because the things that interest him are disintegration, decay and transience – the sort of chaos that may represent the end of the old order, but also marks the beginning of a new one.

Joanna Bator, who won Poland's major book award, the NIKE Literary Prize in 2013, takes us on a completely different journey to the East. Apart from writing excellent novels, for the past several years she has been making regular trips to Japan. Here we present her latest book about the Land of the Rising Sun, in which she fixes her anthropological gaze on "cool Japan", a very modern place that we only know superficially, but which is full of astonishing and baffling trends. And so Bator writes about "cosplayers", *otaku*, Godzilla, and the art of serving sushi, doing her best to show them in all their complexity, in their cultural context, to give us the broader picture, though she also notes that it is a "super-flat" culture. Perhaps only when these two dimensions collide can the outsider come to understand the culture of Japan.

There are other striking stories featured in this catalogue too, including the celebrated playwright Janusz Głowacki's highly comical account, *I Comed, or How I Wrote a Screenplay about Lech Wałęsa* for Andrzej Wajda – a title that perfectly captures the author's adventures when the famous director commissioned him to write the script for a film about the man who led Poland's independent trade union movement and later won the Nobel Peace Prize. At first it seems Głowacki is simply going to tell the story of his work on the script and his misunderstandings with Wajda, but he also takes the opportunity to provide a highly absorbing and lucid description of the events that led to the collapse of communism in Poland, and thus he relates an important chapter in European history.

We also have an excellent book about Nelson Mandela by Wojciech Jagielski, a shocking account of life in the Gaza Strip by Paweł Smoleński, reports by the talented young journalist Witold Szabłowski from the Balkans, Georgia and Cuba on problems resulting from a change of political system, some scathing gonzo journalism about Ukraine, for which the author, Ziemowit Szczerek, won the Paszport Prize, awarded by the news weekly *Polityka* for the best first book of the year. And two very good works of crime fiction – which, like reportage, is gradually becoming one of Polish literature's trademark genres.

As you can see, there's plenty to choose from. We hope you'll enjoy reading about these new books from Poland, and we wholeheartedly encourage you to publish them in your own language.

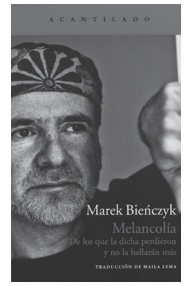
Izabella Kaluta

RECENTLY PUBLISHED:

GOTTLAND

MARIUSZ SZCZYGIEŁ

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones
New York: Melville House



MELANCHOLIA

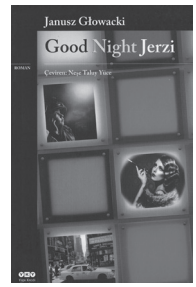
MAREK BIEŃCZYK

Translated by Maila Lema
Barcelona: Acantilado

SOLARIS

STANISŁAW LEM

Translated by Gang Zhao
Guangdong: Flower City
Publishing House



GOOD NIGHT, DŻERZI

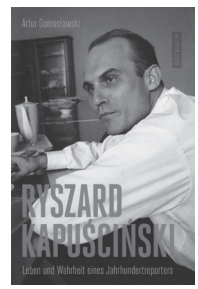
JANUSZ GŁOWACKI

Translated by Neşe Taluy Yüce
Istanbul: Yapi Kredi Yayinlari

CWANIARY

SYLWIA CHUTNIK

Translated by Michala Benešová
Prague: Argo



KAPUŚCIŃSKI NON-FICTION

ARTUR DOMOSŁAWSKI

Translated by Antje Ritter-Jasińska
and Benjamin Voelkel
Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag

ZIARNO PRAWDY

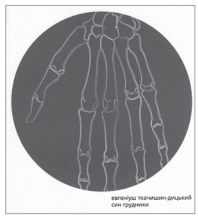
ZYGMUNT MIŁOSZEWSKI

Translated by Anat Zajdman
Tel Aviv: Penn Publishing

OPĘTANI

WITOLD GOMBROWICZ

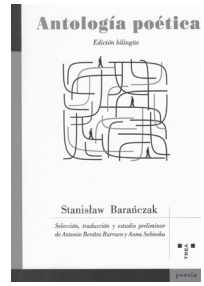
Translated by Lin Hongliang
Shanghai: Shanghai 99 Culture Consulting



SELECTED POEMS

EUGENIUSZ TKACZYSZYN-DYCKI

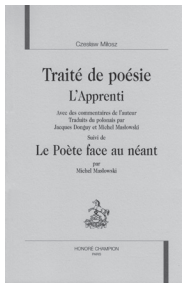
Translated by
Marianna Kijanowska
Kiev: KROK Publishing House



SELECTED POEMS

STANISŁAW BARAŃCZAK

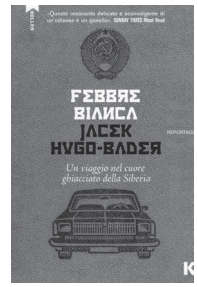
Translated by Antonio Benítez
Burraco and Anna Sobieska
Gijón: Ediciones Trea



TRAKTAT POETYCKI

CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ

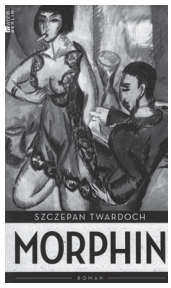
Translated by Jacques Donguy
and Michel Masłowski
Paris: Éditions Champion



BIAŁA GORĄCZKA

JACEK HUGO-BADER

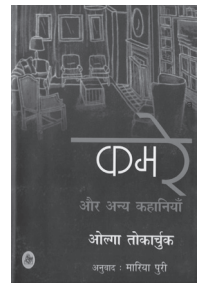
Translated by Marzena Borejczuk
Rovereto: Keller editore



MORFINA

SZCZEPAN TWARDOCH

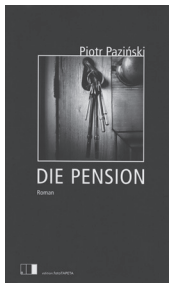
Translated by Olaf Kühl
Berlin: Rowohlt



SZAFA

OLGA TOKARCZUK

Translated by Maria Puri Skakuj
New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan



PENSJONAT

PIOTR PAZIŃSKI

Translated by Benjamin Voelkel
Berlin: edition.fotoTAPETA

BUKARESZT. KURZ I KREW

MAŁGORZATA REJMER

Translated by Luiza Săvescu
Bukarest: Polirom

DZIENNIK 1954

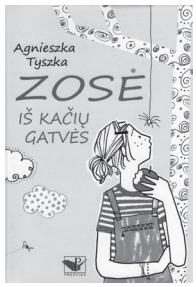
LEOPOLD TYRMAND

Translated by Anita Shelton
and A.J. Wrobel
Evanston: Northwestern
University Press

DOM DZIENNY, DOM NOCNY

OLGA TOKARCZUK

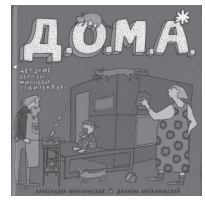
Translated by
Hanne Lone Tønnesen
Copenhagen: Tiderne Skifter



ZOSIA Z ULICY KOCIEJ

AGNIESZKA TYSZKA

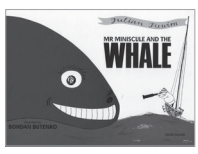
Translated by Irena Aleksaite
Vilnius: Presvika



D.O.M.E.K.

ALEKSANDRA MIZIELIŃSKA
DANIEL MIZIELIŃSKI

Translated by Sofia Kobrinskaya
Moscow: Samokat



PAN MALUŚKIEWICZ I WIELORYB

JULIAN TUWIM

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones
Raumati South: Book Island

GUCIO I CEZAR

KRYSTYNA BOGLAR
BOHDAN BUTENKO

Translated by Lydia Waleryszak
Geneva: Editions La Joie de lire SA

OLGA TOKARCZUK

THE BOOKS OF JACOB

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Olga Tokarczuk *(born 1962) is regarded by the critics as one of Poland's greatest contemporary novelists and is extremely popular among Polish readers. She has won numerous Polish and foreign awards; her novel* House of Day, House of Night *was shortlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. She is one of the most widely translated Polish authors.* The Books of Jacob *is her fifteenth publication.*

The protagonist of Olga Tokarczuk's magnificent new novel, Jacob Frank, was a real historical figure, though all but forgotten. Yet Frank was a fascinating and enigmatic man whose fortunes are connected with many places in Europe and beyond. It's hard to believe that lots of novels haven't been written about him, or lots of films made – but the reality is that Jacob Frank is known only to a few scholars. He lived in the eighteenth century, when history began to speed up, as the French Revolution approached, and the currents of the Enlightenment were on the rise. The mystical religiosity of this Jewish heretic, considered the last Messiah, while it may seem particular to its day, also contributed to the demolition of the old structures and divisions between Jews and practitioners of other religions. In the mid-eighteenth century several thousand of his followers, under the auspices of the Polish king and nobility, converted to Catholicism. It was not their first conversion: they had already become Muslim, too.

A mystic and a politician, charismatic and debauched, a charlatan and a religious leader, Frank was an ambiguous character, very difficult to pin down. Tokarczuk's great epic, written in a somewhat Baroque style, abounds with colorful characters, while Jacob is always portrayed through the eyes of others, always just beyond our grasp. Perhaps it was this ambiguity that caused history to be so unkind to him. Or maybe he was inconvenient to everyone? To the Jews he was an apostate, the precursor to an identity-destroying assimilation, which is hard to reconcile with the global history of Judaism, although it is a part of it. For the Catholics, Frank served as a reminder of their anti-Semitism. For the many assimilated descendants of the Frankists (as his followers later came to be known) he represented a display of their origins and of the circuitous routes of their assimilation.

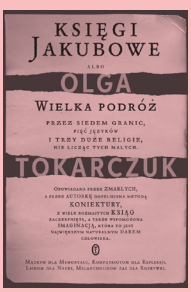
Frank was born in a small village in Podolia, in other words today's Ukraine, to a family of followers of another Jewish heretic, Shabbetai Zevi. He grew up among Ashkenazi Jews in what is now Romania, traveling to Turkey as a merchant, then

returning to the eastern territories of Poland to spread word of his faith and recruit new followers. He taught that all the religions up until then had been insufficient, just stages on the road to true awareness. His conversion had nothing to do with accepting traditional Catholicism, but was rather a road he believed would lead him further on. It was a rebellion against ossified religion and social habits. Persecuted by Orthodox rabbis, he fled Poland and began to preach in Smyrna and in Thessaloniki. He tried to set up a commune; as the prevailing customs amongst his followers were pretty promiscuous, he dreamed of a small Jewish state, to be established on Polish or Austro-Hungarian territory.

Poland was host to great public debates between the Frankists and the Orthodox Jews. The moderators in these debates were Polish bishops, who became Frank's protectors. But none of this was well-intentioned – the Frankists were used against Jewish society in an attempt to ascribe ritual murders to Judaism. Not long after Frank's baptism he was accused of heresy and spent thirteen years imprisoned in the monastery at Jasna Góra, the famous Polish sanctuary housing the holy icon of the Virgin Mary. In examining this painting, Frank discovered in it Shekhinah, the manifestation of God in female form. When freed by the Russian army he set off for Brno in Czech Moravia. He aroused interest at the Austrian imperial court, and also had his own court, with an army and servants, drawing Jews and a variety of curious onlookers from all over Europe. He died in Offenbach, near Frankfurt, in a mansion, to which apparently cartloads of gold were delivered by his followers.

Tokarczuk takes us on a journey through different places, times, and religions. It is a journey readers will not want to return from, and one which will remain etched in their memory for a long time after. It restores Frank to Poland, the Jews, Europe, and to all those who might otherwise assume on reading this novel that the whole thing is made up. But this is Polish history told otherwise, with a place in it for Jews, women, and the metaphysical longings and desires that don't fit in traditional works. Along with a wealth of wonderful stories generated by the author's unusual imagination.

Kinga Dunin



OLGA TOKARCZUK
KSIĘGI JAKUBOWE
WYDAWNICTWO LITERACKIE,
KRAKÓW 2014
165×240, 912 PAGES
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THE BOOKS OF JACOB

ABOVE

the entrance hangs a handmade – and rather poorly done – sign:

>SchorrGeneral Store<

And then Hebrew letters.There is a metal plaque on the door, with some symbols next to it, and Father Chmielowski recalls that according to Athanasius Kircher, the Jews write the words "Adam, Chava, Chuts, Lilith" on the walls when a wife is due to give birth, to ward off witches: "Adam and Eve may enter here, but you, Lilith, evil sorceress, go away." This must be that, he thinks. And a child must have been born here recently, too.

He takes a big step over the high threshold and is wholly submerged in the warm fragrance of spices. It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, for the only light inside is let in by a single little window, cluttered with flower pots.

Behind the counter stands an adolescent with a barely sprouted mustache and full lips that tremble slightly at the sight of the priest, and then attempt to arrange themselves into some word or other. The priest can tell the boy is taken aback.

"What is your name, son?" the priest asks, to show how sure of himself he feels in this dark, low-ceilinged little shop, and to encourage the boy to talk, but he does not respond. So the priest repeats, officially, "*Quod tibi nomen?*" But this Latin, intended to be an aid to communication, now sounds too formal, as though the priest had come to conduct an exorcism, like Christ in the Gospel of Saint Luke, who poses that very question to the possessed man. But the boy's eyes bulge, and still all he manages is a "buh, buh" sound, and then he bolts back behind the shelves, bumping as he goes into a braid of garlic bulbs hanging on a nail.

The priest has acted foolishly. He ought not to have expected Latin to be spoken here. He now takes a harsh look at himself. The black horsehair buttons of his cassock protrude from beneath his coat. That must be what has scared the boy off, thinks the priest: the cassock. He smiles to himself as he recollects Jeremiah, who also almost lost his head, stammering, "Lord God, for I cannot speak!": "*Aaa, Domine Deus ecce nescioloqui!*"

So from now on the priest will call the boy Jeremiah, in his head. He doesn't know what to do, since Jeremiah has gone off. So he looks around the store, buttoning his coat up. It was Father Pikulski who talked him into coming here. Now it doesn't really seem like it wassuch a good idea.

No one comes in from outside, for which the priest mentally thanks the Lord. It would hardly be your ordinary scene: a Catholic priest, the dean of Rohatyn, standing in a Jew's shop, waiting to be helped like some housewife. Father Pikulski had advised him to go and see Rabbi Dubs inLwów, saying how he used to go there himself, how he had learned a lot from him. And the priest had gone, but old Dubs seemed to have had enough by then of Catholic priests pestering him with questions about books. The rabbi was unpleasantly surprised by the priest's request, and what Father Chmielowski wanted most he didn't even have, or at least he pretended not to have it. He made a polite face and shook his head, tut-tutting. When the priest asked who might be able to help him, Dubs just waved his hands and looked back like someone was standing behind him, giving the priest to understand that he didn't know that, either, and even if he did, he wouldn't tell. Father Pikulski explained to the deanlater that this was a question of heresies, and that while the Jewsgenerally liked to pretend they didn't suffer from the problem of heresies, it did seem that for this particular one they made an exception, hating it head on.

Until finally Father Pikulski suggested he go and visit Schorr. The big house with the shop on the market square. But as he said this, he looked at Chmielowskiwryly, almost mockingly, unless Chmielowski was imagining it, of course. Perhaps he should have arranged to get those Jewish books through Pikulski, despite notliking him very much. Had he done so, he wouldn't be standing here sweating and embarrassed. But Father Chmielowskihad a rebellious streak, so he'd come. And there was something else that wasn't very smart, a little word play that had intruded upon the matter – who would have believed that such things had any impact on the world? – for the priest had been working diligently on one particular passage in Kircher,on the great ox Schorrobor. So perhaps the similarity between the two names was what had brought him here, Schorr and Schorrobor. Bewildering are the determinations of the Lord.

Yet where are these famous books, where is this figure inspiring such fear and respect? The shop looks likea regular stall – yet its owner is supposedly descended from the renowned rabbi and sage, the venerable ZalmanNaftalkiSchorr. But here are garlic, herbs, pots full of spices, canisters and jars containing all stripe of seasoning, crushed, ground, or in its original form, like these vanilla pods or nutmeg seeds or cloves. On the shelves there are bolts of cloth arranged atop hay – these look like silk and satin, very bright and attractive, and the priest wonders if he might not need something, but now his attention is drawn to the clumsylabel on a sizeable darkgreen canister: "Herbate." He knows what he will ask for now when someone finally comes out – some of this herb, which lifts his spirits, which for the dean means that he can continue working without getting tired. And it aids in his digestion. He would also buy a few cloves to use in his evening mulled wine. The last few nights were so cold that his freezing feet had not allowed him to focus on his writing. He casts around for some sort of chair.

Then everything happens all at once. From behind the shelves there appears a sturdily built man with a beard wearing a long woolen garment and Turkish shoes with pointed toes. A thin darkblue coat is draped over his shoulders. He squints as though he's just emerged from deep inside a well. That Jeremiah peeks out from behind him, along with two other faces that resemble Jeremiah's, rosy and curious.And meanwhile, at the door opening onto the square, there is now a scrawny, winded boy, or perhaps a young man, for his facial hair is abundant, a light-colored goatee. He leans against the doorframe and pants,you can tell he must have run here as fast as he could. He openly surveys the priest and smiles a big, impish smile, revealing healthy, widely spaced teeth. The priest can't quite tell if this is a derisive smile or not. He prefers the distinguished figure in the coat, and it is to him he says, with extraordinary politeness:

"Kindly forgive this intrusion, noble sir..."

The man in the coat looks at him tensely, but after a while the expression on his face slowly changes, revealing something like a smile. The dean realizes all of a sudden that the other man can't understand him, so he tries again, this time in Latin, pleased and certain he has now found the right tack.

The man in the coat slowly shifts his gaze to the breathless boy in the doorway, who steps right into the room then, pulling at his dark-colored jacket.

"I'll translate," he declares in an unexpectedly deep voice with a little bit of aRuthenian lilt to it, and pointing a large finger at the dean, he remarks excitedly upon the fact that Father Chmielowski is a real live priest. [...]

"I'd like to have a word with the venerable Elisha Schorr, if I may be permitted," he says. "In private."

The Jews are taken aback. They exchange a few words. Jeremiah vanishes and only after the longest and most intolerable silence does he reemerge. But evidently the priest is to be permitted, because now they lead him back behind the shelves. He is followed by whispers, the soft patter of children's feet, and stifled giggling – as though behind these thin walls there were crowds of other people peeking in through the cracks in the wood, trying to catch a glimpse of Rohatyn'sdean wandering behind the scenes in the house of a Jew. And it turns out, furthermore, that the little store on the square is no more than a single enclave of a much vaster structure, a kind of beehive: rooms, hallways, stairs. The whole home turns out to be larger, built up around an inner courtyard, which the priest just glimpses out of the corner of his eye through a window when they pause a moment.

"I am Hryćko," pipes up the young man with the slender beard. And the priest realizes that even if he wished to retreat now, he could not possibly find his way back out of this beehive-house. The thought makes him perspire, and just then a door creaks open, and in the doorway there stands a trim man in his prime, his face bright, smooth, impenetrable, with a gray beard, a garment that goes down to his knees, and on his feet woolen socks and black slippers.

"That's the Rabbi Elisha Schorr," whispers Hryćko excitedly.

The room is small and low-ceilinged, sparsely furnished. In its center there is a broad table with a splayed book atop it, and next to it in several piles some others – the priest's eyes prowl their spines voraciously, trying to make out their titles. The priest doesn't know much about the Jews in general, and he only knows these Rohatyn Jews by sight.

Suddenly the priest is struck by how nice it is that both of them are of only moderate height. With tall men he always feels a little ill at ease. As they stand there facing one another, for a moment it seems to the priest that the rabbi is also pleased that they have this in common. Then he sits down, smiles, and gestures for the priest to do the same.

Translated by Jennifer Croft

PAWEŁ HUELLE

SING GARDENS


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Paweł Huelle *(born 1957) is a novelist, playwright and university lecturer. His work has won many prestigious awards, and has been widely translated. His first novel,* Who Was David Weiser?*, has been translated into more than fifteen languages.* Sing Gardens *is his fifth novel.*

Sing Gardens is a novel set on several time-scales and with multiple layers of meaning. In a nutshell, it weaves together three stories. The central theme involves the fortunes of a married couple called Hoffmann – he is a would-be composer, and she is a singer in the chorus. We see their lives mainly in the 1930s, when they are citizens of the Free City of Danzig, living in a house on what was then Pelonkerweg (now Polanki Street). The secondary theme is about the narrator's family, and here the central figure is his father, a wise and resourceful man; in 1945 he came to Gdańsk (as Danzig had just been renamed) to enrol at the Polytechnic and start a new life. He too became a resident of the house on Polanki Street. Finally we have an additional story based on an old manuscript, written by a seventeenth-century French libertine, who was the first person to live in the house where almost two hundred years later the Hoffmanns would reside.

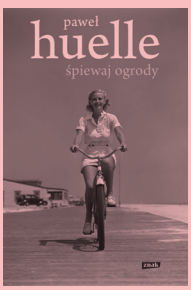
In fact there are two rediscovered manuscripts in the book, because at the start of the novel Ernest Teodor Hoffman, the composer, goes to see a mysterious antiquarian bookseller who gives him the score of an unknown opera by Richard Wagner. The rediscovered work appears to be a musical adaptation of the mediaeval legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, made familiar by the Brothers Grimm. And here another literary and musical game begins, as the story of the notorious rat-catcher makes metaphorical reference to the fact that the world is about to go up in flames, because Hitler has just appeared on the scene. To further complicate matters, Ernest Teodor not only works in an excited frenzy to finish off Wagner's score, but also composes a cycle of songs inspired by the poems of Rilke; some of the episodes in the novel are a development or a re-working of poetical images to be found in the *Sonnets to Orpheus*. The novel's title also comes from Rilke.

The permanent presence of the author-as-narrator is a vital element. He comments on events happening within the plot, and also on his own activities as a writer. We don't know his name, but there is plenty to imply that here we have an autobiographical figure. He protects the polyphonic narrative from coming apart, and above all he keeps us informed about his aims. Firstly, from an adult perspective he wants

to reconstruct his carefree, happy childhood, and in the process to express his love for his father and his fondness for his Kashubian friends. Here a special role is played by a character called Mr Bieszke who, by talking about ancient Kashubian beliefs, has introduced the boy to the marvels of folklore. Secondly, the author-narrator wishes to pay tribute to Greta Hoffmann, Ernest Teodor's wife, a German woman who managed to remain in Gdańsk after 1945, and who exposed the boy to the richness of German culture, especially its music. Thirdly and finally, through his characters, Huelle's narrator considers issues of a moral nature.

This novel was published at a time when nostalgia for great works of fiction was unexpectedly on the rise. Tending towards aestheticism, full of reflections on High Culture, and steeped in the literary and musical traditions of the early twentieth century, it met that demand very well.

Dariusz Nowacki



PAWEŁ HUELLE
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SING GARDENS

The story-telling

had just entered my favourite realm of fiction, which before it became legend, had had its origin in real-life events – events of a kind nobody could possibly have imagined. My father had just abandoned his canoe on the Mottlau River, tossing the paddle behind him and with it his entire past life, then shouldered a small backpack and set off down the first gutted street to look for a new life among the still smoking ruins of houses and churches, hopping across the unburied corpses of people and horses, and skirting around the remains of military hardware that cluttered most of the crossings and junctions; here and there he was stopped by a Soviet patrol, but none of them was capable of clarifying where the mythical PUR – the repatriation office – was located, where he needed to go in order to obtain ration cards for something to eat and a voucher with an officially assigned address on it. It was only at the Polytechnic – which he reached after an hour's forced march, and where they confirmed that he could sign up for the first term in shipbuilding, but only in a couple of weeks once enrolment began – so only there, at his future college, did they show him the way to the magical PUR, to which he trekked, once again on foot, by returning to the burned-down city centrealong Grosse Allee, its tram lines ploughed up by shells and littered with torched tram cars devoid of window panes or headlights, like a procession of hideous blind cripples. [...]

I knew that any second now the critical moment was coming in my favourite story, the tale of the beginning: fifteen minutes before closing time at the repatriation office, where a swarm of desperate people was milling about in a narrow corridor, my father glanced at Mr Bieszk, Mr Bieszk returned his glance, and at once they were firm friends. Bieszk knew how to get to the top official without queuing, but he couldn't write the necessary application in Polish; nobody would have touched it in Kashubian, and German – in which he had once scrawled three whole pages to his mother from the front – had ceased to be an official language, excluded from use in Gdańsk at its own bidding for years to come. So my father, leaning on his knee, licked a copy pencil and quickly wrote the necessary note for Mr Bieszk: a request for the return of two horses which the day before, along with a cart, had been requisitioned from him by a Soviet patrol for the requirements of the Red Army. And so they entered the presence of the top official at the PUR, with an application for the return of an agricultural vehicle and an oral request for my father to be assigned a place to sleep.

They failed to get anything sorted.

"There's no accommodation left. Everything's been taken. They're still pouring in. From Wilno, from Lida, from ruined Warsaw, Lwów, and Tarnopol. You'll have to wait," the official told my father. "Once we expel the Germans in six months' time, something's sure to become vacant. We have to relocate everyone in Langfuhr and Zoppot. But for now there aren't any trains. The Bochehave blown up all the tracks and bridges. We should put them in the concentration camps. Let them try spending the season in Stutthof. In a nice cloud of smoke from the crematorium. In those stinking barracks. Well, unless" – at this point the official took off his horn-rimmed spectacles and wiped the lenses – "you decide to move in with a German family. It does have an advantage – once they leave, you can try to get more space, occupy two rooms, for instance."

My father wasn't interested in that sort of solution, so his name was added to the waiting list. Whereas Bieszk was advised to forget it – anything taken by the Red Army was gone for good, lost without trace. Seeing their pitiful expressions, the official added: "You can try going to Soviet command. They sometimes like doing things for the poor. As long as they don't arrest you on sight."

Yes, that was scene two of my favourite story: Mr Bieszk and my father standing outside the city's Soviet command HQ, wondering whether to go inside or not. With two applications – Mr Bieszk's, stamped by the Polish official, and another, requesting accommodation for my father, which the official had kindly written out for him. Finally they went in, by a side door. First they were thoroughly frisked, then they waited in a box room, under the watchful gaze of a sentry with slanting eyes. And then they entered the mirrored ballroom of a palatial residence, the only one in the city centre that hadn't burned down. At the head of a table arranged in a semicircle sat the commandant, Lieutenant General SemyonMikulsky. On either side of him sat the officers: colonels, mayors, captains and lieutenants, with their batmen standing behind their chairs. The table was groaning with food and drink, from all the nearby hotels which, though gutted, had deepcellars, well-stocked until recently – the Vanselow, the DeutschesHaus, the Hansa, the Metropol and the Continental. The commandant was extremely courteous. Before Mr Bieszk and my father had said a word, he told them to sit down beside him and join him in a toast to *pobyedu* – victory – and to Stalin. So they drank. Only then did they notice the barber in a white tunic. A German prisoner, he was standing behind the commandant, holding a crystal carafe of flower water; every time the Russian swallowed a shot of alcohol, using a rubber bulb and hose fixed to the carafe, the barber squirted a tincture of *eau de Cologne* into the commandant's open mouth – three short puffs, then he respectfully took one step back from the commandant's chair, within the sights of two of the adjutants' pistols. He performed his duty with the greatest dignity and skill, as if in all his years as a barber in Ohra he had solely been preparing for this mission. So Mr Bieszk and my father went on eating and drinking in the company of the Soviet officers, it was well past midnight, toasts had been drunk to every victory from Kursk to Stalingrad, the adjutants had been sent off in all directions, and were finally back with good news, in the shape of two official documents for the city commandant to sign: the first authorized Mr Bieszk, a farmer from the village of Ramkau, to report within the next three days with this very certificate, and he'd be issued two healthy draft horses from the transport division, and as far as possible his cart as well, which an officious patrol had mistakenly retained. Providing for the war-ravaged Polish nation was a vital task, stated the commandant, and then added a flowery signature, before also signing a paper allocating one room on Pelonkerweg to my father, an important shipyard worker – so it said. The commandant stamped them himself, they drank a farewell toast to friendship, and to the workers of the world as well, the German barber once again refreshed the commandant's open mouth, and Mr Bieszk and my father were on their way out of the mirrored ballroom, supporting each other by the arm, because the floor was covered in broken glass, when one of the lieutenants, having slept through the signing and stamping, suddenly awoke, and catching sight of two civilians walking away from the table, seized his adjutant's pistol and started firing in their direction. Luckily he missed his target, because another, slightly more conscious lieutenant had pushed the barrel upwards, causing the bullets to chip stucco off the ceiling, razor-slash the crystal chandeliers, shatter the upper sections of the mirrors, rip the picture frames and canvases, and go whistling through the windows to the tune of a mighty *Huuurrraaa*, which came flying from the officers' throats, throwing Mr Bieszk and my father to the floor. Luckily they were already in the doorway, close enough to hear the commandant's mighty roar: "*Durak, niestrielaj!!*" – "Don't shoot, you fool!" Then seconds later they found themselves outside, between the gutted churches of St Elizabeth and St Joseph, in a street leading to the station.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

MAGDALENA TULLI

NOISE


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Magdalena Tulli *(born 1955) is a novelist and translator. Her books have won many awards and have all been shortlisted for Poland's top book award, the NIKE Literary Prize. Her latest novel,* Italian Pumps, *won the prestigious Gdynia Literary Prize and the Gryfia Prize. Her books have been translated into more than a dozen languages.*

How can we live in a world that turns out to be a trap? How can we talk about something we have barred ourselves access to for many years? *Noise* by Magdalena Tulli is an intimate story woven into the grand history of a century marked ignominiously by war's "times of contempt"; it is a tale about how to survive catastrophe – how to clear the minefield of one's memory, come out of hiding, become master of one's own fate.

The heroine is a little girl, the daughter of a woman whose emotions remained trapped behind the barb wire of Auschwitz. Her few loved ones are destroyed by the war, while in the world of those who have survived, in brutalized communist Poland, goodness, empathy, and understanding are in short supply. With her inability to connect with people and her lack of self-confidence, the girl becomes easy prey for her peers. Even years afterward, as a teenager, then as the mother of two sons, she remains the hostage of the little girl. Many years later, a cousin in America she is not fond of sends her a letter that triggers a stream of recollections and at the same time also of events.

To begin with, it might seem that this new novel is simply a continuation of the brilliant, prize-winning *Italian Stilettoes* (2011). Nothing could be further from the truth – in *Noise* Tulli effects a spectacular escape from the world of her nightmares presented in the earlier book. The little girl in this novel, left to her own devices, befriends an imaginary fox, terror of chicken coops, object of hatred of every society – like her, a perpetual outsider. No surprise here – in many folk mythologies the fox personifies the trickster, someone whose status is ambiguous, who is both despised and admired, scapegoat and also guide to new worlds. Much later, the teachings of the fox allow the heroine to escape from her oppression; to find understanding for her mother, who was an inadvertent victim; to forgive not only her persecutors but also those who once were directly responsible for the afflictions of wartime, and now populate the imaginarium of European memory, or these days rather post-memory. All of them, victims and op-

pressors, in the twentieth century constitute what she calls a great "family."

Tulli's novel says more about postwar Poland and Europe than many volumes written by historians and sociologists. In *Noise* the living converse with the dead; in the underworld, at a tribunal presided over by the Fox, there is a great judgment upon what has happened. Tulli's prose is about the need for forgiveness, about how to live in such a way that the sense of shame by which victims are stigmatized does not turn, paradoxically, into a sense of guilt. About how to find a way out of the chalk circle in which those wounded by ricochets struggle with their undeserved suffering. The terse, ironic tone of the writing has an admixture of the phantasmagoric. But this phantasmagoria works in the interests of a great metaphor that has the dimensions of a realistic argument. *Noise* is a psychotherapy session, an overcoming of trauma with the aid of literature. Literature can become a lifeline across many an abyss in life. Magdalena Tulli's new novel is the clearest proof of this.

Marek Zaleski

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NOISE

"Children

are a lottery," she said to me one time, a few decades later, during a walk in the park, by the swings. In her time she'd played that lottery; she hadn't won anything, and had been disappointed."There's no way to tell in advance who'll be born. You're at the mercy of chance."

She may even have liked walking in the park, though no doubt she would have preferred to take a bus ride somewhere far away, on her own. By that time, however, if she'd done that she would almost certainly have found herself in trouble and been brought home in a police car many hours later. So the park was the only option.

"A child is like a box," I remarked. "It's hard to take something out that you didn't put in." She wouldn't agree with me. It could happen, some people had managed it, once a long time ago she'd had hopes of succeeding as well. She had counted on it. She expected there to be something in the box. After all, the whole point of a lottery is that it gives you a chance. But for a lottery you need good luck.

There was a cold wind, and I fastened her coat under her chin.

"I never had the opportunity to put anything into the box, if you want to know, ma'am," she said. "There was no connection with her, nothing I tried worked. It was nothing but problems from the very start."

I looked into the well of decades past. The problems lay at the bottom, tiny as pebbles.

"And now? Is it any better now?" I asked, taken aback by the thought that my mother was right after all: it was a lottery and you could win something. Were my sons not better children than I had been in my time?

And my mother – had she not in fact taken out of the box more than she had put in?

She eyed me doubtfully; perhaps for a moment she had the impression that I looked a little like the daughter she barely remembered anymore.

"No, it's not better. She hasn't visited me in years," she replied. "She never even calls. "Whenever I ask her for anything she always refuses."

The pills did no good. They couldn't. True, the illness would have progressed more slowly if my mother had begun taking them right away, instead of reassuring us that the worst had been ruled out. Because it was precisely then that she got some crazy notion about the medication that I found later in the dresser, the seal still intact on the container. We'd been told that the pills would delay the worsening of her condition. But the illness was incurable. Incurable? *His* mother couldn't understand what that meant. That nothing could be done? That we had to be content with

flashes of lucidity while they still occurred? "How can you all accept something like that, how can you sit with arms folded, waiting for it to get worse!" she would say angrily. As for her, she wouldn't agree to it, she refused to just sit and wait. "Nothing is inevitable!" she would shout, forgetting that raising her voice was not her style. At the district clinic – she would remind us, before she began to suspect we were driven by ill will – my mother had had a good doctor who didn't prescribe medications of that kind. In his mother's view we should have gone back to that doctor from the clinic. The entire time, she asked only one thing of me – that Istop constantly interfering. That I let my mother go wherever she wanted on the bus on her own, that I give her a break with the park. She ought to have complete freedom, it was her right, didn't she live in a free country? Independence would supposedly be the thing to keep her in good shape. Independence alone.

It was the only remedy.

"She hasn't been in good shape for a long time now," I would point out, trying to bring his mother back to reality.

"Exactly," she would retort. "Because you took away her independence." And turning to my mother, she'd say:

"Promise me you'll stop going to that new doctor."

My mother would have done anything in her power to reassure his mother and make her feel better. It was just that the promises she made vanished from her mind. But she didn't forget that it had been about the pills. At supper she hid her pill in her pocket, wrapped in a handkerchief.

At moments like those, when his mother voiced her opinions about diagnoses and treatments, the same anger would grow in both of us, spilling out between us like a stormy sea. I couldn't forgive her for incessantly demanding the impossible of me. In her view it was my bounden duty to hold back the unavoidable, while inside me, along with the little girl and her fox there was also someone I didn't know all that well, who was capable of anything, who would have had the strength to fight back, to actively oppose her will. I studied her out of the corner of my eye: we were somewhat alike, if not in appearance, then in character at least. It was hardly surprising, we had common ancestors after all. Yet the person within me who could have opposed her was bound and gagged. Their fury raged in me, but it was helpless and mute. Anger did not translate into action, it was incapable of pushing his mother aside. Whoever the person was, they couldn't be relied on. I had to seek help elsewhere. I had to meet with him, with her son. He agreed, he found time for me, but right away he gave me to understand that he found my request indelicate.

It was his mother, he reminded me. He would support her whether or not he thought she was right. His gaze shone with the reflected light of his firmness. He could be firm when he was defending the rules she had introduced, when he refused to cast doubt on the opinions she would express in her imperious tone. That was the only time he was capable of being firm.

"What did you expect of me?" he asked.

Her madness inspired my respect as well as my resistance. When I found myself in the car with her, the houses and trees fled past as if we were about to cross the finish line in a world rally championship. She radiated confidence that she was indestructible and that others too could not be harmed while they were with her. After the loss of the court case she came to her sensesa little, and she agreed to slow down.

The day after the evening when my mother had died, I completed the formalities, then I went to see his mother. We sat in the kitchen drinking tea. We were both dazed by the sudden absence, which seemed overwhelming. That morning I'd been looking for the receipt for my father's cemetery plot. I'd found it in an envelope that also contained a letter addressed to the two of us. I laid it on the table. His mother started reading it and frowned. The letter stated that my mother wanted no gravesite or funeral, that she wished to be cremated.

"In nineteen seventy-eight she couldn't have written that," his mother said as she studied the shaky characters.

It was true, it couldn't possibly have been in seventy-eight. In those days she was healthy, her elegant handwriting hadn't even begun to falter. The remote date in the top right corner spoke tellingly about my mother's personal calendar, in which time did not flow forward in a straight line but strayed, looped back, and retreated thirty years.

I was tormented by the idea that my mother may have died feeling thirsty. It monopolized my thoughts. I told his mother about it. She placed a hand on my arm.

"I'm sure you did the best you could," she said.

Shortly before her illness and death, his mother went to a historical exhibit about a concentration camp, the last and worst of those she had been in. I was surprised – previously she'd given such things a wide berth. As for him, he refused to go with her.

That was why she called me. She thought that if she went alone, she wouldn't come back. She was afraid, I was certain of it.

Her last and worst camp was located near the city of Linz; she arrived there from another, better camp outside Dresden, in a column of prisoners who had made a formidable journey of several weeks in freight cars, interspersed with long marches. By some miracle, no one died. The commandant of the evacuated camp had a bag of sugar and a spoon. He gave the bag to an NCO, and the NCO, amid the infernal chaos of roads and train stations, every day put a spoonful of sugar in each prisoner's mouth . At their destination, the camp authorities took charge of the convoy. At that point the responsibility of the conscientious previous commandant came to an end. In that last, worst camp, my mother's sister survived twelve days; for the last few she was unconscious. On the thirteenth day, the Americans arrived. If they'd come later, she probably wouldn't have lasted till the fourteenth day.

In the subdued lighting she stared at the emblem over the gateway, the interior of the barracks. And the rows of photographs. Afterwards she sat on a chair by the cloakroom as if she were waiting for something else.

It was the thirteenth day, but I could see with my own eyes that the Americans had not arrived. I had to take her away. That was exactly why I was there.

Translated by Bill Johnston

JANUSZ GŁOWACKI

I COMED, OR HOW I WROTE A SCREENPLAY ABOUT LECH WAŁĘSA FOR ANDRZEJ WAJDA

© Krzysztof Dubiel / The Polish Book Institute

Janusz Głowacki *(born 1938) is an acclaimed novelist, dramatist and screenwriter. His stage plays (including* Antigone in New York *and* The Fourth Sister*) have brought him international fame. He has won numerous prestigious awards and his books have been translated into more than a dozen languages.*

The first sentence of the author's introduction to this book goes like this: "I wanted to explain that I'm writing this book mainly out of stinginess, because about twenty scenes that I wrote and several of my ideas never went into the film". Of course he's talking about *Wałęsa: Man of Hope*, Andrzej Wajda's feature film about the colourful hero of the events that led to the fall of communism in Poland, who rose from being an electrician to a trade union leader, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, and first president of the independent Polish Third Republic.

The great Polish director commissioned a screenplay from Głowacki, a master of irony and tragicomedy, as well as a witness to the events at the Gdańsk shipyard. That is highly relevant: the premise here was that Wajda's filmmaking genius would be combined with Głowacki's intelligent satire, which would not only – so it was assumed – result in an original picture, but should also protect the whole venture from slipping into hagiographic pathos. In accepting Wajda's invitation, Głowacki was convinced that the filmmaker whom he admired was aiming for an artistic movie. It took a while for him to realise that the result was going to be what could be termed an "educational" film, aimed, above all, at foreigners and young people. So here Głowacki describes how he gradually lost control of his own version of the story, and generally how it came about that *Wałęsa* is, and at the same time isn't, his work, on the literary level of course. This unusual, paradoxical situation pervades the book and serves as its organising principle. And perhaps this is its most interesting aspect – it shows how it's possible to claim and at the same time deny authorship, and how to understand the legendary phrase "for, and even against".

Thus, the book tells the story of a misunderstanding. At its foundation there seems to have been a different view of the title hero. Głowacki is fascinated by Lech Wałęsa as a "royal" figure, like one of Shakespeare's kings, and thinks about him in a literary way, as well as via literature. This is how he expresses – and on the very first pages – the key issue, which is the question of whether in the 1970s Wałęsa was a secret

police collaborator with the code name Bolek. Głowacki tells us that for his version of the story – for any version at all! – it would be better if the hero had a flaw, or were battling with some inner dilemma. And there absolutely had to be a mystery. In an early version of the screenplay this mystery was built around the fact that Wałęsa was inexplicably three hours late for the August strike, which he was meant to be leading; the framework of the story was going to be his journey – from leaving home to reaching the shipyard. Meanwhile Wajda's view is different; in Głowacki's words the aim of the film "is to bear witness to history and to provide a civic lesson", "so that the young people should understand at least something". And so the artistic rationale caves in under pressure from the needs of political persuasion and, as it were, educational aims.

In the three years that he worked on the screenplay, Głowacki encountered all sorts of unpleasantness, such as accusations of "treachery". There was always someone asking him if he'd have the courage to work on Bolek's story, while at the same time suggesting that the screenwriter was sure to run out of character. Głowacki subdues these disagreeable things in his characteristic way, with venomous irony and provocative cynicism. He notes: "Indeed I am not a moralist, but I do have certain hard and fast principles, and no one will ever, not even by threatening my loved ones, force me to falsify history for nothing". Incidentally, he gives a highly engaging account of the relevant bit of Polish history, citing dozens of amusing anecdotes about artistic and public life in communist Poland.

Dariusz Nowacki

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So as we

I COMED, OR HOW I WROTE A SCREENPLAY ABOUT LECH WAŁĘSA FOR ANDRZEJ WAJDA

all know, Wałęsa was late for the strike in defence of Anna Walentynowicz that he was supposed to be leading. And he was about three hours late or more. Bogdan Borusewicz, who had got everything ready with the help of Joanna and Andrzej Gwiazda, Krzysztof Wyszkowski and many others (because the list of heroes of August never stops growing), said that if the strike had ended in disaster, he'd have made Lech account for that delay, but after such a victory...

And Wałęsa himself is enigmatic about why he was late – saying there was something he had to do at home, that his youngest daughter had only just been born, but hadn't yet been registered... Of course, there was also the version close to the heart of the tragically deceased Anna Walentynowicz, heroic activist for the Free Trade Unions, one-time close friend of Lech, and later quite the opposite – which says that Wałęsa was an agent, and had dashed off to the regional Party committee and the secret police for instructions, and then as he was late the police had driven him there in that motor boat.

And the Journey, as journeys are, is a tension-inducing thing, both metaphorical and metaphysical. There's no doubt about that, either in books or in films, including Kerouac, and the beatniks, and Steinbeck in *Mice and Men*, and *Scarecrow*, and *Vanishing Point*. And we're all on some sort of journey, running, crawling, riding, flying all the way to the end. It's true that Maxim Gorky wrote that if someone's made for crawling, he isn't going to fly. But that's a bit off the mark, because a caterpillar does however metamorphose into a butterfly, and something like that happened at the Shipyard. Of course, plenty of Poles think that either way, we've been flying for centuries, and flying high too. Gombrowicz once wrote a parody of a children's counting rhyme that went: "One two three four, every Jew's a lousy cur! Every Pole's a golden bird. Out you go". But while the golden birds are golden birds, the rest of us drag along, carrying our childhood on our backs, like in Kantor's *Dead Class*, or the recent past, and fears about the future push their way in too. And so I thought of trying to write a "Wałęsa's Journey" of this kind in flashbacks.

It's also curious in that we know almost or absolutely nothing about those hours of delay, in other words with a touch of audacity and risk one could make something up, invent some fabrication of one's own, which could appear more interesting and more genuine than the so-called official truth. There's a British film called *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, in which the main character never stops running, though now and then he remembers something, and by the end we know why he's running and why

he'll never get there. So I thought perhaps those few hours of delay were easily enough for an entire film, which needs to be at most two hours long.

And this sort of journey would be full of fear, and doubt, and tension, about whether he'll manage to get there, because the secret police won't allow what'll happen if he gets there, or what'll happen if he doesn't. And finally the important thing is that he did get there. Meaning to say the Polish word for "I came", Lech Wałęsa once said "przyszłem", instead of the correct form, "przyszedłem", which is like saying "I comed" – and when someone corrected him, apparently he replied: "It doesn't matter if I comed or came, what matters is that I gotted there... or got there."

Chesterton put it beautifully when he wrote that in England people travelling by train to Victoria Station dream about various miracles on the journey, but actually the greatest one of all is that the train really does get to Victoria Station.

And then Lech Wałęsa, being trailed by secret policemen, gets to the wall, jumps over it and hangs in mid-air... permanently. It's a freeze-frame.

For a while I had an idea in my head of starting the film with the casting session for the role of Wałęsa. Each of the hopeful actors would have to jump over the shipyard wall in padded work clothes. In the process, one of them would do a Fosbury flop, explaining that that's how you jump nowadays. But I never mentioned it to Andrzej. And I was cunningly trying to avoid scenes at the Shipyard.

At first Andrzej liked the idea of the Journey, and had the very fine notion of the picture (the freeze-frame) being taken by a chance tourist, whom the secret police catch, and then they destroy the negative. Then it would cut to the Congress, in other words, "We, the People" – Kazimierz Dziewanowski's brilliantly inventive start to the speech Lech Wałęsa made in Washington. Because in the United States those words from the Declaration of Independence are sacred, every child knows them. And who could have a greater right to say "We, the People" to the congressmen than this folk leader, this peasant-turned-king, this Catholic Moses, who had led the Poles across the sea of communism to liberty? Well, not alone, not on his own of course. But a great victory, just like a great defeat, has to have a single face. Partly to facilitate things. So in Congress there was an understandable standing ovation, apparently greater than those afforded to foreigners such as Winston Churchill and General de Gaulle. Not bad at all.

So after this speech I thought of showing a trio of secret policemen – whom we'd have met in the course of the action, because they were dealing with Wałęsa – so I'd show this trio watching the broadcast on TV and nostalgically, but threateningly saying:

"Look at that jackass putting on airs".

"He sure got away with it".

"Relax. We'll get him yet".

The last remark in particular might give some viewers a thing or two to think about.

SO FOR EXAMPLE

It's the fourteenth of August 1980, five in the morning, before the heat sets in. It's quite grey even, but the sun is starting to disperse the mist. Lech W. is standing in an open window on the first floor, gazing at the dismally sad landscape. Three grey, four-storey blocks joined at the sides, a rubbish heap, a carpet-beating frame, a rickety Warszawa car, a Trabant and a garish green Syrenka. And Lech W. is smoking, tapping ash into a flowerpot, smoking and tapping...

But before the Journey begins, I thought we could try to give some indication of the fact that the film's being made in 2012. And that we know more than can be fitted into a 90-minute, at most two-hour telling. So a sort of taster, a summary of what has already happened and what's about to happen. Like a sort of prologue, after which we go back to Lech W. in the window.

Either way, I gave it a try. I had a few ideas – the first was a bit long.

PROLOGUE NR 1

August 1980, a crowded street, women, men, hard, worn-out faces, like something out of Breughel, among them Lech W. – aged thirty, under surveillance by undercover agents mixing in the crowd, who are a step away, but just observing and exchanging short communiques via microphones hidden under their jacket lapels. These are not entirely realistic shots. They should be made to look strange from a distance, dream-like. Maybe like in Andrei Tarkovsky's films – there's a black sun shining, or something like that. Or like the opening scenes of Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*. And then suddenly a crowded bed, with six children sleeping in it, a big strong man comes up to the bed, wakes up a six-year-old boy, Leszek, and says: "It's your name-day, so you've got a present, you're going to herd the cows", and then he hands him a stick and the stick changes into a billiard cue; it's the start of the game, so the balls are pressed together in a tight block or a triangular frame, looking impossible to move, something like the Warsaw Pact; opposite there's the white ball, seen from a perspective that makes it look very small; there might be intermittent voices speaking a mixture of Russian, German and Czech; then we see Lech W. – as an adult – holding the billiard cue, he leans over the table and shoots, the white ball flies like a missile, the triangle scatters about the entire table; soon after, we see an enthusiastic crowd of shipyard workers carrying Lech W. aloft, he shakes his fists in a characteristic gesture; then we see Lech W. with Danuta by his side, taking the presidential oath, which only lasts a few seconds, and we can't hear the words, or maybe just: "I swear to the Polish nation"; this frame passes into another crowd, at night, carrying an effigy of Lech Wałęsa on a gallows, there are signs and shouts saying: "Bolek to Moscow!" and the effigy goes up in flames.

And then we go back to the first image, in the street, as Lech W. pushes his way through the crowd more and more nervously, he starts to run, the undercover agents set off in pursuit, now we can see that he's running up to the shipyard wall, he jumps over it and is suspended in mid-air. Freeze-frame.

And then the main title: "*Wałęsa*, a film by Andrzej Wajda", and we go back to the window in August. Because I'd already convinced Andrzej that it wasn't *We, the Polish Nation*, but *Man of Hope* that hadn't yet appeared.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

IGNACY KARPOWICZ

SONIA

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Ignacy Karpowicz *(born 1976) is a novelist and columnist, one of the most interesting contemporary writers of the younger generation. He has written seven books, and his work has been shortlisted three times for the NIKE Literary Prize (Poland's top book award). In 2010 he won the Paszport prize, awarded by the news weekly* Polityka.

This is a masterfully constructed and contrary story. It starts like a fairy tale, not only because it opens with the phrase 'Once upon a time…', immediately followed by some animals that talk (a cat and a dog). The main reason is that it is about the incredible encounter of two fairy-tale characters: an old woman who owns nothing but a cow, and a handsome prince who owns a luxury Mercedes. As bad luck would have it, this fabulous vehicle has broken down in the middle of nowhere, 'at the end of the world' – in other words, on the Polish-Belarusian border, near a village called Słuczanka, where, and this may be highly relevant, Ignacy Karpowicz spent his childhood. The old woman invites the prince into her poor cottage, offers him milk straight from the cow and tells him her life story. Her name is Sonia, and the man listening is called Igor, a trendy theatre director from Warsaw who has been corrupted by success. Igor rapidly realizes that Sonia's fortunes are ideal material for a moving play about great love and even greater suffering, set within the real events of the Nazi occupation. At this moment the reader loses his or her bearings; s/he doesn't know if s/he is dealing with a shocking story taken straight from real life, or a stage script that has been edited over and over again, cranked up for theatrical effect, essentially a kitsch 'product' manufactured by the crafty Igor, who knows how to win the hearts of the Warsaw public.

Sonia hasn't had an easy life – she grew up with no mother, was beaten and raped by her father, knocked about by her brothers, and chained to the housework like an animal. Nothing but blood, sweat and tears – until June 1941, when the German army came marching through the village on its journey east. Just one glance, and she instantly fell in love with Joachim, a handsome SS officer. And her feelings were reciprocated. For two weeks the lovers meet each night, and love gives Sonia wings, tearing her away from life in the strict sense of the word (all this time she never eats or sleeps, as if she's in a supernatural sphere). The price of this transgression will be high, but for the time being the sentence is postponed: now pregnant, Sonia marries a young man from the neighbourhood, and gives birth to a son, who is the result of her liai-

son with Joachim. But about a year later she loses everyone in her immediate circle: the cruel father, the insensitive brothers, her devoted husband, the child, and finally her SS-man lover. From then on she lives alone, branded by the village community as a traitor, a whore and a witch, with domestic animals as her only friends.

Karpowicz has had the excellent idea of constantly confronting his main characters with things that are foreign to them and experiences that cannot be expressed. Sonia speaks in Belarusian, and Igor translates her story, not just into Polish, but into the language of the *engage* theatre (for Warsaw snobs) as well. In her conversations with Joachim, Sonia is – as we read it – totally sincere, because she doesn't know German, and he doesn't know Belarusian, which means that neither of them has to tell lies. Karpowicz 'plays out' this situation brilliantly: while she's listening to the SS-man's account of exterminating the local Jews, Sonia is fantasizing about their future happiness, imagining an idyll at the side of her beloved, while he, as he cuddles up to her breasts and strokes her hair, can give vent to the nightmares tormenting him. He tells her about the bestial acts in which he has been participating, while she both listens and doesn't listen. It's an excellent idea. It's also quite original to include a semi-autobiographical figure in the story. It turns out that Igor is actually called Ignacy, and like Sonia, he comes from the Podlasie area, but has turned his back on his roots and on the Orthodox faith; having killed off his own rural identity, he has been entirely possessed by the idea of an international career. But typically for Karpowicz, all this is placed in inverted commas, tinged with irony and self-irony, streaked with a fear of being too straightforward, artless or sentimental. As a result we trust *Sonia*, but at the same time we approach it with suspicion – and that's exactly what Ignacy Karpowicz wants us to do.

Dariusz Nowacki

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SONIA

IN THE

village people are easily found, whether they want to be or not, unless perhaps they go missing, then they sink like a stone, nobody saw it, or heard it, or sensed it, just a splash. A village is a small world, where everything is within range of sight and hearing, everyone lives so close to each other that nothing can escape anybody's notice, and then comes the punishment, which is rarely fair. I slipped out of the cottage as usual. My father and brother were sleeping solid, heavy sleep, as if they'd taken opium. Past the gate, Wasyl rubbed against my legs. He let out a high-pitched, pitiful meow. I leaned down to stroke him. Just then I thought I heard a noise, something like twigs snapping, someone holding their breath and a droplet of sweat welling between their breasts. But it was nothing, so I went on my way, to the bridge. I spotted Joachim immediately: as the daylight dazzled and blinded me more and more, a clear outline reflected in my eyes, a dark set of arcs. Two steel flashes gleamed on his uniform. To me it was as if those flashes, so close together, momentarily set alight in a blinding flare, were us.

I kissed him and took his hand. For the first time he was tense all over, hard and absent.Angular, all corners, with no circles or curves. We walked down to the riverbank, and he started to tell me a story. At first I thought it was just that, a story.

Not long from now the war will end. The front will be gone, and I won't be needed here. I'm going to take you to my mother's place – she has a beautiful villa outside the German town of Haradok. My father died two years ago, he was a teacher. My mother will be pleased. She's sure to fall in love with you. My mother predicts the future and the past; she works in both directions. Then we'll get married. Sometimes you'll cook *polnische* food. Everyone will love it. We'll have five children: Waschil, Griken, Jan, Phrosch and Schiessen. We'll go to holiday resorts and to the seaside (the German word for the sea is *Juden*). We'll have a cat called Raus. He'll bask in the sunshine and catch *Schweine* (that's German for mice). The neighbour, *Herr* Abramowitsch, a smart old man in a striped suit, will bequeath us his fortune. And another neighbour, Mr Buchwald, who's also from *Polen*, will marry off his daughter to our first-born.

At first I really did think it was just a story. The panic that fluttered up inside me when I first saw Joachim had clouded my mind so badly that I didn't know things I actually did know. After all, people were talking. The panic was bouncing around inside me like a dried bean against the sides of a can. But with each sentence I was gradually realising that I understood all too much in my total lack of

understanding; the names of our unborn children sounded suspiciously familiar, only distorted in this rasping dialect. Then I started to hear a different story, peeping out from behind the first; I've heard that other story hundreds of times since, not from Joachim's lips, but from those who had survived or witnessed it, or had tried to beat off the nightmare like fire, waving their hands about and just fuelling the flames. Or maybe the story wasn't about them at all, but about my brothers and my husband? Or maybe it wasn't in the past at all, but in the future?

More than a hundred people had assembled near the wooden synagogue in Gródko, the one that stood close to the Orthodox church. It was a very hot day. The Jews were packed in a throng. They were afraid. There were some petty tradesmen, innkeepers and cobblers. Their families were there. Those who still had some possessions: not much perhaps, but still, they still had something. They had accounts recorded in notebooks, nightmares about Yahweh, because their God is even nastier than ours, they had bar mitzvahs on their minds and daughters to marry off. They were spreading their hands helplessly, shoving their hands in their pockets, and clenching their hands into fists.

There were old people, smelling of dust and kerosene from lamps; there were also young ones, smelling of sunshine and fresh sweat. Behind a cordon of soldiers, the townspeople of Gródko were gathering. Some were sympathetic, some didn't understand, some were counting on settling a debt. Some were amused by the sudden humiliation of their better-off neighbours, some were shocked.

First the soldiers pulled a young boy out of the compact group. "*Sehr gut*," said Joachim, just as he had once addressed me. The soldier drew his Mauser from its holster, put the barrel to the boy's temple, and pulled the trigger. And that was all, a fountain of drops of blood and shattered bones.

Sonia shook her head, as if not understanding much of what she was summoning up, but hadn't seen with her own eyes. Perhaps she had actually invented it all? Perhaps in the clash between an oral account and history it's the truth that always gets battered? Igor was lying down, tensed. He was already taking individual suffering badly, his own for instance, which was close to tonsillitis; mass suffering, planned from above and inflicted from below, paralysed him. He was unable to listen, but just sympathised automatically, in an unconditional reflex of numb solidarity.

In the bright spark that jumped across to him from the cat, Jozik the Shepherd of Mice, he realised that he must memorise even more than Sonia was telling him, that he must harness his memory to the theatrical or novel-writing treadmill, in order to save himself, to tell a true story at last, to get up and fight for something. Though in fact he had sensed this from the very start, as soon as he crossed the threshold.

The boy fell. The elder kept saying that the God of the fallen will rise, and strike down the unfallen. God did not raise the boy, or press the drops of blood or the slivers of bone back into him. Could it be that the Jewish Yahweh wasn't quite so benevolent or powerful? After all, here in Haradok He was as if in exile, far from the sands and deserts, a wanderer. Or maybe we didn't deserve it? For the boy it no longer mattered; it was others who felt the unhappiness, it was others who needed a miracle to reassure them. Clearly we didn't deserve a Lazarus. Though this Lazarus, in rational terms, was not ours, and the Jew was like all the first Christians.

Apparently nobody said a word. The Germans dragged the Jews forward one at a time, put guns to their temples and pulled the triggers. As each one fell, several people broke free of the circle of neighbours watching the incident. These people went to houses, but not to their own. Seeing the death of a shopkeeper, they headed for his abandoned shop. Seeing the death of a cobbler, they went to his ownerless workshop.

Finally there was no one left but old Mr Buchwald, the elder, and a Catholic priest. At this point the German soldiers suddenly walked away, leaving almost a hundred corpses, three men living and swarms of flies. Flies will instantly scent out corpses and shit. The Germans simply walked away, as if this incident was of no great consequence, as if the working day were over and the time had come for a rest. Almost a hundred dead, three living, and the flies.

That was, or may have been, Joachim's story. I no longer thought *Juden* was the German word for the sea, that *Raus* was a cat, and *Schweine* meant mice. I felt extreme sympathy for Joachim. I loved him, and he was still alive; in spite of all I sympathised with him, I couldn't do otherwise. My poor, fair Joachim, and his beautiful body, suddenly surrounded by the twisted figures of corpses.

Joachim stopped talking. To this day I still don't know what he was trying to tell me that night: about the future and a massacre in the town, or maybe the future after the massacre, or the future without a future, I don't know. He squeezed my hand tightly. It hurt, but that pain was nothing compared with the pain he was feeling. He had started to cry. He was talking and crying, without any connection. Then he laid his head on my breast and was silent. I breathed with a sack of stones on my chest.

We didn't sit there for long. He didn't even kiss me goodbye, just touched my arm, and then my breast; my nipple hardened.

I watched as he walked away: he had long since dissolved in the darkness, yet I stood without moving, wondering whether my Joachim was a nocturnal illusion, or a real man of flesh and blood.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

PATRYCJA PUSTKOWIAK

NIGHT ANIMALS

Patrycja Pustkowiak *(born 1981) is a sociologist by education and a journalist by profession. Her work has been published in journals including* Chimera, Lampa, Polityka *and* Wprost. *Her first novel,* Night Animals, *was shortlisted for Poland's top book award, the NIKE Literary Prize 2014.*

Patrycja Pustkowiak's first novel has been praised for its original style – sophisticated, bold and mature. *Night Animals* has been described as "a women's version of *Under the Volcano*", except that there is far more humour here than in Malcolm Lowry's novel. Yes, this is a novel about a female alcoholic, about drinking, smoking and taking drugs, and thus about all the greatest dangers to which a young woman is exposed as she roams the sinister, phantasmagorical scenery of Warsaw on her own. "Her only companion, and also the only witness of her decline, is this city, Warsaw. Its huge bulk is interwoven with rows of columns, residential buildings and prefab tower blocks lit up by a thousand flashing neon signs." It is often Pustkowiak's turn of phrase that engages and astonishes the reader most – her writing is dense, lyrical, pervaded with gallows humour and a tragic, fascinating perspicacity. In the drunkard's cityscapes she finds unexpected touches of poetry, which is scattered about the text right up to the grotesque scene of the heroine's downfall. Tamara Mortus – as she is named – is the opposite of the sentimental alcoholic. She doesn't try to make excuses for going off the rails, she isn't yearning for love or waiting to be rescued. She simply forces the reader to keep her company.

Pustkowiak's sense of drama gives the heroine a lot of help with this. Pustkowiak starts her story with a dead body, and immediately points out the culprit. "They say you can tell a criminal by his ears. But as for Tamara, freshly turned into a murderer just a few hours ago, things are completely different. There's nothing to give her away at all – Tamara is like a lighthouse that has broken down." Is that true, wonders the reader, or is it a delusion born of delirium? Now that the author has given us rather an unpleasant beginning, we must find out if we're heading for an equally disastrous ending.

Despite one possible interpretation, *Night Animals* is not just an irreverent or nihilistic book. Of course, Pustkowiak does occasionally parody the way in which big-city thirty-year-olds like to tell stories about being hung over, throwing up and getting totally plastered as if they were their own original works of art. She finds her own all-inclusive form for

conditions of this kind, which stands up to the mindless prattle of those who seek the illusion of immortality in drugs.

Young, pretty, educated, unemployed and degenerate, with a credit card from her business past that by some miracle still works, Tamara is not the typical victim of addiction, a wretched junkie, sick and dreadful. Instead she is a reflection of the fear felt by those who are still working and buying things, and she is also like an inspired prophetess, who reveals the single, inconvenient truth to her own generation: there won't be a job for you either, there will be no point in looking for one, there will be no illusions about the magic key to happiness being found in access to goods and services. But, says the oracle, the temptress, maybe you can live without all that. If only a posthumous life, because it could be that a person can always be resurrected by cocaine and alcohol. Or maybe not? This uncertainty – a feature of the crime novel as well as the religious tract – is the axis around which the novel turns.

Kazimiera Szczuka
Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

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NIGHT ANIMALS

they say

you can tell a criminal by his ears. But as for Tamara, freshly turned into a murderer just a few hours ago, things are completely different. There's nothing to give her away at all – Tamara is like a lighthouse that has broken down. She sits on the edge of her bed like a figure in a wax museum, immobile, spaced out and numb. Her hands, which barely an hour ago were holding the murder weapon, now hang inertly on either side of her body and haven't even the strength to reach for a cigarette. There's nothing to reach for, anyway – there aren't any more cigarettes in her house. There are only cigarette butts, burned out like her. There's no heat, only ash.

And truly, if you were to look around this room, which is beginning to show its bleak shapes in the pale light of dawn creeping through the window, you wouldn't notice anything of any use. Everything has been used up, worn out and processed – like her. This thing sitting here on the bed, this empty wrapper of a former human being, isn't even half as attractive as the thoroughly consumed contents.

Our murderer sits on a bed covered in a navy blue bedspread and watches the dawn creeping over the floor, all the way up to her feet, still filthy from yesterday.The feet of Christ after walking the Way of the Cross.Dawn struggles through the ineffective curtains arduously, it's coming closer and closer, on tiptoes, like a monster. The first shapes emerge from the darkness –the chest of drawers, the bedside table, the television set. It's impossible to hide the fact that these are the last shapes too – when it comes to interior decor, absolute minimalism reigns here, while the devil, everyone's favourite bit-part character, is in the details, as usual.Rampaging around the whole room like a medieval plague, they form the real decor, the so-called quintessence. From them it's possible to piece together our Tamara's way of life with a precision comparable to that used by scientists to reconstruct what dinosaurs ate and the intensity of their sex lives on the evidence of their bones.

What do we have here? Dirty clothes. Dead flies and mosquitos. Two empty wine bottles, one empty vodka bottle. A couple of empty cigarette packs. An ashtray full of butts. A pipe for smoking hash and marijuana. Two empty painkiller packages.The remains of some psychoactive substances on the sticky, grimy floor. Her room resembles the hotel rooms of rock stars – the ones they're found dead in.

There are lots of things here, but there are lots missing too. For example,pangs of conscience.If Tamara were tested for their presence, the result would be negative. And there are no exterior signs of anxiety either – there's not even the slightest scowl on her face. It's quite another matter that

after the two-day partying marathon that she's taken part in, her face could successfully adorn a shocking anti-narcotics campaign poster. Its dominant shades are grey and violet, her pupils are dilated, her hair'stousled and enriched by something from a graveyard landscape: dried leaves, mud, dust, cobwebs, blood, slight traces of everything that can be found in this world, especially in its nocturnal territories. Her makeup belongs to the category of yesterday's memories, and you could tell more about her from the bruises, scratches and shadows on her body than from her fingerprints. The way this girl looks, she's definitely asked for sick leave today – if it were Halloween, she could dress up as herself and win a contest for the scariest costume.

And yet her body is not just the image of destruction and loss. Even in this zero zone, something stands out – the fragments of another body. There's a tiny bit of the dead girl hiding beneath Tamara's fingernails, in the form of shreds of skin, and it would be possible to find a few of her hairs somewhere on Tamara's clothing. While inside her, there's someone's sperm. Right now it's flowing out of her; a pathetic souvenir of someone, some unwelcome guest, is trickling down her thighs in a little stream. It seems that Tamara, meaning her body, has once again been the tracks for that famous tram known as male desire. Whereas the object of her desire was hard drugs – in the course of toxicological tests you would be certain to find the presence of cocaine, mephedrone, ketamine and alcohol in her system, and maybe something else too. Tamara would pose a huge challenge for chemistry students. Nevertheless, she doesn't feel stimulated. Quite the contrary – she's strangely cool and collected. Admittedly she can't fall asleep, but this has more to do with the kind of concentration experienced by monks who are practised in the art of meditation than with any of the substances she has consumed. Tamara feels as if a gigantic ocean liner has moored inside her body. The turbulent waters have grown calm. Apart from emptiness, there's nothing now but icy composure.

She suspects that the corpse hasn't been discovered yet. It's too early. And so this death has both happened and not happened –at this moment the dead girl is something like Schrödinger's cat. Although dead, she is still alive in the minds of those who are unaware of her death. Until somebody finds the corpse, until the police are notified, until the news spreads like dandelion seeds, this transitional state between life and death will continue.

Maybe in a few hours someone will enter the room where the crime happened, be alarmed by the thirty-year-old woman lying motionless in it, take the pillow off of her face and then cover their mouth with their hand. Dead people always prompt panic in the living.

II

In life, dying is irrevocable and only happens once. "He who has died no longer lives," as they say. Corpses appear here solely as coffin portraits or as dummies at a crime scene, only the living are truly alive, proof of which are their continued vital functions: from consuming and excreting food to making love, building houses and taking care of their savings accounts. Meanwhile, a novel knows no such limitations. Here you can make more allowances for yourself vis à vis such disagreeable facts as death and its consequences.

For example, now it's Friday, two days earlier. Twilight is falling, grey mists are rising over Warsaw, this tormented city – this prisoner-of-war, whose identity, as a result of numerous nasty events, was torn to pieces and then hastily stuck back together from whatever came to hand. This city launches ruthless flares over its residents'heads, and stretches its arms out after them like swiftly growing beanstalks. There's a girl walking around the city somewhere who, two days from now, will be transformed into a corpse, while the girl who will kill her – Tamara Mortus – is lying on the floor of her flat, feeling like the wreck of a small plane, positioned somewhere in the great blue yonder and shot down into an abyss by unknown perpetrators. She curls her long hair around a trembling finger, lights a cigarette, allows the smoke to rise upwards, almost as far as the ceiling, and feels as if she's a corpse laid on a pyre.

Tamara is still alive – despite her last name and her efforts to live up to it. For a long time now she's been collaborating with death, she's been negotiating with it on the matter of an impending merger. Her bargaining card is alcohol and stimulants of other kinds; it's for them that she's inclined to hand her shares over to death, but it still hasn't shown up, it continues to mock her efforts.

Today once again, since noon, Tamara has been having a conversation with death. By six p.m.,which the clocks are now striking, she has managed to drink three large glasses of lemon vodka and a bottle of wine, while seasoning it all with a bit of hash. The image before her eyes is like something from an impressionist painting – a flock of flickering multi-coloured spots. People say that an alcoholic doesn't drink with just anybody. So Tamara thinks that by drinking alone, she'll never become an alcoholic.

She's made sure of having a solid stock of psychoactive substances at home, since she wants to stay there (at home, as well as in a blessed state of intoxication) as long as possible, preferably for the entire weekend, which has just begun, and during which – as has been the case for the past few years – she has no social plans. Her only companion, and also the only witness of her decline, is this city, Warsaw. Its huge bulk is interwoven with rows of columns, residential buildings and prefab tower blocks lit up by a thousand flashing neon signs. The Tamara–Warsaw relationship is like the one between supporters of rival sports clubs. But despite this, the girl isn't capable of leaving this place, there's no way to explain it, it's some kind of addiction, like Stockholm Syndrome. Some time ago, Tamara would have left the house and opened herself up to the city's wide range of offers, to all of its lumps, growths, chutes and trapdoors, to all of those places where the city strays from the norm and shows its sickly tumour markers. It's precisely these places she would like to reach, to lick all the salt of the night off them, just as animals lick it off the streets in winter. But she hasn't done it for a long time. Instead of going out into the city, she prefers to go out for some wine.

Translated by Scotia Gilroy

ŁUKASZ ORBITOWSKI

LAND OF HAPPINESS

© Bartłomiej Kwasek

Lukasz Orbitowski *(born 1977) is an author and journalist, best known as one of Poland's top writers of horror. His published work includes a large number of stories and twelve novels, several of which have been shortlisted for literary prizes (including the Janusz A. Zajdel Award and the Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award). Apart from writing fiction, he regularly contributes to the daily Gazeta Wyborcza and to Nowa Fantastyka magazine. He lives in Copenhagen.*

Land of Happiness by Łukasz Orbitowski, an author famous for "genre" literature (horror and fantasy, in this case) has made a step toward literature "as such," though without entirely departing from his work to date.

His latest book (justly nominated for this year's Polityka Passport Award), is a special kind of generation novel (the author was born in 1977, and thus it concerns the generation now in its thirties), which combines realistic and insightful psychological and social analysis with an original touch of the fantastic.

Literally speaking, this is a story of a few friends from the Lower Silesian town of Rykusmyk; at the threshold of adulthood they have a remarkable and tragic adventure together which casts a pall over their later lives, though they live scattered apart; finally, they are compelled to return to their point of departure and to grapple once more with, so to speak, the unknown, whose nature the author gradually reveals, with a great feeling for suspense.

Orbitowski's book is outstanding because, apart from its technical skill, his work eludes one-dimensional interpretations. The point is not only that he shies from easy oppositions of good and evil, or that he prefers shades of gray to black-and-white. The crucial point might just be that both levels of narrative can be taken separately – one being another tale of the "lost generation," the other a creation (or ultimately: a reconstruction) of a certain myth, which drives the "supernatural" component of the book and the related vicissitudes – and it would turn out that both "parts" remain convincing. It could be that Orbitowski weaves them together to find a way to universalize and complicate an ordinary narrative about lives which are ruptured in various ways, about dreams which come true at too great a cost, and about the risks involved in every human decision. Or perhaps it is merely for the telling. When, near the end of the book, one of the protagonists says: "Things were good and we had it good. Now things are

bad and we have it bad. Why bother making a big story out of it," it is clear this is not an accidental sort of question. And that Orbitowski, in mythologizing his narrative and breaking down realism, sees this as a defense against silence, emptiness, and the void, which sucks in not only his literary protagonists, but also (to put it in somewhat grand terms) each one of us individually.

One shudders to think how good his next book might be.

Marcin Sendecki
Translated by Soren Gauger

ŁUKASZ ORBITOWSKI
SZCZĘŚLIWA ZIEMIA
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KRAKÓW 2013
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LAND OF HAPPINESS

MY MOTHER

was called Fury. We were living together when I started hearing. For a long time I kept asking her to take me to a doctor. She plunged her own finger into my ear canals. She said everything was fine and I had to be brave. A little man is still a man. Then she twisted my ear.

"A doctor's going to poke a needle in there," I heard. "Just see how that hurts."

2.

They say truth and opportunities can only be found in big cities, but for a very long time I couldn't imagine life anywhere other than in Rykusmyku. Mum would have liked to leave. The long rows of massive tenements in Legnica terrified me. I used to watch out for the giants who lived in them when I was there. Wrocław, which we rarely visited, consisted of a zoo, an occasional amusement park, ice-cream in the Main Square and a cinema showing old Disney cartoons. After watching a film, I'd get on a bus, happy to be going home. That's also the reason I didn't go on holidays. Rykusmyku provided everything I needed. Except silence.

There was a market in Castle Square, behind the bus stop, where every day something different was sold. Monday flowers, Tuesday animals, Wednesday clothes, Thursday cars, and so on until Sunday, when junk was hawked: colourful cigarette lighters from Germany, Russian electronic games about a wolf or submarine, shirts for workmen and T-shirts with a Sandra on them. The thing I most wanted in the world was a little calculator, round, red-and-white like a football. Mum even gave me some money which I immediately squandered on the vending machines. As for the little calculator, I just drew it for myself, in my maths notebook.

The Marketplace was very dilapidated in those day and the municipal council building, constructed after the war, looked worst of all. It looked as though it were falling apart with grief over the fate of the tenements, as battered as the scoundrels partying from morning till night at the Ratuszowa. High above the balding roofs protruded the Strzegomska Tower next to which stood our house. Staromiejska Street ran alongside our house with a hairdresser's and toy shop; it ended abruptly at a disused cinema and the culture centre, where my mum worked. If I walked straight ahead, I soon reached the fields beyond Rykusmyku, and then in front of me I would see a canopy of trees hiding a submerged quarry. To the right, a gravel road, bordered on both sides by poplars, led to the Metal Works; the opposite turn led to a park which had a pond full of ducks with petrol-coloured heads. There was also a small playground. The

swings were made of logs and tyres held together by chains. A little further on ran a stream and, on its bank, on a slightly raised area, stood the shell of a cement bunker, inviting us to play war games. On the other side of the river, new housing estates were springing up. The people who lived there seemed alien, like the barbarians who screwed bones of their enemies deep into their tattooed faces.

Apparently a woman had once been raped there, a stranger. She'd appeared here for some unknown reason, rented some private lodgings and wandered around the castle for days on end. Somebody assaulted her just beyond the river. She reported it to the police but immediately withdrew her statement, explaining that she'd consented. Then she left. I was very small when I heard the story by chance and the grown-ups refused to explain what I didn't understand.

On the other side of town was another park, larger and more neglected. There stood the Church of Peace, the pride of entire Rykusmyku, built after the Thirty-Year War without a single nail being used, a token of peace between Catholics and Protestants. One only had to go to the house next door, ask the pastor, and he would open the church and switch on a tape telling the history of the place, God and Rykusmyku. The ruined building of what, before the war, used to be a café served us as a playground. Beyond the fence and streets, there was nothing but railways and the Inprodus Co-operative for the Disabled. I imagined people without arms and legs being created there, then dispatched by train to places where they were needed.

We also had a castle. The castle is what was most important. Located on a corroded elevation between the Marketplace and Castle Square, the sand-coloured castle made one think of Piast, the Polish king, who had undoubtedly lived there at some point. It was built by Radosław the Czech. Kings and Marysieńka came here to visit. In the nineteenth century, the castle was turned into a prison and, a hundred years later, into a forced labour camp, which some local people still remember. Maybe that's why all the entrances have been walled up and the windows of the lower floors boarded up. Yet I still saw lights in the tower.

Shouting, laughter and other sounds which, because of my age, I couldn't understand, used to emerge from the bowels of the castle at night.

3.

Mother was very beautiful. One day I studied myself in front of the mirror, naked. I had a concave stomach with a shallow belly-button and small eyes separated by a long nose. I went to mum and asked her why she hadn't told me she wasn't my mum. A beautiful woman doesn't give birth to ugly offspring, I wanted to add, but got a slap across the face.

4.

Our first game involved the castle. It's difficult to say how old we were, maybe eight, maybe even younger. Grown-ups said it was dangerous there and we could fall off; I heard about a labyrinth with no way out and a boy who had found a way in a long time ago and was still wandering around even though he was already grown up. But we knew better.

It must have been Horn who found a way in – a tree with a branch just below a window on the first floor. The five of us used to go there at least once a month. More often in the summer. I'd slip down the branch straight into the chill and onto rubble and glass. The sloping branch drowned out all light. We'd lean against the stone sill. We all joked, trying to give ourselves courage. The quest was always the same and ended in the same way. Who was going to go the furthest into the darkness? Was anyone going to reach the end of the castle corridor? Bluet it claimed there was an underground lake below but couldn't explain how he knew.

I'd hold my cigarette-lighter through a rag or glove so as not to burn my hand. I walked close to the wall. I'd glance behind me at the bright, receding rectangle and four bewildered shadows. I'd count, and they'd also count. Number, step, number, step. I'd place my foot carefully, parting the rubble with the tip of my shoe. It got darker and darker, and increasingly colder. I thought about the boy living in the vaults, of the lake full of monsters and bandits who had their hide-out there. The window grew smaller and smaller, I'd walk slower and slower until finally I'd turn back and run as fast as I could, yelling loudly. There was no shame in that, we all did it. If I'd taken more steps than anyone had done before, DJ Harm would scratch my record on the wall. If not, he didn't.

Afterwards we'd go to the now deserted marketplace and sit on the long tables. We'd tell ourselves all the things we were going to do, how great it was going to be when we finally made it to the bottom, and repeated various stories about the castle. Something was living there, something was waiting. The castle was our first game. It also turned out to be the last.

5.

We had a flat on Środkowa Street, near the little market square. The entrance was through the courtyard at the back, where a carpet-rack stretched out its rusty arms and faded curtains hung in windows below which lay piles of rubble.

I had my own corner, although my true source of happiness was mum's room. She forbid me to enter it, but, ever since I was little, I'd been left alone for the whole day and could do whatever I liked. I leapt on the enormous bed and browsed through the magazine *Przyjaciółka*. I believed that my mother's dressing-table grew all on its own, like a church built over centuries. I wouldn't have made such a comparison at the time. I had a different one which involved the mirror, dusty apart from the centre panel in which my mother looked at herself. I imagined that I was looking at the world through a window covered in black snow.

Treasures lay next to it: a bowl full of hair-clips, insect-shaped broaches and bits of tortoise shell threaded on some string. Using make-up, I covered my face with warpaint. I bedecked myself with necklaces.I pretended that tubes of lipstick stuck together with tape were bullet belts. I aimed the hairdryer at the mirror and said: "Die."

Translated by Danusia Stok

BRYGIDA HELBIG

LITTLE HEAVEN


© Beata Lipowicz

Brygida Helbig *(born 1963) is a writer, literary scholar and university lecturer. She has published collections of poetry, short stories and works of literary scholarship.* Little Heaven, *her latest novel, was shortlisted for Poland's top book award, the NIKE Literary Prize 2014.*

Little Heaven is a story woven from family histories. There is a continuing distinct overtone of nostalgia, but the narrator's voice is well controlled throughout the book. It brims with warmth and the confident dexterity with which the author constructs her narrative – a mosaic which comes together into a simple, intelligible whole. The beginnings of this family history are noble, almost biblical. Father "came into the world in the mythical region of Galicia, where his progenitors settled in 1783, having made their way from the banks of the Rhine in a dozen or so wagons in search of a livelihood. German colonists. [...] There were twelve settlers, like the twelve apostles of an unknown God."

The crux of the book lies in the unusual genealogy of the family described in it. The principal characters, the author's parents and grandparents – there is no doubt *Little Heaven* describes Brygida Helbig's own family history – are Polish Germans. Or else German Poles, as "daddy", the central character, "no longer knew whether he was a German or a Pole."

Waldek, once known as Willi, (or else "who was really called Willi") is one of those fathers who brushes difficult issues aside with a shrug. The twists and turns of fate are hidden behind the immediate realities of life, behind the levelling, deceptive ordinariness of family life in a socialist housing block, in a "tiny flat fit for dwarves on the third floor of a building made of prefabricated concrete slabs". It is the narrator's voice which shows this situation to be problematic and pushes for further revelations, gently but persistently aiming to reconstruct a cohesive thread. She does this in defiance of the views expressed by her father, who says: "It wasn't a mask at all. At that point I already felt I was Polish. I didn't think about my roots. I was born in Poland,wasn't I? Stop talking nonsense."

Yet this type of duality, which relates to one of the most taboo elements in Polish history, has its effect on the family's fortunes, in terms of both subconscious, emotional development and in terms of real, external events. The father's career in the socialist Polish army is abruptly terminated once his superiors discover his family background. In Poland concealing "questionable origins" is more commonly associated with

Jews. Which is worse for the author's generation, the second post-war generation: to be the symbolic heirs of the victims or the oppressors? German descent, which was outwardly transparent and already completely absorbed into the landscape of the regained territories, into their post-war stabilisation, citizenship and language, only stops being a burden in the second generation when it finds a literary form, which restores order and the right to exist. The narrator's voice displays a genuinely soothing quality, a capable dexterity inherited from her German grandmothers and the will and ability to manage her own small patch. This voice is both meticulous – no detail of the family stories is lost, and economical – the text is cohesive, cut to just the right size.

The secondary thread in *Little Heaven* is the story of Basia, Willi/Waldek's wife. Just as in a primer there is "mummy and daddy". That is the title of one of the chapters. The female family line, on the mother's side, shows artistic talents, cultivated for domestic purposes. Basia plays the mandolin. She enjoys hiding away in the attic at home with her daughters and granddaughter and playing just for them. Alongside the title, which refers to an old outdoor children's game, this homely scene of creativity within the family is in some sense a key theme of the book. Its message relates to the caring concern and relief brought by telling a story despite the paternal demand to "stop talking nonsense".

Kazimiera Szczuka

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Eins, zwei, drei

LITTLE HEAVEN

'Daddy, where did you get such a strange surname?' Marzena would ask from time to time, and little Ewa would badger him as well. 'My goodness! Where indeed!' Waldek would say with a shrug. 'As you'd expect, from ancestors of mine – goodness only knows when it was – some ancestors were Austrians. How should I know? Stop bothering me and get back to your homework! Oh yes, and whose turn is it to take the rubbish out today?'

Nobody's, of course. It definitely wasn't Ewa's turn.

But Marzena continued to probe, asking: 'Daddy, how did you learn German?'

'Goodness! How? I learnt it at school.'

'You know, I shall never,' Marzena would say, stamping her foot, 'ever learn the Kraut lingo. I hate it.'

Once when Willi carelessly mentioned emigrating to West Germany, his 13-year old shrieked so loudly that the flimsy walls of the miniscule kitchen in their socialist two-room flat shook. 'You'll go without me then! You'll blooming well go without me! Go on your own! I'm not going anywhere! I hate their jabber! I'm staying here. This is my native country. I won't go to the Nazis EVER.'

*

'Ah.'

Waldek, who was really called Willi, and was meant to have become a farmer or a joiner like generations of his forefathers, to have wed a woman called Hilda or Susanna with a surname like Bischoff, Börstler or Koch, and named his son Heinrich or Ludwig, had instead got stuck in socialist Poland, married Basia and called his daughters Marzena and Ewa. He had moved quickly up the ladder. He hadn't been far off becoming a major, perhaps even a general. If only it hadn't reached the point where his plans were thwarted by his past, if only the things he had pushed aside and forgotten hadn't one day floated up to the surface and forced him, with a heavy heart, to hand in his Polish People's Army captain's uniform with four stars on the epaulettes.Until then carefully kept in the hallway, in the depths of a built-in cupboard, coated with white gloss paint, into which from time to time his little daughter would secretly steal, making the door creak.

*

Waldek found it rather painful whenever his daughter shrieked that she'd never go to the Nazis.Because once upon a time Waldek had been something like a German – assuming that there is such a thing as a German.

Now he no longer knew whether he was a German or a Pole. Essentially he could be considered a Pole, were it not for the fact that during football matches between

Poland and Germany his heart beat faster for the German side, quite involuntarily, it seemed, and Waldek would start to fidget restlessly in front of the TV. His favourite armchair suffered severe wear and tear as a result of these extended night-time sessions.

During his lifetime he had been very much a German and very much a Pole. He had changed his skin, first to survive, to avoid blows and humiliation, and later in order to get somewhere in life, to achieve recognition and position, to provide for his family.

'I didn't change my skin at all,' Waldek would deny it, shrugging his shoulders. 'I was always the same.'

He was a child when the war caught up with him, when German aeroplanes circled above the hamlet of S., lighting it up as if it were Judgement Day. He wasn't even nine then. He had closely watched the adults and everything happening around him. He was sharp.

Little Marzena stored the stars from her daddy's epaulettes in a matchbox. From time to time she would check they were all there, she would count them once again. One, two, three, four. She didn't know how to count in German – only to three. She picked that up playing outdoors. '*Eins, zwei, drei* . Krauts out! Bye-bye!'

She also knew how to say, '*Guten Morgen*. Kick your gob in!'

THE HAMLET OF S.

The hamlet of S. near Bandrów!

When a certain Otto Mack, a member of the German National Council, visited this place from Lwów one fine summer afternoon in the 1930s, apparently he cried out in delight:'This is the most beautiful place in the world: it has water, woods and sunshine – a real spa!'

This point on the globe, a small village, in the Bieszczady region, of which nothing remains today, is where daddy comes from. The vestiges of S. lie in no-man's-land,right by the border strip between Poland and Ukraine. Waist-high grass grows there now,or rather weed-choked, wild grass. Willi was born in a land of hobbits, which stretched picturesquely along a fast-flowing brook,the Stebnik, which briskly raced to the river Strwiąż and then eastwards with it, all the way to the Dniester. It was a strange village, in an unusual place, very far from the balcony on which now – with a vigour aimed at warding off her fear of wasting time on foolishness, on superfluous luxuries, on unpaid activities – Marzena was tapping the letters on her overworked keyboard,watching them throng onto the screen and pile up like pillars of fire, columns of figures, a balance sheet of life.

Not far from virgin forest, in a quiet valley with a view of slopes lavishly covered with deciduous and coniferous trees, the streams Nanówka and Królówka burbled exuberantly as they flowed into the Stebnik. That's how Marzena pictured it. Like a religious image. That was the way Germans wrote about it in their memoirs. 'A proper idyll,' they said, although they were a bit abashed by the word. A multitude of trout, crayfish and unusual fish frolicked there; sometimes there was even gudgeon.

A colourful chessboard of fields with cereal crops of all kinds. Next door was the Ukrainian village of Stebnik, from where came the heart-tugging songs of Ukrainians working the land. And the Ukrainian women in their wide colourful skirts, under which the whole world might be hidden.

Mother of God, those were the times!

Nowadays it is mainly cows and horses that take the waters there. Though actually, who knows what is there now. Marzena certainly didn't. Up to this point her focus in life had been on totally different things.

*

A LITTLE PRINCESS

Marzena is defrosting the refrigerator. She chips off the ice. It clatters into a bowl and gradually melts.

What does she remember best of the time after she returned from the town of L., from the home of her grandmother, who had just died, and with whom she spent the first few years of her life?

There was a family story about her mother Basia catching her red-handed in the kitchen. She had been two-and-a-half at the time: she had got herself inside a kitchen cupboard and had guiltily set about drinking rich white cream straight from the bottle. When her mother suddenly opened the door, Marzena went on the attack and cried out fiercely, though hesitantly: 'Who did that? Who licked the cream?' while a broad trickle of cream dribbled down her chin.

Her mother burst out laughing.

The nursery school. She knows she refused to go to there; she had firmly dug her little feet in just outside the building and refused to budge. It was going to be yet another change in her life. To this day she detests change: she stubbornly resists any changes, even when they might lead to freedom. In the end she went. Resistance was pointless.

She got used to it. She remembers that the red string bags in which vegetables were sold at the greengrocers were in fashion then, and every child at the nursery wanted to have one, as fine and as stretchy as possible. What for? She didn't really know.

Playing outdoors. She would spend hours playing outside with other children: they would hang around the blocks of flats and collect bits of glass from around the kiosks and rubbish bins where the bottles tossed aside by drunkards mostly lay. They would collect the coloured sweet wrappers that littered the area, and small leaves. They would use them to make what was called a little heaven. Nobody knew where this game came from. They would dig a little hollow, make lovely patterns in it using the gold and silver foil and flowers and grasses they had found, cover them with a piece of glass and bury it all. You had to remember the physical features of the spot in detail to know where you had hidden the treasure. Several friends were always in on the secret.

On subsequent days you would go and look for your little heavens. If a little heaven had vanished, it meant someone had given away the secret. Someone had betray edit, in other words they had dug up your treasure. You were supposed to look after your treasure – not forget about it.

In the evenings their neighbours, drunken men, common, or even vulgar people, would often pick quarrels and stones would fly. The police would have to be called. Marzena's parents were the only ones who had a telephone. Marzena could remember the grim atmosphere of waiting for ensuing events. Pure fear. [...]

Basia and Waldek were the first to buy themselves a black-and-white television set. The neighbours' children would come over to their flat to watch the bedtime story. One time, one of them was so excited it peed on the carpet.

The children would say to Marzena, 'You're so rich!'

She felt like a Little Princess.

Translated by Kasia Beresford

MICHAŁ WITKOWSKI

THE CRIMINAL AND THE MAIDEN


© Ola Grochowska

Michał Witkowski *(born 1975) is one of the leading novelists of the younger generation. His books have won numerous literary awards and have been translated into many languages. The English translation of* Lovetown, *the novel that brought him overnight fame, was longlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize.* The Criminal and the Maiden *is his seventh novel.*

The Criminal and the Maiden is Michał Witkowski's second "rancid" crime novel, following on from *The Lumberjack*, which came out three years ago. "Rancid", meaning not so much a pastiche, as having no rules of any kind, very chatty, with hundreds of digressions and several lengthy asides that disrupt the narrative and will annoy any reader who only thinks like a consumer, exposing the conventional nature of crime fiction, and making fun of its formulaic features. Some call it superficial, while others stress the usefulness of this bizarre form: the crime novel framework allows the writer to keep control of his chaotic, polyphonic content. But it doesn't really matter how Witkowski makes use of this popular genre, because he isn't aiming at fans of crime fiction, but seeking ways to communicate with readers who already know his work, especially those who have grateful memories of his bestselling first novel, *Lovetown* (2005). Beyond that, *The Criminal and the Maiden* is the most "recycled" book he has produced so far: here we find plots, characters and places familiar not just from *Lovetown*, but also from his last book, *The Lumberjack*.
As in *The Lumberjack*, the main character is a writer named Michał Witkowski, or Michaśka for short. Once again it's a cold time of year (the story is set in November and December 2012), and we're back in Międzyzdroje for a few days amid some familiar faces (Mariusz the "grunt", Robert the lumberjack, and others). But we spend most of our time in Wrocław, where a pervert whom the police have dubbed the Pre-war Murderer is on the prowl. He preys on young boys from deprived backgrounds, renders them unconscious, then dresses them in pre-war clothing and puts them to death. Sometimes he brutalises their bodies – by raping them, slashing their skin, and occasionally peering inside their open bellies. Once he has performed his sinister rituals he dumps the corpses in places favoured by Wrocław's pre-war homosexuals; significantly, most of these places were described in *Lovetown*.

Suspicion falls on the novelist Michał Witkowski, because he has also been gathering information about boys who have gone missing, and about the operating methods of some

famous serial killers. As the main suspect, he lets himself get caught in a trap set by the police – the handsome investigator (aka "the Student") makes Michał fall in love with him at first sight, but then just as quickly provides our hero with an alibi. So we soon know for sure that Michaśka is not the Pre-war Murderer. And then a strange thing happens: from one day to the next our hero becomes – and it's hard to put it any other way – a self-appointed policeman, certainly more than just a consultant helping with inquiries.

The writer's metamorphosis into a policeman is of major significance. Again and again he keeps stressing that he has given up on literature,because it has deeply disappointed him. For some time he remains in limbo, and we don't really know what he's doing, apart from making regular visits to the gym. Perhaps it could be said that he's celebrating himself, and not just because at every step he keeps reminding us of his literary fame; though a thing of the past that has gone rather stale, it is still his strongest trump card. Apart from getting involved in the inquiry, Michaśka becomes a collector of superficial impressions, an arbitrator in matters of style and fashion, and a guide to the Polish consumer scene. Severely antagonised by the sterility of this "plastic" existence, he finds that a world branded by crime and perversion offers him the opportunity for some excitement.

Dariusz Nowacki

MICHAŁ WITKOWSKI
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THE CRIMINAL AND THE MAIDEN

Saturday, 1 December 2012

On Saturday I was rudely awoken by the sharp, straight-laced sound of the entry phone. I haven't bought anything on the Internet lately, so it didn't even enter my head to answer it – probably just kids pressing all the buttons and then running away. But someone kept ringing with the persistence of a DHL courier, and soon after that the doorbell rang too. I dragged myself out of bed and peeped through the spyhole. It was the Student with some bird. In other words, the police.

"Just a moment!"

I glanced in the hall mirror and confirmed that I looked like a serial killer,just as I always do first thing in the morning, and also like one of his victims who's been lying in a pool of water for the past five months. But there was nothing to be done about it. I put on my dressing gown and decided to act the way they do in American films – when the police arrive, I'm in a turban made from a towel, on a rumpled bed, and I don't offer them biscuits or coffee, nothing. As if the cops came to see me every day of the week in this awful dump of mine.

I'd never seen the Student looking so old before. Since we'd parted the day before at the taxi rank on Wystawowa Street he hadn't changed his clothes, or been home, so he can't have slept either. He hadn't washed his face or brushed his teeth, which meant that he was exuding an odour of well-absorbed vodka. Since yesterday all the irony,all the jokes, had collapsed, the dazzling starlight in his eyes had gone out, the ironical wrinkles had changed into static senile furrows – all the fantasy was gone, all the gnomes, nothing was enchanted any more, now he was simply here in reality, he'd come on command to lock me away, here was the cold face of reality and no joking;it's like in that movie, Krystyna Janda's already waking up in prison, wondering where she is, looking for her handbag, a red one, and then the old woman tells her that here they take the handbags away.

Beside the Student stood the small, very thin woman who had flashed past me in an open door at the hostel the day before. She treated me to a weary smile and introduced herself as Prosecutor Joanna Pospieszalska. (So she was the Joanna who'd called him yesterday when he was under the bridge). Despite my original idea of receiving them like a whore in a slum, instantly my mother awoke in me, I was my mother receiving guests –at once she had to apologise for the mess, say that under no circumstances were they to take off their shoes, sit them down, offer them tea, coffee, biscuits, dinner, permanent accommodation here for free, with full board and lodging... I did all that, and somewhere

further down the line I furtively gave the Student ironical hints that it was just my mother-the-provider speaking through me, but I don't know if he was in the right mood to pick up such nuances. He sank heavily onto the sofa and buried his face in his hands.

The prosecutor lady started reading the spines of the books, and examining the foreign translations of my fiction, which she leafed through and put back on the shelf. Then she looked at the photo of Elfriede Jelinek stuck to the pinboard, with the ever increasing circles drawn with a compass, and at the dart stuck in the great writer's eye. She exchanged a knowing glance with the Studentas if to say: "We're onto the right one, he's the psychopath, the serial killer we're after". She was in no doubt whatsoever as soon as she saw the collection of announcements about missing boys put up on the wall with drawing pins. This is the one – there are his trophies.

But nothing of the kind. The Student at once reassured me that I'm not suspected of anything, because yesterday, at the time when the murderer was dumping a body outside the Bliźniak Hostel, I was with him under Zwierzyniecki Bridge. As a result they can tell me a little, not much, but a little, because they need to consult me...

"In a literary way, as it were..." he stammered.

"So on a professional matter?" I said, acting dumb.

"Don't play the fool, Michaś, I know you went straight off there yesterday, I deliberately said the address out loud because knowing how nosey you... I mean, knowing it might come in handy for your fiction, and..." He faltered again, and then without asking, brazenly lit a cigarette.

"Why don't you help yourselves to biscuits? They're wholegrain, fructose-sweetened, with goji berries, eco, bio and organic",urged my mother-within, and poured the coffee.

"Leave it for now, Misiek", said the weary Student, blowing smoke at the ceiling, and he gave the coffee a look that immediately told how much of it he'd drunk that night. He set aside his cigarette on the ashtray I'd fetched for him, put his crumpled face in his hands, and stayed like that for a while, as if focusing, as if gathering the remains of his strength; then he wiped it, stretching the skin as he did so. The whites of his eyes were covered in little red veins. Whereas, fresh as a rose, the prosecutor dutifully ate her biscuits, with great relish too, and asked for tea instead of coffee.

"Listen. I'll tell you a little, but if you talk to anyone about it, you'll be in trouble, I'll make sure of that. This isn't to be used in fiction, or as anecdotes for showing off in interviews, like saying the Viper lent you his taser and then had a spot of bother in the anti-terrorism squad..."

"All right, Jesus Christ, I get the picture..."

Speak, just get on and speak!

"It's to do with yesterday's murder outside the student hostel. What's the quickest way to explain it?"

"Maybe you've heard of the 'Pre-war Murderer'?" said the prosecutor,coming to the Student's rescue.

"No".

"Well, of course you haven't. But do you know why that is? Because so far we've managed to keep it a secret from the media. But we've been working on the case since May. So you see... If anything were to come out now, it'd be down to you. It's totally forbidden. I'm deadly serious".

I had noticed. The press'll soon be onto it anyway, and I'll get the blame.

"I've been working on it all summer and autumn, which may be why it's been hard to get hold of me sometimes. Now I've had more free time, because I thought we'd caught him. Goodness, do you go about in ladies' rings? Never mind. It all started in May..."

THE PRE-WAR MURDERER

It's the long weekend of 1-4 May, 2012. Wrocław – the Meeting Place – is panting in extremely hot weather, it's wilting, bathing in the Oder, in Morskie Oko Lake, in the clay ponds, or in thick smog preceding a storm. Above the city, white aeroplanes go flying across the searing sky, sharply lit by the merciless rays of the sun. They're carrying defenceless post-human being sutterly disarmed of nail scissors, nail files, liquids and penknives, and dazzled by the sun.

Down below, the forsythia has withered: everything that should be just coming into bloom is already dusty and wilted, coated in oily exhaust fumes. The place is deserted, with no traffic jams and lots of free parking spaces, because everyone's away for the long weekend. Only the Marketplace is undergoing the ultimate siege. Crowds of drummers, people with dreadlocks, people with plaits, those guys who stand there in surreal costumes without moving, like Tower Man, German tourists, Swedish tourists, and everyone else who doesn't feel like sitting at home or lying on the beach in Majorca, but absolutely has to tour the smaller, pretty much attraction-less cities, offering purchases at the same chains as they have at home. By the pride of the city council – the glass fountain – English, German, and indeterminate Swiss-Dutch burblings blend with the burble of the water and the smell of grass, cigarettes, beer, barbecues, and roasting-hot building sites. Strachowice Airport, hurriedly constructed for the Euro soccer championship, has become a campsite for filthy dirty young people, covered in international grime carried from country to country, coated in global dust, dust from the entire Schengen area. They litter the whole place with paper coffee cups from Starbucks, Coffee Heaven, Green Coffee, McDonalds and so on. They play guitars, and set out those paper cups,in the hope that someone will toss a Euro into one, because by now they're not entirely sure which country they're in at the moment. From Amsterdam to Rome, from Rome to Oslo, from Oslo to Zurich, from Zurich to Helsinki, from Helsinki – suddenly – to Wrocław. Hitchhiking by plane. [...]

"At four in the morning there are already some runners in tight clothing jogging in Szczytnicki Park, when one of them wants to take a leak, so – here's something for you, Misiek – he runs up to a pre-war toilet, the one you called the 'Scorched Picket' in Lovetown... as you know, the Scorched Picket has been fenced off and slated for demolition – even the fence has started to collapse, and no one's interested in that ruin. So the runner goes past the fence, and is instantly knocked backwards by the dreadful stink and the swarms of flies and mosquitoes that attack him. But he's already seen something he'll be having nightmares about for the rest of his life – a decaying corpse, dressed as a pre-war youth, as if the world had gone back in time. We still haven't identified him. Part of his face had been eaten away by birds, but the remaining, lower part also had a pre-war look, with a small moustache curled with brilliantine, a bowler hat and so on, a pre-war newspaper and some pre-war banknotes in the pockets. He didn't have an ID card, but knowing this psychopath, if he had, it'd have been a genuine pre-war ID card, a German one, one of those Kennkarten they issued".

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

AGNIESZKA TABORSKA

THE UNFINISHED LIFE OF PHOEBE HICKS

© Grażyna Makara

Agnieszka Taborska *(born 1961) is a novelist, art historian and translator of the French surrealists. Her publications include* The Dreaming Life of Leonora de la Cruz *and* Conspirators of Imagination. *Her fairytales for children have been published in Poland, Germany, Japan and Korea. She lectures on art history at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, RI.*

Dedicated to the 'Magic Town of Providence,' and written with a light touch, the story of Phoebe Hicks is just as much about the place in which the action unfolds as it is about its nineteenth-century heroine, the inspired star of spiritualist séances. The harbour town of New England, that most European part of the United States, is famous throughout the country for its maple trees whose colours in autumn 'change through over thirty shades of scarlet and pink.' Providence is Agnieszka Taborska's second home after Warsaw. There, at the Rhode Island School of Design, this distinguished expert on Surrealism teaches the history of art and literature. The story of Phoebe, which is fictional, although apocryphal in the Surrealist meaning of the word, is as much saturated by the magical *genius loci* as it is by spirits. Phoebe herself is, in a sense, the literary incarnation of Providence. Staidness, madness and beauty have endured here for centuries alongside one another in unruffled harmony. In the ingeniously composed miniatures that make up the book's chapters, Agnieszka Taborska consistently steers a middle course between rationality and the creation of a deception, between humour and erudition. The story, passing itself off as a literary game, is also an exposition of classic spiritualism; factual in its details, it also unlocks the imaginations of those who long to get to the bottom of photography and cinema, the cult of psychoactive substances or different states of consciousness.

'Who was Phoebe Hicks?' Even before she conducted her first séance in 1847, as a consequence of her providential poisoning by a clam fritter, she was a privileged being, 'thanks to her good birth into a well-to-do home on Benefit Street.' But the piece of stale clam brought her a fascinating opportunity! After vomiting fits that lasted all night and were almost fatal, Phoebe had a vision, which opened up to her for years to come a mental corridor leading directly to the Beyond. It gave her an exceptional status, somewhere between that of an artiste, priestess and a rather dubious creature. She was fortunate that her fraud was never proved, but maybe she was not an imposter. Miss Hicks, who clearly enjoys the sympathy of her

author, is also apparently presented as an eater of hallucinogenic mushrooms and a smoker of marihuana. Among female mediums, however, notorious for sexual scandals, conjuring tricks and arduous efforts to summon up spirits before large public audiences, she was exceptionally staid and sober-minded. Full of mysterious fantasy and artistic inventiveness, she is introduced by Agnieszka Taborska as a prototype both of the psychoanalyst and the performance artist – and also a special kind of cultural researcher, who sought the symbolic figures of the collective imagination. The woman medium would call forth and give shape to unconscious desires, becoming the guardian and guide of this nocturnal aspect of the souls of respected citizens, with which they could not otherwise associate.

This strange adventure in the history of American rationalism, the mania for summoning up spirits that gripped the continent in the second half of the nineteenth century, is retold through the life story of the enigmatic Miss Hicks with great care and charm. The series of collages by American artist Selena Kimball, which illustrates the book, gives added depth and context to that extraordinary yet comic collective hallucination known as spiritualism, just as with time Freudian psychoanalysis and Surrealist art would give depth and context to encounters with ghosts.

Kazimiera Szczuka

AGNIESZKA TABORSKA
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THE UNFINISHED LIFE OF PHOEBE HICKS

Materialization from the Azure Plasma

The spirit of Harry Houdini inaugurated the third phase of Phoebe's fame. He joined the séance by materializing out of an azure-coloured cloud hovering over the table, which some took for plasma. He remained with the company throughout sixteen long evenings – sometimes looming out of the plasma, sometimes stepping from behind a heavy curtain concealed in the gloom, sometimes emerging from under the plush drape spread over the table. Before the start of the final séance with his participation, he sat at Phoebe's right hand, awaiting the guests like any legitimate citizen of this world. It could be argued, of course, that he was merely the medium's assistant dressed as a magician, sitting shoulder to shoulder with the others, emboldened by their gullibility. Yet how to interpret his materializations from the azure cloud? Or explain the appearance of the ghost of someone born a quarter-century later? And what possible interest could the medium have had in fighting a duel of magic tricks with Houdini, which would comprise her in the eyes of spiritualists?

PHOEBE CONTRA HOUDINI

Nothing anticipated Phoebe's duel with Harry Houdini. The magician's spirit started it suddenly during his sixteenth séance and then, two hours later, abandoned the bemused participants. Garbled tales of the duel circulated across New England for many years to come. It's not true the spirit jangled his chains. Nor was the medium irritated by the situation while he maintained a cold indifference. The only account anywhere close to the truth concerned the vying of the sides: every time Phoebe caused a thing or person to materialize, Houdini made it disappear. The list of objects she conjured from the abyss is not long: a rusty teapot, a bouquet of dried yellow flowers and a Turkish carpet, which on closer examination would probably have proved a lousy fake. Figures momentarily summoned from the Other World included Ivan the Terrible, Catherine the Great and Alexander Pushkin, thereby confirming rumours about American mediums' weakness for Russian culture. Anyway, Harry Houdini did not allow any phantom who would testify to Phoebe's genius to remain among the living for more than a minute. Even in his ghostly form, the greatest unmasker of fraudulent mediums did not miss an opportunity to belittle Phoebe's merits.

(...)

PSYCHOANALYSIS

Few realized Phoebe was something more than a go-between for the Beyond. Well acquainted over the years with human nature, she would assume during her séances

the role of psychoanalyst *avant la lettre*. Before darkness descended along with the start of the séance, she would patiently hear out her clients, rarely interrupting with a question or comment. Perhaps – not unlike the fraudulent mediums – she took advantage of a chance to acquire useful information. It seems, however, something more was at stake. Like Freud later, she was fascinated by other people's accounts of missed opportunities, squandered potentials, alternative versions of life that wielded boundless power over the imagination. This too distinguished her from other mediums.

HEAD OF THE COUCH

In her new life, the thing Phoebe most valued was that her thoughts – up until then so restless – now revolved around one issue: whether the next séance would be just as successful as the last. Such a clearly formulated goal brought inner peace. Wishing to share with others her simple discovery about how to make sense of life, she even contemplated changing her profession. She imagined herself sitting in a comfortable armchair at the head of a couch, on which a patient lay relaxing. She listens attentively and then gives her advice – which is always the same: that he should devote himself to some mission provided he does so absolutely. Apparently, she came quite close to making the change. She was dissuaded, however, by the obtrusive materializations of a German-speaking boy who would reiterate with a persistency worthy of a better cause that such a career had been assigned to him. The toddler kept appearing at the most inappropriate moments until she promised to drop the idea. The visits were so exhausting she never investigated why he had left behind his earthly shell in Europe to plague the Atlantic town as a luminous phantasm.

THE HOUSES' FATIGUE

And now a few words about the town without which there would have been no Phoebe and no séances, without which the spirits would have been condemned to remain forever on the Other Side. Providence is the capital of Rhode Island – the smallest state of the Union, an important hub of New England, the European part of America.

All its streets give the impression of being side streets, so limited is the traffic upon them and so insignificant the role they seem to play in the life of the town. They are like old stage sets stored in a props room, not used for years, but from behind which ghosts of past productions might peep at any moment. The disorientated passer-by will rarely stray this way, overawed by the crushing atmosphere of provincial banality. This type of difficult-to-define atmosphere no doubt had its effect on the imagination of Phoebe Hicks.

Just as the town had formed her, so she had an influence upon the town. Her séances were rightly seen as the source of changes beginning to affect the houses. For the houses of Providence are bursting at the seams. Walls stretch and bulge under the impact of the spirits that inhabit them, of vapours rising from once living matter, of unfinished conversations hanging in the air. Interrupted sentences and questions without answers grow heavier and heavier with time, bloated like dry bread rolls soaking up water. The walls of especially haunted houses are almost oval. Inhabitants of neighbouring towns laugh at Providence and long into the night discuss the superiority of straight lines over crooked. The uncouth nature of the citizens of Johnston, Warwick and Pawtucket stops them troubling to inquire what might cause the walls to swell. Their views have no effect on the habits of the spirits, of course. What's more, some ghosts, bored by their sojourn in the Beyond, seem to derive a particular pleasure from altering the shapes of the walls. It's enough to walk down Benefit Street in the late afternoon, when the setting sun casts shadows of gas lanterns against distended façades, emphasizing their absurd forms, to grasp the scale of the disturbing transformations.

Houses in Providence also have wrinkles. No one speaks openly of the connection between the frequency of the séances conducted within them, and the pace of their ageing. It's an open secret that the shortest séance transforms even quite new façades beyond recognition – as a sleepless night can add years to a human face. From the degree to which the house-paint is cracked or walls are crooked, from the feeling that a ceiling is about to cave in, connoisseurs can tell how often the occupants succumb to their addiction of communing with spirits. As a matter of fact, you don't have to be a great specialist to observe the symptoms. It's enough to be born in Providence, or stay there a little while, to see the houses' fatigue as clear as day.

(...)

GENTLEMEN AND PHOEBE'S FURY

Some phantoms seem just as astonished by their sojourn in this world as mortals who observe it. Now and then they repeat nonstop the same words or motions, as if trying through familiar gestures and sounds to prove to themselves they again exist. Their maniacal behaviour makes the living attribute offences to them they've not committed: breaking a window, spreading fire, displacing objects to weird places, shooting furniture or utensils into the air, making superfluous objects appear in houses, the banging of shutters, the sudden opening of locked doors. Spirits attempt to rebel against the unfair charges, yet few mortals perceive that rebellion.

Phantoms' looks and physicality also afford misunderstandings. Desiring to see in them ethereal creatures fashioned from congealed mist, séance participants never ceased to wonder when their hands did not sink into a spirit as if into dough, but settled on entirely material skin. Hence the rumours about mediums disguised as ghosts. In this "unclear" situation, some sitters found an excuse for impertinent behaviour. Groping at women arrived from beyond the grave, New England gentlemen risked outbursts of Phoebe's fury.

(...)

IT HAS NOT YET SHOWN ITS TRUE COLOURS...

Phoebe's story seems to belong more to dream than reality, but everything going on in this town creates a similar impression. Even today, female inhabitants of the magic town of Providence are convinced Phoebe Hicks has been reborn in them. Bleached-blond clerks, green-haired students in ripped jeans, bored wives of bankers, are united by a common secret: certainty that they are incarnations of the mediumistic impostor. Her spirit soars over New England's provincial towns, mingles with the smell of fish and the ocean breeze. For reasons unknown, the guide-books never mention her. Their silence smacks of conspiracy. Like a stubborn memory, the spirit of Phoebe Hicks tethers and smothers the lives of descendants of Atlantic fishermen, great-grandchildren of slave traders, and new immigrants who settled not long ago, unaware of the dangers inherent in the place. It has not yet shown its true colours...

Translated by Ursula Phillips

MARIUSZ SIENIEWICZ

THE HYPOCHONDRIAC'S SUITCASES


© Elżbieta Lempp

Mariusz Sieniewicz *(born 1972) is a writer whose novels have been used as the basis for several theatrical plays. His books have been translated into German, Lithuanian, Russian and Croatian.* The Hypochondriac's Suitcases *is his seventh novel.*

Emil Śledziennik – the hypochondriac from the title of Mariusz Sieniewicz's latest novel – claims that packing teaches you minimalism. If that's true, then he definitely doesn't know how to pack. His account of a few days spent in a Polish provincial hospital is stuffed to bursting, crammed full of childhood memories, declarations of love for the most important woman in his life, tirades against petty-minded patriotism, paeans in praise of painkillers, the self-reflections of a graphomaniac (for, as the author's alter ego, he too is a writer), and some ironical thoughts on the topic of life-death-and-the universe.

The Hypochondriac's Suitcases is a truly baroque novel. Each sentence is dripping with metaphors, every paragraph closes with a brilliant conclusion, each story is blown up and embellished as much as it possibly can be. But it is Gombrowicz-style, satirical baroque. The ironical witticisms and genteel amusing anecdotes serve one single purpose: "To kill Poland – that'd be something! Just the very idea seemed thrilling to me on account of its pretentiousness." Emil isn't bothered about political correctness, and doesn't give a damn about any of Poland's sacred cows; he dreams non-stop of emigrating and wonders if all the blood shed for Poland would form a body of water the size of Lake Śniardwy, or if it would be as big as the Baltic Sea. Śledziennik can't stand Poland, simply because it is stifling him.

But he doesn't give in easily. He protects his ego by surrounding it on all sides with a wide range of topics for discussion. Above all there is illness – the hypochondria of the title, to which he openly admits, saying he has fallen sick for good and all, with every possible ailment: "Dyscalculia right up to the twentieth year of my life, and dysmemoria from the twenty-first". Like a true hypochondriac, he is only sick in his imagination. But for him this is a more frightening, worse form of illness, because he is a person who actually lives totally and entirely in his own imagination; to the very end and then one step beyond, he lives in the surreal distortion produced by his own mind, in its dream-like bewilderment and warped confabulation. It's in language and writing that he grows and finds fulfilment, and in language that he loves. This novel is full of strange but extremely beautiful declarations

and rhetorical remarks: “Oh my morphine-flavoured profiterole, my heroine-laced cream puff, thanks to which I can live in so many worlds at once!”

Śledziennik is a complete addict – he’s hooked on everything, including painkillers, grumbling, the love of his life, making up stories, and talking. This is a book you read in one go, because there isn’t really a good point where you can put it down, not even for a moment. Interrupting your reading would mean interrupting Emil in mid-breath and suffocating him. Emil lives in his body, which he never stops examining and analysing. He revels in his gallstones, delights in the taste of ketoprofen, turns the pre-operation shaving of his groin into a metaphor for the comic fate of man, and calls his entire doubtless, though twistedly beautiful lyricism “hormonal”. We’ve had the Baroque, we’ve had Gombrowicz, but there’s still “sickness as a metaphor” and as the leitmotif of a writer who draws inspiration from being ill.

In the suitcases of the title, Sieniewicz packs literary tradition, current styles and languages, real memories and inventions, emotions and reflections. He prompts the idea that writing in itself is like hypochondria, like stating that I have something very important and exceptional inside me, something nobody else has and that nobody else has ever said before, and that it has to be said. It’s worth plunging your hands into *The Hypochondriac’s Suitcases*. You’ll pull out a whole lot of intelligent humour and cynical reflection, with a brilliant writer lurking behind them.

Iga Noszczyk

MARIUSZ SIENIEWICZ
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THE HYPOCHONDRIAC'S SUITCASES

my eyes. Once again there's the ceiling, the wall, my toes protruding from under the duvet, and disappointment, disappointment to find I'm more here than there. I reward myself for it with the sound of your name.

For now, it's not too bad. A little reminiscing, a little light dreaming. These are the invisible suitcases that I've dragged along with me, apart from the one containing my pyjamas, a towel, and my copy of *The Death of Beautiful Deer*. I open the cases at random, without any particular intention. I peer inside cautiously, not quite sure what's hidden in them. Come what may, being in hospital is a specific form of journey: the longer you lie there, the further you drift away from the world outside, and the more often you go beyond your own body, while at the same time going beyond the limits of memory again and again. It's worth having as much baggage as possible – even a seemingly irrelevant recollection might come in handy, because you never know how long the journey will last and where it's going to lead.

I want to believe that the ketoprofen will allow me to get through my first night without you. You know how scared I am of pain, but I'm more scared of your absence… I'd give a lot to turn it all back and be falling asleep beside you again. I swear I would never betray you, not even in thought, I'd limit my range of male depressions and narcissistic frustrations to the minimum – which perhaps you find just as depressing and frustrating. I'd stop vanishing each evening in the Bermuda Triangle of the sofa, the fridge and the TV. I wouldn't wrap my face in the newspaper any more. I'd finally appreciate the charms of our leisurely conversations.

Not enough? Alright, listen to this! I hope you're sitting down.

For you I would renounce even the very mildest ailment, not a word would I utter about the pains shooting through me. Never again would I hold forth about depression and self-destruction, never again would I say: "Oh, look, something's sprung up on my neck", or "Would you just check and see if you can feel a lump here too?" Instead I'd learn to iron your skirts and dresses, each pleat would come out as straight as a ruler. I would find your lost socks, each one that's missing from the pair – even setting the washing machine would hold no mystery for me. For you I'd be like a rally driver on the routes of all those Biedronka and Lidl stores. For you I'd do the dishes: I'd plunge my hands into the sink and catch the dinner plates, cutlery and pots like shining, silver-and-white fish, and each one would be your little goldfish. For you I'd become a worshipper of panelling and floors, bowing low to them with a cloth. For you I would

guide the vacuum cleaner through every room like a tame anteater on a walk. I'd be your home help! Your Ukrainian manservant! Your hot-blooded southerner – a Spaniard or an Italian, but on pay day I'd also be a Russian oligarch with the outer appearance of a Swede! To the end of my days I'd tickle your feet, and like Marco Polo I'd explore the erogenous capes and headlands of your body. Of course your, and only your desires would act as my compass! ... Each evening I'd run you a hot bath with oils and incense. Each morning I'd bring you your slippers in my teeth, and a small glass of mojito in my hand! ...

This isn't pathos, my wonderful high priestess. It's love! Of the truest and sincerest kind.

My hands have almost stopped trembling and my pulse is slowing down. I pick up a bottle of mineral water. I take a sip and run my tongue over my palette. It hurts far less, hardly at all, though my face is still tensed in a mask of torment, as if any other, milder expression were impossible. I don't even feel like smoking, and that's a whole day without a single cigarette now. Believe me, I'm resting. I'm having a rest from obsessively thinking about myself in the wretched "here" and the blasted "now". The ketoprofen helps. It's not just a genie, but my Ariadne too – from the bundle of nerves I was until now, it is conjuring up a long, strong thread of relaxation. It is guiding me through the labyrinth of my own ego. There's nothing finer than to free yourself from your own ego, if only momentarily. It's as if I'd stepped out of myself and were standing next to myself, suddenly embarrassed by this shrunken forty-year-old man – with a grimace of pain, with grievance burning in his eyes at the fact that fate has treated him so improperly. Sometimes I start to suspect that my suffering borders on autoeroticism. And as such it deludes itself that it's tantalizingly self-sufficient.

Luckily the situation is starting to look different. I can easily think about other people, because in fact there are other people too. Finally I am well enough to appreciate the world with liberated senses – me, the Whitman of the hospital! Me, the local Leśmian! How lovely the starched bed linen smells! How nice the IV tube feels to the touch! I'm rolling it in my fingers, like an umbilical cord pumping out euphoria.

I must confess to you that I'm enchanted by the ward sister Krystyna, who has the evocative, hopeful surname Ceynowa. No, I've no naughty thoughts or butterflies in my tummy, I swear! Purely platonic thoughts, and if there are any butterflies, they're just metaphysical ones. Because think for yourself: doesn't everything begin and end with nurses? We're born and die in their presence. When they tell us to, we strip naked in front of them like obedient children, often admitting our shameful secrets. They are our stepmothers for one thousand seven hundred zloty a month. They are our patron saints of vaccinations, pills and intravenous drips. Does anyone ever give them a second thought, except for the patient who's wet the bed? Has a single monument ever been erected in praise of them, such as the greatest heroes deserve? Instead of Poniatowski and Kościuszko, instead of Piłsudski or the Miracle on the Vistula, I'd rather honour the nurse on the night shift! Instead of all those insurgents, instead of the Silent Unseen and the accursed soldiers on the pedestals that serve the national cause, I'd rather see the prominent chest of the hospital nurse! They deserve more than just coffee, chocolate, and for want of anything better, flowers. Most of them never even get a sniff of the cash in the white envelopes that patients bring here with them – those go straight into the doctors' coat pockets.

My paean in praise of the lower-ranking medical staff will not be drowned out by the hospital trolls who accuse the nurses of communist-era habits, or of throwing the patients around like sacks of potatoes. For God's sake, let's be aware of the scale and the location! They work amid groaning, wailing and moaning, not at a diplomatic post in Brussels. Anyway, as proof that one should cut them a lot of slack, I ask you the rhetorical question: who has direct access to the magic cabinet that's kept locked with a little key? ...

And in that magic, secret cabinet there are shameless supplies of ketoprofen and nalorphine! In boxes, bottles and ampules. Next to them lie stacks of single-use needles, pentazocines, pethidines, tramadols and morphines, forming multi-storey houses, skyscrapers even, a whole Manhattan of ecstasy! There are yet other anti-depressants and barbiturates with mysterious names – not exactly Latin, and not exactly from Tolkien. Just imagine: each ampule is paradise in liquid form, it's the Bahamas injected by the millilitre! Each tiny little pill is an Atlantis in a sea of suffering, it's the Promised Land administered in small transparent glasses... It's the Great Book of Oblivion! You only have to swallow, constrict a vein, or ask for more!

Today I saw the magic cabinet, the secret cabinet, when the door of the treatment room was ajar. I almost wept for joy. This ward is well stocked – you could fight a war against pain here. I just have to get on well with the nurses. Not play up, not complain, not ring my bell without a good reason, and never, ever at night, unless I'm dying in agony. Anyone who wakes the nurse on night shift is really in the doghouse – better never to have been born. Next day he's sure to get aspirin or ibuprofen.

Could you bring me a few bars of Lindt chocolate? The big ones with nuts. And some coffee, preferably Jacobs instant.

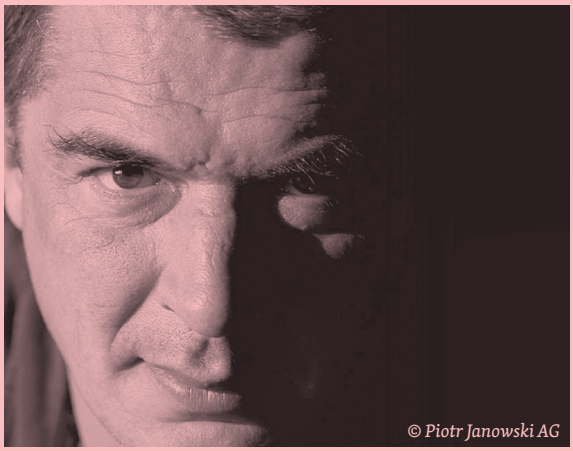
I'd judge the age of "my" nurse to be about fifty, not more. She's thin, with long blonde hair tied in a bun. As a child I'd have thought that when she died she'd change into a bright poplar tree or a lilac with white flowers. She knows her job, as I found out at once after the first, highly professional insertion of a needle. It takes me longer to open a bottle of beer. I'd swear she doesn't make a fuss of the patients, but definitely believes in the old principle that the patient is a long way from the booze, and dying isn't a scandal. She has quite a curt personality and androgynous looks – a bit like Cate Blanchett's older sister. She's beautiful and ugly, striking and hideous all at once – like in Vermeer's paintings. It all depends on the given set of circumstances, such as which moment you look at her, from where, and how the light is falling: whether from a fluorescent bulb, or from a sun-lit window. And whether she's raising her head proudly, or happens to be glowering sideways. If the former, she's a truly fascinating woman. If the latter, she's nothing, she looks like a guy, almost like an old codger.

Krystyna Ceynowa has one more rare feature: she is an albino, judging by the alabaster skin on her face and hands, and by the striking colour of her eyes. I'd only just asked for a little more medicine, when she wagged her flawlessly white finger and fired me a backhander with the priceless comment: "The patient's teeth aren't chipped, and ketoprofen's not like rusks!"

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

ANDRZEJ STASIUK

THE EAST



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Andrzej Stasiuk *(born 1960) writes books, plays, and articles for newspapers and magazines. He is also a co-founder of the publishing house Czarne. He has received a number of prestigious literary prizes, including Poland's highest, the Nike, for* On the Road to Babadag. *His books have been translated into almost every Europen language and also into Korean.*

A book about Russia by Andrzej Stasiuk was to be expected, for two reasons. First, in the perverse memoir *Dojczland* Stasiuk had described his trips to Germany. Second, because he went to Russia.

The relationship between the two books – the one about Germany and the one about Russia – arises from the fact that for Stasiuk, each of these countries has marked the fate of Central and Eastern Europe. Germany and Russia are like the two jaws of a vise in which the regions lying between them were seized. The strength of the grip varied, but the very proximity of the two powers determined the prospects available to Poland and the countries to its south. For two centuries Poland was afraid of both its neighbors; after World War II it feared the east, while showering the west with a poisonous admiration.

Stasiuk had to go to Russia. And since he went, he had to write about it.

Because he's driven to travel. He travels and he writes compulsively, and we're addicted to reading him. He's even developed his own genre – the travel essay. An essay of this kind arises out of – or even during – a journey. Yet it isn't the customary travel journal or reportage. It's a hybrid. *The East* opens with a description of a present-day scene – the author and a friend are packing up furniture from a collective farm store and taking it to a one-hundred-year-old Lemko cottage, the last to survive in the southeastern borderlands of Poland. An association leads the narrator to recall other provincial shops; then to a description of the forced resettlement of the Lemkos carried out by the Polish army in 1947; and after that to reflections on Russia as the epicenter of a mighty wave of expulsions.

The preceding outline makes it clear that the book is not devoted in its entirety to Russia. In fact, the "east" of the title includes two domains, the historical and the social. The east conceived of historically is a process set in motion by the October Revolution. The other east is the dependent classes.

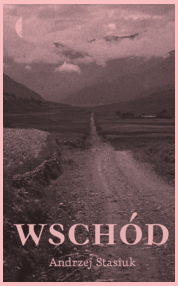
In considering the revolution, the author does not seek to indicate communism or totalitarianism as its consequences. Stasiuk is a historiosopher searching for the hidden patterns of history. He asserts that the essential goal of the communist revolution was the abolition of material. It was not a question of property rights, but of the basis of such rights – namely, property itself. The revolution aimed to destroy materiality as a dimension of collective existence. The revolution could have succeeded if the revolutionaries had never stopped anywhere. Yet before long there began the stage of large-scale construction – of power plants, railroad lines, cities – and that was the beginning of the downfall. The communism that was brought to Poland and other countries at bayonet point, the communism that evicted ethnic minorities and forced the migration of the population from the villages to the towns – this communism was already a child of compromise and forerunner of the great defeat. It promised liberation from material, yet it confined people in material that was impermanent.

Stasiuk observes the consequences of this failure in Russia, where he sees dilapidated factories, shabby rail stations, vanishing cities. He also observes them – and adds moving commentary – in relation to the Polish provinces, which after World War II were called upon to take part in the bogus construction of the new order, a process doomed from the start.

The role of Russia has run its course. At one time Russia defeated its enemies – Napoleon, Hitler – with its limitless space. Now it is losing against itself, unable to manage that space.

Today, according to Stasiuk someone else is directing history – China, which, instead of waging war against material, allows everyone in the entire world to use it. China is victorious because it gives the best response to the challenge of materiality. And by Stasiuk's account it's exactly this that organizes the transformation of civilizations – Western Europe attempted to create perfect forms, Russia sought to eliminate material, whereas China seeks to turn material into something disposable. And since we're talking about a global process, it's winner takes all.

Przemysław Czapliński



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THE EAST

In 2006,

for the first time I went to Russia, because I wanted to see the country in whose shadow I'd spent my childhood and youth. I also wanted to see the spiritual homeland of my local collective farm. I arrived in Irkutsk after a thirteen-hour journey. The flight from Moscow was supposed to take five hours but for reasons unknown, instead of flying to Irkutsk we landed in Bratsk in the early morning and were told to disembark. Gray rain was falling on gray concrete. The airport bus pulled up – a glass-covered cabin containing seats, attached to a Zil chassis. In the distance was a dark green forest. Cement, weather-beaten sheet iron and the military green of the wet trees in the dawn light. From the very first moments there, in Bratsk, I felt I'd gotten what I was after, though I'd had no idea it even existed. The runway glistened like a dead fish. Later, when I stepped out in front of the glass-paneled terminal building, I realized there was nothing else around. That is, there was a kind of broad highway, some buildings, cars in a parking lot. But all this barely existed. People were stepping off buses, getting out of cars, coming in from the deepest heart of the unseen rest. The city lay by a huge reservoir. The Angara had been dammed, and the waters had spilled out across the taiga. I see it now on a map, but back then I stayed strictly at the airport. The rectangular sheet is green, with the reservoir more or less in the middle, like a splotch of light blue ink. Above it, in the top part of the map, there's virtually nothing but green. Black dots indicate *otdelnye stroyenia*, individual buildings. Sixty miles then a house, thirty more and another, and so on all the way to the Arctic Ocean. But there, at the airport, I knew nothing of any of this. I strolled about and stared at the Russians. They must have had me pegged at first glance, just as I had no trouble picking out the few Western tourists from our flight. They were pacing the hall anxiously, trying to find out why we'd landed here instead of in Irtutsk. Whereas the Russians simply sat themselves down and waited. I walked around because I couldn't tear my eyes from Bratsk, from the concrete, from the Russians. From the dirty windows of the hall, the wooden lockers, the green chipboard doors, the terrazzo flooring. I'd traveled four thousand miles and thirty-odd years. The airport at Bratsk was like the Stadion bus station in Warsaw, from where buses went to Węgrów, Sokołów, Siemiatycze. The people were similar too. Yet at the same time I had the feeling I was strolling at the very limit of inhabited regions, that beyond this there was only geography. In a cramped kiosk they poured boiling water into plastic cups and dropped in a teabag. It was too hot to pick

up, and there was nowhere to put it down. People were dozing at the three tables pushed into a dark corner.

It's mid-December and finally it's snowing. In wintertime everything gets quieter. The past grows vivid. The smell of coal smoke and the rasp of metal shovels in the early morning quiet, forty years ago in Praga. Back then it would also become quiet when it snowed. And that metallic sound on the sidewalks. Or the dull scrape of a plywood board used for shoveling snow. In those days there weren't any brightly colored plastic tools – green, red, blue, yellow shovels with aluminum fittings. Just plywood darkened from the wetness, and discolored metal. Monochromatic materials. The geometric white planes of the rooftops and gray smoke rising straight toward the sky through the still air. I left for school at seven-thirty and I had no idea there was such a thing as communism in the world. The path led through a group of acacia trees. Then you had to scramble up over the railway embankment and hop across the tracks. I didn't even know there was such a thing as socialism. At home no one talked about stuff like that, because what everyone took part in was simply life, nothing more.

My mother had seen Russians in 1944. They were sailors. They would moor their gunboats in the floodwaters of the Bug. The river used to often change its course. There would be green standing water in the cut-off channels; later it would retreat, leaving marshland behind. The gunboats and cutters and pontoon boats probably moored in the main stream, close to the manor houses. The sailors wore striped shirts, like the ones from the *Aurora* and the *Potemkin*, and at Kronstadt. But they did not bring revolutionary ferment. Grandfather traded with them. He brought them vodka or moonshine and came back with canned army ration sand sugar. The woods were strewn with German bodies. People despised the Russians. Maybe not the sailors, but the hollow-eyed infantry, who cooked chickens without plucking them. I heard the same story dozens of times: unplucked chickens, three watches on each wrist, rifle straps made of string. That was how my mother remembered the arrival of the revolution. That was how everyone remembered it. In the towns and in the villages. In speech and in writing. The unplucked chickens, the wristwatches, and the string. The hunger for chickens and watches swept in from far away in Eurasia, from the remote nesses of tundra and steppe. This wasn't Marx making the world a better place, only some mongrel Temüjin chasing around after poultry and timepieces. In the villages with their dark wooden houses, in the thatched cottages along dusty back roads, lurked a fear of untamed rapacious legions that would suddenly descend, plundering, razing the thatched roofs and the dusty roads and the wooden homes that were little better than Mongolian yurts. It wouldn't come, though, from the cities, from among the brick houses and stores and churches, but from the very ends of space, from places where the people were beginning to grow fur and by night would howl to the red moon. It had to originate somewhere in those parts and at first come loping across its own steppes on all fours, then only later, as it drew closer to our civilized settlements, would it straighten up by degrees and finally stand on two feet so as to have its hands free to catch chickens and put on watches. By evening, in the villages they turned down the wick of the lamp and listened to the pounding of artillery to the east. The earth shook as if all the horses of Asia and all its camels were thundering in. In theend they would turn off the light and place their ears to the floor. The smarter ones dug hidey-holes for their chickens and watches. Some of them thought about leaving with the Germans. But the noises coming from the east sounded like the mutterings of the beast of the Apocalypse and everyone knew that the Germans, in those shiny boots of theirs that everyone admired, would not find shelter anywhere on earth.

But later, after I was born, at home I never heard anyone talk about communism or the Russians. There was a universal silence on the subject of geopolitics. There was nothing to talk about. My mother and my father had both left their villages as part of the great migration of accursed peoples. They were led out of the house of bondage. Out of the land of dust and hunger and filth – the scorned domains. From east to west. My mother twenty miles, my father seventy-five. Because life was elsewhere. From east to west. From a peasant village to a lordly city. So as to forget their legacy of thralldom, and to put on shoes. To the west, to the capital that a patriotic impulse had turned into a skeleton, such that it had to be filled out once again with human flesh. The insurgents of the uprising, Hitler, and communism had made it possible for them to take the metropolis. But they never made it to the center. They stopped in the outskirts, like the majority of the plebeian conquistadors. But that, no one mentioned. Everything was exactly as it should be – a just division of the spoils of history.

Translated by Bill Johnston

JOANNA BATOR

THE SHARK FROM YOYOGI PARK


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Joanna Bator *(born 1968) is a novelist, journalist and university lecturer. In 2012 she won the NIKE Literary Prize for her novel* Dark, Almost Night. *She is a specialist on Japanese culture, one result of which is her latest, eighth book,* The Shark from Yoyogi Park.

"The naïve traveller – and naïve doesn't have to mean stupid, it can just mean trusting – always looks for things that are exotic and original here, truly Japanese. It's an understandable fantasy, because, after all,'the Other' is a source of illusions, a gulf that gives rise to both love and hatred. It allows us to reinforce our own borders, and shows us who we are and who we don't want to be, but it also exposes us to the unfamiliar. After four years in Japan I have my own fantasy idea of what is Japanese and radically 'Other', and whenever somewhere in the world I suddenly get a taste of what I perceive to be a Japanese quality – whether it's in the shape of the landscape, a particular décor, the way someone is dressed, or the scent of *shiso* growing on my Polish balcony – I know I'm within the territory of my own Japanese fairytale, fuelled by that special kind of nostalgia which doesn't require going back to a place, just daily exercises in sensual memory." Joanna Bator began to write her personal Japanese fairytale several years ago when she published *The Japanese Fan*. It was followed by *The Japanese Fan Returns*, which was an expanded edition of the same book. Now, however, in *The Shark from Yoyogi Park*, we have a collection of several dozen short texts (some of which were previously published in the press), comprising the next phase in Bator's Japanese adventure.

Those who wish to read about tea-making rituals, the silks of a Japanese kimono or traditional kabuki theatre won't find what they're looking for here. Bator only briefly mentions these elements of the culture, focusing instead on "cool Japan", contemporary Japan, globalized and – for this very reason, although it sounds a bit paradoxical – less familiar. She writes about "cosplayers" – little Lolitas pointing their bums at cameras while wearing girly cotton panties and cute little headbands with kitty-cat ears attached; boys from the *otaku* sub-culture – ardent fans of manga who hardly ever leave the house, but live mainly in a computer-generated virtual reality; the Japanese dislike of real sex, and their fondness for photographing abandoned houses; Godzilla as a psychoanalytical delusion, in which social traumas keep recurring; the obsession with Murakami, and the culture of

sushi-serving. But above all she writes about herself and her contact (sometimes her clashes) with this foreign culture.

The Shark from Yoyogi Park reminds me of another book, which, apart from the Japanese theme, would seem to have very little in common with it–*Empire of Signs* by Roland Barthes (whom Bator, in fact, admires). Both books effectively attempt to look at Japan with eyes wide open, while doing everything they can to avoid prejudice and bias. But both are also aware of the fact that their view of Japan is inevitably burdened with personal experiences and categories that can't be escaped – whether Polish or French, gender-related or homosexual, anthropological or (post)structuralist. Thus, instead of desperately trying to get away from themselves and their own culture, both books and both authors push them into the foreground and use them to their advantage.

Bator notes that, from the wood carvings of the Edo era to modern flat-screen television sets, the art and culture of Japan are two-dimensional, "superflat". She not only has a keen eye for this two-dimensional quality and writes about it superbly, but also makes it into her own way of getting to know the Japanese world. She never stops being aware of the fact that, despite having spent a few years living in Japan, she is always an outsider: someone who is not in a position to fathom the depths of this country and its culture. The only thing this sort of outsider can do (and Bator does it superbly) is to look at the flat surface accessible to him or her with care for cognitive honesty, precisely and meticulously contemplating the details of the two-dimensional Japanese landscape.

Iga Noszczyk
Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

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THE SHARK FROM YOYOGI PARK

you can

see them in Shibuya, which is a district on the Yamanote Line, a railway that goes around central Tokyo. In front of the station stands the famous sculpture of Hachiko, the faithful dog who continued to wait for his master even after the man's death. There are always crowds of people here, and the little dog looks like the object of some animist cult, surrounded by pilgrims sending him prayers via the latest mobile phones. I used to come here often. I would sit by Hachiko and observe the Japanese. I would choose someone and follow their movements to see what these beautiful people might be doing in Shibuya – and to try somehow to contain the overwhelming wealth of impressions.

I still have a sentimental attachment to this district, but I no longer watch the Tokyoites from my spot by Hachiko. Instead, I choose a table at Starbucks, near the Bunkamura Museum; it's one of the few places in this area that has outdoor seating. I look at the young men and women, at dressed-up dogs, at a parade of Coach handbags (it's a must-have for every fashionable woman this season) – and at first I can't quite believe my eyes, even though I've been here such a long time, I've eaten out of many a rice bowl and seen all sorts of things. But my eyes are not deceiving me. Walking past my table is a middle-aged man dressed up as a Sweet Lolita. This Sweet Lolita has little white shoes (perfect for First Communion), knee-length white socks with frilly tops, bare thighs which are smooth and hairless, and a flared pink dress with puff sleeves and a lace petticoat. Light-brown hair in ringlets, a bow, long lashes, a white parasol, a delicate blush on the cheeks and (oh my!) a white lace headdress. This man-Lolita is moving elegantly, with his gaze fixed somewhere above my head. The costume is perfect. But until now I'd seen it only on girls – or so I thought.

Sweet Lolita is one of the most popular costumes worn by practitioners of a hobby known in Japan as *cosupure*, from 'costume play'. In the 1990s, it was one of the outfits worn by female *cosplayers* who used to pose on the famous Jingu Bridge in Harajuku. They are no longer there, and foreign tourists with cameras search for them in vain because that fashion has come and gone, as they all do. But *cosupure* is alive and well in Europe; one of the largest gatherings of this type accompanies the annual book fair in Leipzig. In Japan, *cosupure* remains what it was before the big boom of the 1990s: a niche hobby with many variants. Brother Lolita – abbreviated to Lolita Bro or Brolita – is one of them. To complicate matters further, some female and male Lolitas disassociate themselves from *cosupure*, claiming that their dressing up is not the same thing. Apparently,

the difference is that fans of *cosupure* base their costumes mainly on anime characters, whereas the Lolita attire, although similar to costumes worn by the heroines of Japanese popular culture, is not a copy of one. *Cosplayers* meet up in groups and strike studied poses, while Lolitas simply walk around the city, enjoying the sensual pleasure that comes from wearing a costume out in public.

The Lolita costume appeared in Japan in the mid-1990s, and from there it was transplanted to the United States and Europe. German Lolitas in particular are thriving. It's no secret that Japan and Germany have a lot in common and draw inspiration from each other. For example, to this day, Japanese schoolchildren wear uniforms modelled on those of the Prussian army. The inspiration for the Lolita costume came from Victorian and rococo aesthetics, but the rest is pure Japanese imagination. In Japan, Lolita is not associated with Nabokov's book; instead she evokes the ideal of a sweet, theatrical girlishness – studied, exaggerated, consciously artificial, like a bonsai tree. High-quality materials, whites and pinks, cream-coloured cotton and silk lace, the obligatory petticoat – that's what every Lolita must wear. What do these Lolitas do? A costume and a role require spectators, so Lolitas go out on the town, like Brother Lolita in Shibuya. They like to have a cup of tea and a cake in an elegant, old-fashioned European-style café. They like to see their own reflections in windows and other people's eyes.

Tokyo has shops catering to Lolitas, and mastering the art of being a Lolita requires time and dedication. An awkward, overly provocative or cheap Lolita is contemptuously called an *ita*. You don't have to be beautiful; perfect features and shapely legs are not necessary. What counts is your mastery of the role and your skill in wearing the costume. And as we know, men can be Lolitas too. There are no ethnographic studies devoted to them; they're not so obliging as to congregate in one place and pose for pictures, as the young women used to do on Jingu Bridge. Many of them may have walked by me on the streets of Tokyo and passed for girls. The Brother Lolita I saw a few times in Shibuya – solidly built, facially resembling Takeshi Kitano – was something of an exception among the usually young Lolitas of both sexes. Brother Lolitas, in pinks and frills, stroll around the city exposed to the public gaze. And that's what it's all about. Without the costume, you might be an ugly middle-aged man or a young postal employee, but in the costume you're a Sweet Lolita – just as a kabuki actor can transform himself from an elderly gentleman with stomach pains into a shrill-voiced courtesan racked by despair.

Japanese culture is all about the packaging. Here, a role and a costume are what makes a person. That's why anyone can be Lolita if he or she puts in the effort. There isn't the same strong conviction as in our culture that biology is the foundation of everything. Femininity and masculinity are understood more as parts that must be learned and appropriately performed. Improvisation is allowed only after achieving mastery. There is a specific costume suited to every role, and the trick is to know how to wear it in accordance with the rules. Just as in kabuki theatre, where all the parts are played by men. *Onnagata*, or actors who impersonate women, are particularly respected and admired. What counts is the effort. A man can play a courtesan in love, a good mother or a faithful (or unfaithful) wife better than a woman, precisely because he isn't one. Or take *takarazuka*, the reverse of kabuki. All the parts are played by young women, and *otokoyaku*, or performers who impersonate men, are genuine idols – beautiful, androgynous elves with slim, nimble bodies. *Otokoyaku* and *onnagata* wear costumes with the same charm and dignity as Brother Lolita from Shibuya. Artistry, perfection and the effort put into the part are all a façade behind which, of course, many interesting perversions may be hiding, since dressing up is never quite as innocent as stamp collecting.

I was thinking about the Brother Lolitas when I made a brief trip to Poland in the autumn of 2011, right before the elections. I was in a taxi from the airport, driving down streets that were so different from those of Tokyo. I was struck by the dirt and the mess, but I liked the amount of greenery, the open spaces and the way the taxi driver immediately expounded his political views to me. Brother Lolita is a minor perversion compared with my constant returning to Poland, to taxi drivers like this one. I could see his face in the mirror. As my Tatar aunt used to say, it was a face big enough to drive around on a motorbike, with a large, old-fashioned moustache and missing teeth.

Suddenly, I imagined this man, full of hatred and stupidity, in the costume of Sweet Lolita – and since then I haven't been able to stop. For instance, I might be looking at a well-known politician, performing in the everyday costume of vulgar masculinity so popular along the Vistula: an ill-fitting suit and bland tie accompanied by some rubbish about a conspiracy, or about what women ought to do and what gay people ought not. And instead of getting annoyed, I picture him in the costume of a Sweet Lolita, with blush on his cheeks and a little quilted handbag on a dainty chain. I close my eyes and watch him as he strolls down Krakowskie Przedmieście. He has a cat in his bag. For once, he seems likeable.

Translated by Eliza Marciniak

KRZYSZTOF VARGA

CSÁRDÁS WITH A MANGALITSA

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Krzysztof Varga *(born 1968) is a novelist, essayist and columnist for Poland's leading newspaper,* Gazeta Wyborcza. *His main books include the novels* Tequila, Terazzo Tombstone, Sawdust *as well as the non-fiction titles about Hungary. His books have been translated into Italian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Slovak, Serbian, Ukrainian and Croatian.*

It would be no exaggeration to say that Hungary is Krzysztof Varga's great passion. His latest publication, entitled *Csárdás with a Mangalitsa*, follows on from Turul Goulash as an addition to his Hungarian collection.

Collection is a very important, maybe even the key word that could be used to dismantle the storyline of this book into its individual parts. For the narrator gathers elements of reality in his memory, and then sets them out before us, as if presenting real treasures from his private collection. In any case, collecting something, quite literally, is what one sentimental part of the chapter called 'Bertalan Farkas goes into space' is about. It mentions a father who believed that 'every man should have a hobby', and who therefore decided that his son, the hero of the book, would be a philatelist. The narrator was even given an album, in which the sets of stamps were not organised or catalogued. But this was the sort of inheritance that had to be tackled – like a terrible curse and a wonderful gift all in one.

In a way, Varga's book is just like the album. Thanks to the essay form and slow pace, only seeming to be disciplined by chapters, we are almost immediately tossed into several different whirlpools, all driven by the search for a Hungarian identity.

One of the most significant collections that comes up in the course of reading *Csárdás with a Mangalitsa* definitely involves the cuisine. It is surely no accident that among his greatest personal treasures Varga includes a menu from the Castle Restaurant, found in what was once his father's room. There is also a separate passage here about fisherman's soup, and elsewhere a detailed account of the menu at the local pizzeria. But none of it appears by accident, because the pizzeria just happens to be offering seven pizzas named after the seven legendary Magyar chiefs. That is enough of an excuse to talk about these specific characters (as well as specific ingredients used to make the pizzas). But after all, as Varga writes at another point, 'the cuisine is too serious a matter here to be littered with any old names, so when I'm eating Hungarian food, I think about Hungarian literature, and when I read the brilliant Hungarian writers,

I think about the food – it's the perfect synergy of body and soul, brain and stomach, melancholy and elation'.

Literature – Hungarian, but not only – is another collection that comes up in the course of this book. Varga pays tribute not just to Danilo Kiš, but to a whole constellation of better or lesser-known authors. He is mainly interested in fiction, but he doesn't ignore poetry, which he quotes, and he also refers to the lives of his favourite authors.

The culinary and literary consumption in the book are accompanied by pictures – of the provinces, graveyards, and crumbling railway cars from his favourite Budapest metro line. There are also references to films here; again and again Varga reveals his passion for the cinema when he refers to Julie Delpy (in the film about the 'bloody' Countess Elizabeth Báthory, niece of Stefan), or elsewhere to Gustav from the animated cartoons he remembers from childhood (Gustav in turn makes him think of Mr Bean).

Reading this book is a joy, not just intellectually, showing Hungary from various aspects – generally the less familiar ones – but also existentially, being mildly comical; in any case it's a book where there's not much room for martyrology or any truly serious tragedies.

Marcin Wilk

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CSÁRDÁS WITH A MANGALITSA

But I really

did want to see the villages of Tiszakürt and Nagyrév, though I was expecting there to be nothing worth seeing in those places. Yet an inner compulsion to visit the area where after the First World War the women had poisoned at least fifty, perhaps well over a hundred men, and passed into the history of major female murderers, was stronger. Nagyrév and Tiszakürt are the sites of what may be the greatest mass murder not connected with war or totalitarian terror, but a "civilian" mass crime, additionally committed by women. Not by soldiers, policemen, or degenerate thugs, but by village woman in great big skirts and headscarves. Well, maybe in a way these murders were connected with the war, because apparently the women from the banks of the Tisza River started to poison the men in 1914, thus when the Great War broke out, and stopped in 1929, when – reportedly thanks to an anonymous letter sent to the local press – they were finally caught, tried and sentenced. But those numerous deaths of fathers, husbands and sons must have seemed strange before then, though passing from one woman to another, from neighbour to neighbour, from relative to relative, the secret was well concealed. What a strange thing: why didn't the men wonder why they seemed to be dying more frequently now than in the past? Though amid wartime conditions and post-war poverty, in a world of disease, war trauma, and copious amounts of palinka and the worst quality wine, the rise in the mortality rate among men living in Tiszakürt and Nagyrév may not have been all that surprising. Moreover, in these provincial, isolated villages they probably had a more natural approach to death – God gave life, God has taken it away, thought those who were not aware of human involvement rather than the hand of God. The main character in this particular drama, the old Lucrezia Borgia of Nagyrév, was Júlia Fazekas, who was already over sixty at the time of her arrest, an ugly woman (so at least the surviving fuzzy photos suggest), and a midwife who also performed a sort of folk healing and illegal abortions. She arrived in Nagyrév in 1911, with some sort of general grip on medical matters, and it may in fact have been she who worked out an innovative way of extracting arsenic from flypaper; the arsenic procured by this domestic method was later fed to the men, added to their wine or food by the murderesses. Though it should be noted that the first poisoning apparently took place before the arrival of Julia Fazekas – either way, it could be said that she arrived on ground that was receptive to her murderous activities. After all, she wasn't the only one to try her hand at it – there was a whole crowd of these women, the significant majority of them anonymous but

brought in on the conspiracy. Together they definitely poisoned about fifty men, or, according to legend, possibly as many as three hundred; the facts concerning the number of victims are rather unclear, and the entire story is full of uncertainties. In any case, it would be safe to reckon that about a hundred corpses may have quietly piled up in the course of those fifteen years. During the trial, which took place in 1930, a decision was made to exhume 162 bodies from the local graveyards, in connection with suspicions that their former owners might have been victims of the poisoners. As I examine the fuzzy photos from the trial I can see that the defendants are ageing village women in headscarves and ample skirts, with their hands folded in their laps, not devilish *femmes fatales*; all of them are widows – for obvious reasons, as they had poisoned their husbands, buried them, and perhaps even mourned them – but there is unsettling calm painted on their faces. In any case, they probably didn't kill out of lust for murder; their actions must have had some rational incentives. They rubbed out the men who couldn't work, husbands who beat and drank, and war cripples who had to be fed but were of no use, no longer suitable for farm work, physically and psychologically battered by the war. Well, yes, we could also add in a love story, because while the Hungarian peasants were sitting in the trenches at the front, some Italian prisoners turned up near Nagyrév, who apparently felt fairly free in this land hidden away from civilisation, so despite the fact that formally they were shut in a prisoner-of-war camp, they moved about the district without much trouble. The result was some physical fraternising between the soldiers from the Apennines and the Magyar women, leading to pregnancies that had to be got rid of; the Italians turned out to be far nicer than Hungarian men, much more gallant towards women, and so the men who returned to Nagyrév from the war came back to a different village from the one which they had left to defend the monarchy.

But Nagyrév and Tiszakürt weren't the only villages of death – there were poisonings in other hamlets and towns along the Tisza as well, including Ókécske and Öcsöd, Tiszaföldvár and Kunszentmárton, and other counties too, where not just the bad men were poisoned, but also children and old people; the crazed marathon of killing spread like an epidemic, an unusual side effect of the Great War. In the end, twenty-eight women stood before the court, and the trial was reported in the local press by Zsigmond Móricz in person; eight were sentenced to death, about a dozen were given lengthy prison sentences, and Fazekas herself committed suicide – by taking poison, needless to say.

In the case of the poisoners of Nagyrév, it was hard to create a pop-culture legend like the one that surrounds Elisabeth Báthory; on the whole, despite its incredible appeal, the incident is not widely known. There is, of course, György Pálfi's feature film *Hukkle*, in which the action has been transferred to the present day, but unfortunately it's an avant-garde movie with no dialogue. Essentially we know what it's about, but it tells the story in an unbearable way; the high-flown artistry – involving no words being uttered, though throughout the film we can hear an old man hiccupping, other people slurping and smacking their lips and pigs grunting – is meant to be enough of a script. There's also a novel by the British writer Jessica Gregson called *The Angel Makers*, which in Polish came out as *The Witches' Dance*, and which is set, naturally, in a Hungarian village, not in fact called Nagyrév, but Falucska, which can be translated as "small village"; the town near Falucska is called Város, meaning "town", and so we have a town called Town and a village called Village. The main character is named Sari; in the first few pages of the novel she is fourteen and is reading *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. The main witch in Gregson's version is named Judit Fekete; she is undoubtedly Júlia Fazekas – the camouflage is too transparent. [...]

In 2005 a Dutch filmmaker called Astrid Bussink made a half-hour documentary called *The Angelmakers*, the story of the crimes at Nagyrév, in which the now ancient witnesses to the years of poisoning tell their story, some very old women, who were little girls at the time. Surely in 2014 most of them are no longer be alive, because they must have been well over eighty when the film was made; they're hunched and wrinkled, swathed in flowery headscarves, and they speak softly, thoughtfully, but also with firm conviction that what they're saying is the pure truth. You can see life's tribulations in their eyes, but a sort of strange playfulness too. As one of these old women relates with a weary smile, one of the poisoners had an inscription carved on her victim's gravestone that read: 'I shall join my beloved husband for my eternal rest'.

Perhaps the most shocking thing about the film is the calmly stated assurance that during all those years everyone knew perfectly well what was going on, and who had poisoned whom; probably even the men had heard about these practices, though none of them would admit the thought that he could be the next victim, so obtuse is male pride. More than that: at the time nobody really regarded these poisonings as murders, nor perhaps do they today, but rather as an expression of helplessness, a desperate means of escape from the slavery of marriages full of violence and drunkenness. And it was all regarded the same way in other villages, in other counties, not just on the Tisza River, but – if the stories are to be believed – all over the country carved out of the former empire after the First World War, even in western Hungary, in villages in Zal County. As one of the women says, flypaper is a familiar item everywhere, isn't it?

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

ZIEMOWIT SZCZEREK

MORDOR'S COMING TO EAT US, OR A SECRET HISTORY OF THE SLAVS

© Sebastian Frąckiewicz

Ziemowit Szczerek *(born 1978) is a historian, journalist and editorial commentator for* Nowa Europa Wschodnia *("New Eastern Europe"). He is working on a PhD in political science. He is fascinated by Eastern Europe and, as he puts it, by geopolitical, historical and cultural oddities.* Mordor's Coming... *won him the Paszport Prize awarded by the news weekly* Polityka.

Ziemowit Szczerek spent several years travelling around Ukraine, and has been the length and breadth of it, from Lviv to Odessa, and from Chernivtsi to Dnipropetrovsk. This highly unconventional book is the result of his experiences there. It isn't reportage, or travel writing, or a guidebook for tourists, but more like a great big parody of the standard ways of writing about the 'wild East' or 'the post-Soviet jungle', a place as fascinating as it is dangerous. Everything gets caricatured here, including the Kerouac-style road trip, Andrzej Stasiuk's chronicles of 'second-rate Europe' such as *The Road to Babadag*, and amateur accounts of journeys to the East to be found by the hundreds in travel blogs, as well as on more professionally produced tourist websites. This particular source is of primary importance: at one point Szczerek betrays that his Ukrainian tales were first written in response to a commission from a Krakow-based website. However, there was a condition – his articles about Ukraine had to be in gonzo style. As Szczerek says: 'In those articles I shocked readers with Ukrainian shittiness and arsehole behaviour. It had to be dirty, nasty and cruel. That's the essence of gonzo.' So Szczerek's travel stories are clearly a hoax – he has consciously distorted Ukrainian reality: things that were only slightly ugly are now as monstrous and hideous as the Mordor of the title, drowning in a sea of alcohol and universal violence, populated with characters out of bandit rap or a horror film.

Is it the schoolboy joke of an irresponsible author? Not necessarily, because Szczerek has managed to extract the not-so-obvious, critical energy to be found in national stereotypes and – more broadly – in Polish images of 'Russki savages' and the dirty, uncivilized East. His distorted portrayal of Ukrainians becomes a cruel self-portrait of Poles – sure of their own cultural and historical superiority, and enjoying the fact that their version of post-communism is far better than the Ukrainian kind. Szczerek shows that this patronising attitude comes from a lack of self-confidence; we use Ukrainian 'inferiority' – which in fact is probably more superficial than real – as a remedy for our own complexes. He examines, for

example, his compatriots' expeditions en masse to the old borderlands of pre-war Poland (eastern Galicia, and most often Lviv, formerly known as Lwów), and how pitifully and indecently they play the role of 'Polish lords and masters'. However, he certainly doesn't cast himself in the role of a moralist, concerned about the revival of imperialist or colonial attitudes among Poles; he rarely goes beyond mockery, not all of it clever, and some of it extremely vulgar for no particular reason.

Life has added a grim epilogue to Ziemowit Szczerek's book. It has turned out that some of the phenomena contributing to the Ukrainian mores and mentality, so entertainingly described by this Krakow-based author, have led to political conflict. At first it could seem that Szczerek largely invents a Byzantine-Soviet threat and only seeks features of Eastern Europe that are completely contrary to the rest of Europe, and that he does it for literary effect, in accordance with the gonzo style. But now, unfortunately this distortion has at least to some degree turned out to be prophetic.

Dariusz Nowacki
Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones and Scotia Gilroy

ZIEMOWIT SZCZEREK
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GONZO

MORDOR'S COMING TO EAT US, OR A SECRET HISTORY OF THE SLAVS

And so it turned out that I'd managed to make a profession out of bullshitting. Telling lies.To put it more professionally– reinforcing national stereotypes. Predominantly foul ones.

It's worth it,because nothing sells better in Poland than *Schadenfreude*. I know this well. It was enough just to write a few articles about Ukraine in a gonzo style – and I had an assignment. In those articles I shocked readers with Ukrainian shittiness and arsehole behaviour.It had to be dirty, nasty and cruel. That's the essence of gonzo. In gonzo there's booze, fags, drugs and chicks. There are vulgarities. That's how I wrote, and it was good.

The best regular commission I got was from one of Krakow's brand-new websites. Every week I was supposed to send a chunk of Ukrainian meat. They were expecting hardcore, so hardcore's what they got.

But before that I had to think up a pseudonym. I didn't want to publish this rubbish under my own name. And so I wrote as Paul Poncki. I figured that would be cool. Biblical pseudonyms always sound good. Like Jesus in *The Big Lebowski* or Chris Pontius in Jackass.

Well, in any case, they paid. And they sponsored a series of trips to Ukraine. And so I bullshitted in my articles mightily, and I made up stories that were so hardcore nobody could possibly believe them.I turned Ukraine into a complete bordello, a hellà la Kusturica, where anything at all can, and does, happen. The wild, wild east. Polish people liked it, clicked on it and read it. And the more they clicked, the more willingly the advertisers paid. In Poland, selling negative stereotypes about our neighbours yielded solid cash.

But it didn't mean I had something against Ukraine. I didn't. Everything I wrote just came of its own accord. And as normally happens, at the beginning I had the best of intentions. Or rather – I didn't have any bad ones. Yes, I know what Hell is paved with.

So I travelled around Ukraine and searched for things to write about. They were everywhere, it was enough to just look around. [...]

I sat down in a bar. A couple of 60-year-olds were sitting there. They looked like an American enclave on Ukrainian territory. They had such American faces that there was no way they could be from anywhere else. That typical self-confidence mixed with a lost look.

The area at and around their table was America and nothing else. Not the city of Izmail, in the Budjak region of Ukraine. America was there in their facial expression, their gestures, and their way of dealing with space. She, sitting stiff as a poker, was mad about something, but she

was restraining her anger, she had control of it; the anger was reflected solely in her fierce facial expression and in the drumming of her long, thin fingers on the keyboard of a laptop; she drummed like a rainstorm. As for him – he didn't know quite what to do with himself. He had the elongated face of an American loser from a Hollywood film. By turns he read a newspaper, glanced at the screen of his mobile phone, at the Kilia River and at Romania on the far side of it. Sometimes he tried to talk to the woman, but she – tall, thin, with a sharp nose, and rather sharp all over – just hissed at him.

I sat down at the next table. The woman was attacking the keyboard as if she wanted to destroy her laptop entirely. The guy glanced at me hopefully. At my backpack, at my clothes which gave me away as a foreigner. He was clearly trying to figure out how to start talking to me. And it was obvious he really needed to talk.

Finally he got up, came over, and said: "They've got pretty hot babes here in Ukraine, haven't they?" And then he added, more quietly so his wife wouldn't hear: "Feminism hasn't given them swollen heads yet."

It was so stupid, pathetic and desperate that I felt sorry for him. I invited him to sit down. And so he sat down and began his lament, which you could call the Peace Corps worker's blues.

A one, and a two, and a one, two, three, four:

His name is Jack. His wife's name is Ruth. Jack and Ruth are from Boston. Not so long ago, when they led the typical lives of members of the American middle class, they promised themselves that when they retired they would tour the world. His wife – *oo-oo, the Peace Corps worker's blues* – dreamed of helping people in foreign countries, which they'd only had a rather foggy idea about until then. And so, when they retired, which both of them happened to do in the same year, they decided to join the Peace Corps. *Oo-oo, the Peace Corps worker's blues*.

The wife – like almost everyone in America at a certain point in their lives – began to dig into her origins, curious about what kind of European roots she had. All the information about her ancestors was rather dull – every trail led to England, Scotland, Ireland, or Germany – except one: leading to Ukraine. *Oo-oo, the Peace Corps worker's blues*.

They signed a contract for two years. All they knew was that they were going somewhere in Ukraine. That's how it is in the Peace Corps –you don't know where they're sending you until the very last minute. They dreamed of Odessa, and he'd written on the form that he had worked for a firm that took care of the logistics of loading cargo ships. That's why he and his wife wanted to go to a city on the sea. Maybe he could be useful at a port, as an adviser or something. He would tell the people of the East how the fuckin' logistics of loading cargo ships works in America. And so they sat on their suitcases and waited for a decision from Odessa. *Oo-oo, the Peace Corps worker's blues*. But perverse fate, in the form of some spiteful bureaucrat, sent them to Izmail.

"You got what you wanted," the bureaucrat said. "Ukraine, with the sea close by. There you go."

Jack looked sadly into my eyes, and I glanced at his wife smashing her laptop to bits.

"For two years?" I asked.

"For two years," he replied, and for a moment we were silent. All that could be heard was some Russian disco and the clatter of the keyboard.

"And how much of it have you got through, so far?"

"Two weeks.

Oo-oo, the Peace Corps worker's blues.

"And so?" I asked, lighting a cigarette. "Are you doing some kind of work? Involved with the sea?"

The guy glanced at the table and noticed a pool of beer. He wetted his finger in it and began to draw squiggles on the table.

"Yeah, tell him, Jack," his wife suddenly blurted from behind the laptop. "Tell him."

"Y-yyeah," said Jack. "A few days ago… we took some kids from an elementary school class to the sea. And we cleaned the beach. We cleared the beach of bottles and…. things like that."

"And condoms," we heard from above the laptop.

"And condoms," Jack obediently confirmed.

"But it's not that we don't like it here," he added quickly. "The city is…nice. It's… peaceful. Not much happens, but… at our age… that's an asset. It's… hm… warm. Pleasant. Odessa isn't that far away…." he said, while his wife pounded the laptop as if she wanted to smash it into splinters.

"That's great," I said. "But can't you go back to the States earlier? You know, in the unlikely case that you stop liking it here someday."

Jack shook his head. "No, we can't. We signed a contract. But no, no, no, listen, it's really great here," he quickly stammered, revving up the engine of his positive American approach to the subject.

I didn't even have to invent any gonzo.

Translated by Scotia Gilroy

WOJCIECH JAGIELSKI

THE TRUMPETER FROM TEMBISA: THE ROAD TO MANDELA

© Krzysztof Dubiel / The Polish Book Institute

Wojciech Jagielski *(born 1960) is a journalist and foreign correspondent specialising in Africa, Central Asia and the Caucasus. For many years he reported for Poland's leading newspaper,* Gazeta Wyborcza, *and now works for the Polish Press Agency. His books have been translated into English, Spanish, Dutch and Italian.*

"One issue that deeply worried me in prison was the false image I unwittingly projected to the outside world; of being regarded as a saint. But I was never a saint. I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying." This is the quote from Nelson Mandela that Wojciech Jagielski has chosen as the motto for his book of reportage, *The Trumpeter from Tembisa*.

In fact, none of its main characters is a saint. Each one sins because of a characteristic that only appears to be virtuous. It is called "passion", and it destroys everything that stands in its way. And the book has three main characters: Mandela (a leader of the anti-apartheid movement and South Africa's first black president), Freddie Maake, nicknamed "Saddam" (South Africa's number one soccer fan and inventor of the vuvuzela), and finally, Jagielski himself. Let's start with him.

One of Poland's best known, most highly respected foreign correspondents, he went to South Africa for the first time in 1993. A year later he witnessed the fall of apartheid, but for a long time he couldn't find the key to describing the South African revolution. His first endeavour resulted in *Burning the Grass*, a book in which he focused on the history of a single town. Published shortly before Mandela's death, *The Trumpeter from Tembisa* is a more comprehensive approach to the subject.

The subtitle is *The Road to Mandela*. It's not just about the road travelled by South Africa to the collapse of apartheid, but also about the author's road to his hero. Jagielski tells how he longed to meet Mandela as soon as he heard about the unusual aura surrounding him. For several years his goal came closer and moved away, but throughout it remained unattainable. And that was what prompted him to write a book about a certain idea of Mandela, rather than about the man himself. The man of flesh and blood constantly eludes him, refusing to come down from his pedestal, though the reporter does his best not to be uncritical of him (for example, he writes about Mandela's close relationship with Muammar Qaddafi).

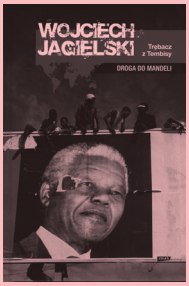
Perhaps this is why Jagielski has chosen "Saddam" as a central character too. This is a man he could talk to, and observe

at close range. This choice means that the book is also a modern history of South Africa told from the angle of soccer: from the ban on South African players taking part in international contests (which was the West's way of punishing them for the apartheid system), to the recent world championships, so deeply desired by our "Saddam". But what exactly connects him with Mandela? One man's passion is politics, the other's is soccer. They're so far apart, and yet so close together.

But above all, *The Trumpeter from Tembisa* is the story of the great passion of a reporter who constantly wants to be close to the most important events and reach the inaccessible, because he can't or doesn't know how to quell his insatiable appetite for adventure. Unfortunately, he sacrifices his loved ones to this passion. But couldn't the same thing also be said of Mandela and "Saddam"?

This book was shortlisted for the Ryszard Kapuściński Prize, Poland's top award for works of reportage.

Małgorzata I. Niemczyńska



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THE TRUMPETER FROM TEMBISA: THE ROAD TO MANDELA

In the waiting room at the President's office I automatically ran an eye over the newspapers laid out on the table. One of them had a small item on the front page headlined: *What Is the Secret of the Witches' Hill?*

I started to read.

People from the village had come to kill Albertina Mololo, because they regarded her as a witch. They were sure it was because of her spells that lightning had killed three herdsmen rounding up their cattle one evening. Night had already fallen when they gathered outside her hut and set fire to the thatch. They blocked the door and windows so that she couldn't get out of the burning hut. They sang and danced. Albertina Moloto said she can still hear that singing to this day. Then God sent help in the form of a police patrol, who broke down the door and dragged Albertina out of the blaze. She was lying unconscious on the clay floor, clutching a Bible.

From the police reports it emerged that in the year when Mandela took power, almost a hundred people accused of witchcraft were murdered in northern Transvaal. A year later the number of victims of witch hunts had risen to two hundred, and the next year almost five hundred people were burned at the stake.

As I leaned over the newspaper, I didn't realize that Jessie, one of Mandela's assistants, had silently opened the huge door separating the waiting room from the President's office. I only noticed her when she came and stood in front of me.

All day I had been looking forward to this moment, but at the same time I was dreading it, and deep down I wasn't feeling any impatience at all. I preferred to go on waiting than to be disappointed.

I had been trying to get an interview with Mandela for such a long time and so doggedly that it had become a virtual obsession. Meeting him seemed to me the one and only, most vital goal. [...] I wanted to meet Mandela in person, because only by doing so could I discover the real source of the indomitable strength that had allowed him to overcome the obstacles, conquer his weaknesses and remain true to himself. I was sure that to get to the bottom of this mystery, all I needed was a short meeting, a few minutes, a few words in conversation.

This time it was all meant to go like clockwork. This time I was actually going to meet Mandela. One of his friends and closest confidants had promised me. He had set a date and a time for the audience.

Though I could sense that Jessie was there, standing over me, I didn't look up from the newspaper.

"Unfortunately it's not good news," she said. "Mr Mandela is very busy. He's not seeing any journalists at the moment. None at all. I've been asked to stress that. I'm very sorry." [...]

Without trying to hide my disappointment and irritation – in fact rather brazenly showing them to Jessie, as if she were to blame for it all, I awkwardly got up from my chair and headed for the exit. As I held out my hand in farewell, I realized that I was holding the newspaper with the article about witches.

"Please take it," said Jessie, smiling. "Maybe it'll come in useful?"

The witches' village was called Helen, and it was on the banks of the Limpopo. The only people who lived there had been driven out of their villages for performing witchcraft, or had been rescued by the police at the last moment from being burned alive. [...]

The village consisted of three dozen new huts, made of hollow bricks, all the same shape and color. Set in even rows along a red-brown, potholed road, they looked like army barracks in the wilderness, in a Godforsaken, abandoned corner of the world.

All around, as far as the eye could see, stretched the desert, dark brown in the thickening gloom, dotted here and there with dusty cactuses and clumps of leafless, stunted trees.

I failed to get there before the storm. As I drove into the village, the dirt road was already changing into a muddy puddle. The huts along it were drowning in streams of rain, and thunderclaps seemed to be ripping the air apart, as dry and piercing as rifle shots.

I stopped the car in the middle of the village, outside one of the shacks, which was no different from all the rest. They all looked deserted.

My plan was to visit Albertina Moloto, whom I had read about in the newspaper at Mandela's office. But as nobody but witches lived in Helen, it didn't much matter which door I knocked on to ask for an interview – and maybe a bed for the night, too, if the storm were still raging.

The shack I had stopped outside belonged to Ngoepe Makgabo. In a bright flash of lightning her kind, furrowed face seemed to change into the mask of a demon.

The storm didn't make her feel threatened, though it brought back the memory of a similar night when the neighbors from her old village had dragged her out of her hut and accused her of attracting the lightning that had set one of their homes on fire. Waving flaming torches and machetes, they pushed her ahead, driving her towards a mango tree at the edge of the village, where they wanted to hang her. Only a few of them were in favor of sparing her life and just driving her out of the village forever. They were already beyond it, nearly at the spot where the execution was due to take place, when the sky was torn apart again by more flashes of lightning, and the earth shook with the crash of thunderbolts.

Seized with alarm, they fell to the ground. Ngoepe Makgabo was the first to get to her feet and make a run for it, into the darkness. She hid in the undergrowth beyond the village. She saw them looking for her, lighting their way with flaming torches. "*Moloi!* Witch!" she heard their voices in the distance. But they kept close to the edge of the village, and were afraid to venture further into the bush and the night.

"Bah! Envious low-down cowards!" she said, spitting disdainfully on the clay floor. "They wronged me out of jealousy! My fame, and the fact that I had money, had stuck in their throats!"

She wasn't a witch, but a *sangoma*, a good spell-caster, fortune-teller and folk healer. She never did people any harm. On the contrary, she tried to help them, by healing them with herbs and seeking advice from the ancestral spirits, with whom she could communicate. It was they who told her how to make medicine and amulets that heal all sorts of ailments and woes.

Drinking from a bottle of caramel beer, she reached into her bosom for a small leather bag. She plunged a hand into it, and fumbling inside it, muttered under her breath.

This little sack was where she kept some magic bones, from which she could read the signs. Sometimes she tossed them to the ground to find out what was wrong with someone and how to treat the illness. But if somebody came to the *sangoma* for professional advice, or for help winning the heart of a woman, she told the customer to cast the bones himself. Then she read what they were saying, and prepared the *muti* – the remedy.

She bought most of the ingredients at herbalist shops in the town of Seshego. You could get practically anything there: lizard fat, powdered snakeskin, desiccated spiders and crocodile liver, lion claws, baboon testicles, all manner of herbs, roots and pieces of bark. But for some plants she had to go all the way to the banks of the Limpopo River.

If she ever betrayed the recipe for *muti*, she'd anger the ancestral spirits who had revealed this secret to her, and bring down their curse and vengeance on herself. But she swore that in preparing *muti* she never used human body parts, as some sorcerers did. They stole corpses from morgues and graveyards, or hired thugs to carry out ritual murders.

She knew how to cure all illnesses and had a remedy for everything. She treated migraines and impotence, and would even have been able to find a medicine for the incurable plague that in the big cities they called AIDS. But she was also able to help with ordinary, everyday matters.

Even important dignitaries and men of great wealth from Pretoria and Johannesburg came to her for advice and medicine. They took the trouble to find her here, in exile in the village of Helen. [...]

"My *muti* can help with any trouble," she said. "It'll give you anything you desire."

On the wall of her hut, between an image of the Virgin Mary and a portrait of the Pope, there was a photograph of Nelson Mandela cut out of a newspaper.

"Anything you desire," she repeated, crossing herself automatically at the sound of another thunderclap. "If you want, I can get you anything. Any woman, any prize, any dream."

I asked how much it cost.

She replied that each treatment and each *muti* had a different price, and that she took payment both in cash and in kind. She also warned me that to work well, sometimes the *muti* had to be changed, so the treatment rarely ended with a single session.

"I've never had anybody complain afterwards," she said.

"But how much would I have to pay for the whole thing?"

"Now you'd pay like everyone else. Five hundred rand for an appointment. But once you get what you're asking for, you come back to me and tell me how much it was worth to you."

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

PAWEŁ SMOLEŃSKI

EYES FILLED WITH SAND

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Paweł Smoleński *(born 1959) is a journalist and foreign correspondent for Poland's leading newspaper,* Gazeta Wyborcza. *An expert on the Middle East, he has won numerous awards for his reporting.* Eyes Filled with Sand *is his eleventh book.*

Red-roofed houses, the sunrise over a gray wall, a field of dark-brown soil, an old woman's sad smile, dust rising over a heap of rubble after the bulldozers have passed, the wreck of a car, burning olive trees. Each element of the world Paweł Smoleński shows in his book *Eyes Filled With Sand* has its own color, smell and taste, but perhaps above all: it has its own temperature.

Symmetry is the ideal shape for the debate around the conflict in the Middle East, but it's so difficult to achieve. In reportage on the subject usually one side seems somehow more justified. This is not the first time Smoleński has been to the Holy Land. In his books *Israel Will No Longer Be Flying High* and *An Arab Fires and a Jew Delights*, Smoleński mainly described the fate of Israel in his characteristic, sensual style. In *Eyes Filled With Sand*, it's time to show above all the suffering of Palestinians living in the territories Israel dominates, for this famous reporter is not in the habit of limiting himself to describing only one side. "I'm a proud Jew and a very ashamed Israeli," says one of the main characters of this latest book.

Once again Smoleński presents front-page events from the standpoint of those living in the most volatile scrap of land on planet Earth. He lets their voices be heard, not always filling in additional information or broadening the perspective. The readers are given the impression they're the ones speaking to the people Smoleński has met, and it's up to them to decide whether to go deeper into the subject, to verify what they've heard. Here there are stories involving tortured prisoners, destroyed water cisterns, the daily battle with the occupiers, and also a peculiar way of "getting rich on the conflict," just to mention the boom in smuggling that resulted from the economic blockade of the Gaza Strip.

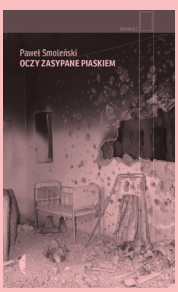
The character from Smoleński's book who sticks in your mind the most is without a doubt nine-year-old Mustafa, who was used as a human shield while some Palestinian men threw stones at Israeli soldiers. But in the pages of *Eyes Filled With Sand* the reader also encounters, for example, Hanna Barag, one of the "grandmothers from Machsom Watch," who have gotten involved with monitoring the treatment of civilians at checkpoints. Or Arna Mer-Khamis, who died of cancer

– a pro-Palestinian Jew who ran a theater group promoting reconciliation between the two communities. And many more.

Eyes Filled With Sand is streaked with sadness, and that sadness comes from the conviction that nothing will change anytime soon. For instance, writing about Jenin, a town in the Occupied Territories situated in the north of the West Bank, Smoleński says that was where he understood "why – when I comeback here in a few years – I'll almost certainly still be walking through the same street scene: decaying, rain- and sun-bleached photographs of young men in the headbands of the shaheeds (definitely green, but the posters have faded so much you have to imagine the color). I'll see fuzzy portraits of young Ashraf, Yusuf, Ali and many other martyred terrorists. So what if they were actors in the Freedom Theater when they were children, who played dogs and kings or recited Orwell on stage? They aren't valued for that here, after all."

The title story concerns one of the main characters in the book. To quote exactly, the author writes of him that he has "eyes filled with the sand of sorrow, disappointment, and dislike." These words also apply to many other people engaged in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And perhaps that's exactly why the metaphorical "street scene" not only of Jenin, but of many other corners of the Holy Land too, will remain the same for a long time yet.

Małgorzata I. Niemczyńska



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EYES FILLED WITH SAND

WIEN

Hanna Barag met General Moshe Ya'alon, then head of the Israeli Army, she was already long retired.

The general was an ex-paratrooper, commando and soldier in the Mossad's special units, known for having a heavy hand. (Today he's a well-known Israeli politician.)

Hanna Barag is a respectable 70-year-old lady, with hair as white as a dove. She has two very grown-up children, five grandchildren, and there are sure to be more. She has worked, among other things, as head of General Moshe Dayan's secretarial staff. Her experience in managing people and having conversations with the great and the good is something that has always come in handy.

Her makeup is light and her hairdo looks fresh out of the beauty salon. She wears discreet earrings and glasses in thin, gold frames. [...]

That time three of them went to see the General: petite, gray-haired ladies, and Hanna the most petite of all, most likely in subtle makeup and gold earrings. The second Palestinian Intifada had just broken out, an uprising known for its terror attacks and suicide bombers.

"Moshe came into the office, his shoes rapping against the floor," she tells me. "Tall, powerful, almost sky-high compared to me, handsome, stern, a real warrior. He had a military manner and a low voice, I maybe came up to his knees. He would ask questions blithely, but politely; I'm sure he thought, the poor thing, that this was some sort of courtesy visit. But we told him about the checkpoints, about what was going on there with the military and border guards, and that such things were simply unacceptable. But we also told him how the soldiers were feeling, how their service was going, how it could be made more tolerable, we gave figures, dates, times, and facts. After all, these soldiers are only a little older than our grandchildren, if at all.

"If Moshe had suddenly won a war against the entire Arab world by himself he would probably have been less shocked," says Hanna."His eyes were as big as saucers. He was expecting these three old ladies to beat most slightly hysterical, but he found himself talking to partners who knew what was going on. He gave us his private phone numbers, he gave us permission to call at any time, and the military opened up a special intervention hotline. He meant well," Hanna thinks, "but he was also scared these old ladies would lose it completely."

"Now we'll stand by the wall, right here, please," says Hanna. "Stand close, I don't have a strong voice. Be quiet, there's enough noise here. And no pictures. It's not necessarily against the rules, but it's better not to take pictures,

because it upsets the soldiers, and we mustn't disturb them, this job is boring enough as it is, it's dumb and stressful, I wouldn't be able to do it myself."

It's very early in the morning, cold, but it'll turn into a scorching hot day. Thousands of Palestinians are going to work in Israel, passing through the checkpoint on the road from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. Hanna got here when the sky had only just started to brighten. She is watching to make sure everything's all right.

"How the soldiers monitoring the Palestinians behave is a reflection on ourselves," she says. "Us, Israelis, all of us. It doesn't matter if we're for or against the occupation. You have to treat people like people, regardless of the circumstances. Apart from anything else it's good for Israel."

And so we're having this conversation in a place that blocks the once-open Route 60 between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, leading south towards distant Beersheba, and north all the way to Galilee and Nazareth: a route walked by Abraham, David and Jesus. It's called Checkpoint 300 or Terminal 300. I'm sure no one likes this place.

When Hanna goes home, she puts together a precise report: what, who, at what time and, in her opinion, for what reason. That very afternoon the report will be posted on a website. Sometimes it's preceded by a few polite, firm phone calls to the top Israeli military officers. [...]

A soldier comes up to us, a long-haired, very young, rather plump girl with a rifle slung over her shoulder. She glances at Hanna and, looking bored, goes back where she came from. There is no friendliness in her look, but there are no intentions either; I'd call it indifference and respect.

Hanna doesn't notice the girl, because she's listening to the voices coming from the other side of one of the gates; the Palestinians standing in line are arguing with one another. When the argument dies down, I point at the name tag hanging from Hanna's neck by a thin tape, which is completely out of keeping with her elegant clothing.

"It's my only weapon, "she says, smiling, and spells out the inscription "Machsom Watch.""And who would give an old lady any trouble?" she adds.

And I think she even winks at me.

In Hebrew a checkpoint is called a *machsom*, in Arabic – a *hayez*. Israelis and Palestinians both know that word all too well. If I took pictures of checkpoints and then compared the photos, I wouldn't be able to find any similarities between them. Terminal 300 looks like an enormous covered market with fractured passages and corridors, locks and glass-walled booths where soldiers sit, illuminated by their computer monitors. Private security employees wear dark-blue, worn-out bulletproof vests. Steel gates open at the command of an electronic signal. Closed doors lead to secret rooms. Guards search through pockets and plastic bags of food, check passes and scan fingerprints. There's a smell of rushed, agitated people, some of them terrified, as they often are at borders, only here there is no real border, because after all there's no Palestinian state.

And through the last gate lies Israel: a crowd of men on low walls and bald lawns, minibuses waiting for workers, mobile stands with coffee and tea. When the crowd heads off at around seven from Jerusalem to Ashkelon or Tel Aviv, it leaves behind piles of trash, discarded bits of paper, heaps of cigarette butts, and disposable plastic cups.

Meanwhile, a crossing like Kalandia north of Jerusalem is an eternal bottleneck, more so on the Palestinian side, because no one checks those entering the Palestinian Autonomous Areas from Israel. There's a smell of gasoline fumes, the asphalt on the pavement is torn up in places, and the parking lots on the Arab side are over-filled. People sell nuts and sunglasses at stalls. The cacophony of car horns is so loud it hurts your ears.

Erez, where you can cross into the Gaza Strip, looks like an abandoned spaceship, aside from the dozen or so Palestinian kids being escorted by their mothers or sick people being helped by a caregiver. Questions asked by invisible border guards flow from the walls or the ceiling– anonymous, firm commands. When I crossed through Erez some hidden Big Brother ordered me to take everything out of my pockets. I stood – as ordered – with my hands up, and then Big Brother said: "You have a ball of paper in your pocket." I dug out a wrinkled piece of cigarette paper the size of a small fingernail and put it on the shining steel counter. Big Brother was satisfied.

But what always makes the biggest impression on me is the tiny checkpoint linking Arab Hebron to the entrance to the Ibrahimi Mosque in the part of the Old City controlled by Israel. Steel doors suddenly close off a dark and narrow, ancient alley way covered by an arched vault. Beyond it is a regular cage, ending with a full-length steel turnstile. Once in a while the turnstile grinds a few people through, and the rest are crowded into the cage, observed by soldiers hidden behind concrete slabs. There are no computers or advanced technology, only the eyes of the border guards X-raying everyone who passes through. No one asks to see a pass; they're not needed right here. The soldiers' eyes see everything, even in a horribly crowded cage.

Maybe it's cages on the Palestinian side that all the checkpoints have in common (small ones like in Hebron, spacious ones at Terminal 300 and in Kalandia, or hundreds of meters long in Erez). And that fear as well, that uncertainty, the conviction that the person passing through the checkpoint is nobody, that you can do anything to them: humiliate them, debase them, destroy them, beat them up. Hanna Barag comes to the place where Jerusalem and Bethlehem meet to limit that "anything."

There are several dozen of these main checkpoints monitored by Machsom Watch. If we added the blockades, large concrete blocks laid out on the highways, or extra barriers obstructing the on-ramps on to the highways, if we count the temporary, mobile monitoring points, in total there would be around a thousand in the Occupied Territories. The grandmothers from Machsom Watch know almost everything about almost all of them.

Translated by Sean Gasper Bye

WITOLD SZABŁOWSKI

DANCING BEARS


© Albert Zawada AG

Witold Szabłowski *(born 1980) is a correspondent for Poland's leading newspaper,* Gazeta Wyborcza. *He has won numerous awards, including the Beata Pawlak Prize for his first book,* The Assassin from Apricot City, *which was listed by* World Literature Today *as one of the top ten translated books of 2013.*

"Ladies and gentlemen, presenting... the bear!" as Jan Brzechwa wrote. He may be only a few years old, or possibly more than thirty. He has thick fur, weighs two hundred kilos, and has something called a "holka" through his nose – a metal ring that was stuck into the most sensitive part of his body by his master, a gypsy. As a result, the bear does as he's told – he stands up on his hind legs and dances, does impressions of famous sportsmen, politicians or other stars, and lets you stroke him for good luck before you buy a lottery ticket. He usually lives near human habitations and eats several loaves of bread per day. He chews them very slowly, because in most cases his teeth have been knocked out.

In this book of reportage, Witold Szabłowski describes the years leading up to Bulgaria's accession to the European Union. One of the many changes that were made there at the time involved the country's dancing bears, which have been taken away from their gipsy owners by an animal rights organisation and relocated to a special park, where they've learned to be free. It sounds like a splendid idea. But is it really?

The book opens with a conversation with one of the former bear owners. For him, parting with the bear was a dramatic event. He claims to have treated his animal like a member of the family, saying he never beat it. In fact, it was quite the opposite – he cared for it as well as he possibly could. The bears travel to their – symbolic – freedom in cages. Accustomed to living among people, they find it all very confusing. They keep putting their paws to their noses, from which the metal rings have suddenly been removed. They don't know how to get food for themselves, and must learn how to hibernate; as they're not very resourceful they have to be castrated – for how could they teach their young? On top of that, the range of their freedom is limited by an electrified fence.

"Freedom is an extremely tricky business. You have to apply it gradually," says one of the animals' new keepers. Surely by now everyone will have realised that this book isn't just about bears. It reminds me of a famous report entitled "Paw in paw," written in 1976 by the journalist Barbara N. Łopieńska, who used tiger training as a metaphor for the relationship

between the Polish regime and its citizens in the era of "real socialism." Nowadays it is cited as the standard example of Aesopian journalism. But Szabłowski doesn't need the animal metaphor to outwit the censors. He can go further. And he does.

The second half of *Dancing Bears* is a set of reports from various parts of the world, each of which has been in some way affected by a change of system. Szabłowski has already shown himself to be sceptical about the benefits of capitalism (especially in the book he co-wrote with Izabela Meyza, *Our Mini People's Poland*, about daily life in the communist era), and a similar, though ambiguous, attitude comes through in these texts. Dynamic language and the careful eye of the observer guarantee that Szabłowski's accounts, whether from Cuba, Ukraine or the Balkans, are truly fascinating.

Małgorzata I. Niemczyńska

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DANCING BEARS

He comes to me at night. He gazes at me, puffs on his pipe and twirls his moustache. He smiles, and then heads for the door. Then I weep and cry for him to stay. But what guy would be bothered about a woman crying? Georgian men are like that: they have a drink, enter you, come quickly, and fall asleep. I hate men who drink. But here in Gori there's no other kind. The other kind only exist in American films.

Stalin was a different matter. Highly civilised. He knew how to take care of a woman, how to pay her a compliment, how to smell nice. He lived modestly, but he wore smart clothes. And he didn't drink too much. And if he did, it was only good, foreign alcohol. I hardly need mention the fact that he conquered fascism and Hitler. So I said to myself many years ago: "Tanya, why the hell should you have to squabble with drunks? Why the hell, when you can live with Stalin?"

ANNA SRESELI: HE'S LIKE FAMILY

We're standing outside the house where Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin was born. His parents lived in poverty. His mother did the laundry for the local priests. His father was a cobbler. As you can see, his house has had a structure in the classical style built around it, and the neighbouring ones have been demolished. Yes, the entire district. No, I don't think there's anything odd about that. Would you be happier if there were hens crapping here, and children playing ball? [...]

A few years ago we had a war. The border with Ossetia isn't far away. A hundred Russian tanks drove into Gori. We fled to Tbilisi, but I wasn't afraid they'd blow up my housing block and my apartment, only that they'd blow up the museum. But they didn't hurt a thing. They're still afraid of Stalin. They didn't touch the smallest patch of grass, they just took photos of each other by his statue. And that's how Stalin saved us from beyond the grave.

When I was at school, some of the girls dreamed of working in a shop, others longed to fly into outer space, but I wanted to tell people about our great compatriot. I steered my entire life towards making it come true. I started to study history. And after college I ran straight to the museum to ask for a job.

But by then the Soviet Union had collapsed. The museum was closed and had barely survived. They only recently began to employ people again. I was the first person to be accepted in the new intake. Meanwhile I'd started to teach history at the high school – so I work half time at the museum.

When I was at college, we were still taught that Stalin was an outstanding statesman. But the system changed, the curriculum changed, and now I have to teach that he was a tyrant and a criminal. I don't think that's true. The resettlements? They were necessary for people to live in peace. The killings? He wasn't responsible for them, it was Beria. The famine in Ukraine? That was a natural disaster. The Katyń massacre? I knew you'd ask. All the Poles ask about it. But there was a war on – in wartime that sort of action is a normal thing. And before you start shouting, please let me finish. Are you feeling calmer now? All right, I'll tell you my personal opinion.

I regard Stalin as a great man, but I can't say that either to my pupils or to the tourists. So I say: "Some regard him as a dictator, others as a tyrant, and others see him as a genius. What he really was you can decide for yourselves."

TATIANA MARDZHANISHVILI: O GOD, TAKE ME TO DEAR STALIN

When I see what they've done to our beloved Stalin, my heart bleeds! How could they? How could they make such a good man into a monster, a cannibal, an ogre?

Once upon a time, coach after coach came to our museum. People stood in queues several hundred metres long. I used to look at those people's faces, and I could see the goodness emanating from them. But nowadays? One would bite the other. That's capitalism for you.

Now I don't go there any more. Firstly, because of regret. For my youth, my job, and my friends. And secondly because my legs are weak. I can't even get down the stairs on my own. In March I'll be eighty-two, and you can't expect a person to be healthy all their life. In the morning I get up, cut some bread, make the tea, sit down and say to myself: "O Christ, why did you let me live to see times like these? Why do they badmouth our darling Stalin?"

But later I think to myself: "Just remember, Tanya, how much Stalin suffered for the people. For you too he didn't eat enough, and didn't sleep enough. He fought against fascism so that you could finish your education." And then I fetch the medal with Stalin's face on it, which I was given when I retired. I stroke the darling man's moustache, and somehow I feel better.

I worked at the museum from 1975. As a *nabliudatel*, a person responsible for the order and safety of the exhibits. If anyone tried to touch them, we had to go and shout at them.

It wasn't easy. Old women used to come from the villages and throw themselves at our Stalin. They had to kiss each picture in the display, like icons in a church. And there are over a thousand of those pictures! If a whole coachload of those old biddies drove in, and they all wanted to kiss them, what was I to do? If the manager was looking, I'd go up and shout. But if he wasn't, I'd say: "Kiss away, ladies, may God give you good health! But don't touch the mask! Under no circumstances." The mask is the most sacred object in the entire museum, because it's his death mask.

Earlier I worked at the National Museum in Tbilisi, but my second husband was from Gori, and I managed to arrange a transfer. It wasn't easy. The Stalin museum wasn't a place where you could just walk in off the street and ask: "You haven't got a job opening, have you?" Public opinion counted. I was a divorcee. My first husband drank and beat me – the less said about him the better. At the time I was afraid the divorce would be a problem. Luckily I had a very good reference from the museum in Tbilisi.

The smartest people from all over the world used to come and admire Stalin's house. From all over Russia, Asia and America. Journalists, ambassadors and artists. And I stood among the exhibits with a small card showing my name, as proud as I don't know what. That job meant everything to me. The museum was like a home to me.

My husband didn't understand. I had nothing to talk to him about. Although I only guarded the exhibits, I used to read books and got to know new people. But he drank too. He tried to beat me, but this time I wasn't having it. Later on he fell sick and went on benefits. He'd spend all day long sitting in the flat, or at his mother's. He used to say nasty things about Stalin, just to spite me.

When the USSR collapsed, he stuck out his tongue at me. He got great satisfaction from that. And then he died.

It's a pity he didn't live to the present times. Now I'd be sticking out my tongue at him. What do we need all this capitalism for, all these American cheeses, juices and chocolate? You can't even buy normal milk any more, it has to be in a carton, because that's how it is in America. I think to myself: "O Christ, take me off to my dear Stalin. Take me away from this world, because I can't bear it here any longer." [...]

TATIANA GURGENIDZE: I'D HAVE BEEN GOOD TO HIM

I was born in a bad system. Because I have the mentality of a socialist hero of labour. When something needs to be done for society, I go and do it. I've produced a wall newspaper for the employees. And classes for single mothers bringing up children on their own. During the war, I helped distribute aid.

In the communist era, everyone would have respected me. But now that we've got capitalism, they look at me as if I'm an idiot.

So when I really can't manage anymore, I come to the museum to calm down. And I say: "Mr Stalin, I know you'd appreciate it." And it helps. And when I dream about Stalin – as I told you, he looks at me, twirls his moustache and leaves – it's usually a few days after that sort of calming down.

I'm not really in the right era when it comes to my attitude to men, either. You see, there wasn't any sex in the Soviet Union. There was intercourse between the genders. There wasn't any of what the young people watch on television these days. All those music videos and bare bums, if you'll pardon the expression. If there was a kiss, someone just lightly stroked someone else's arm, and that was enough. A woman had to be a good worker, dress and behave modestly. So when I take a look at today's young girls, I go to the museum too. And I say: "Mr Stalin, you wouldn't like it either." And once again it helps. [...]

And sometimes I go and say to him: "If you were alive, maybe we'd be together. You'd have a good time with me. I know how to cook, I'm a cheerful person, and I can sing well too." And I fantasise about how nice it would be to be Stalin's wife. But later on I reject those thoughts, because I'm behaving like an idiot. Stalin is dead. Communism has collapsed. It's over, it's finished, been and gone.

If I dream about him at a time like that, I'm very cold and official towards him.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

KATARZYNA BONDA

THE DEVOURER


© Bartek Syta

Katarzyna Bonda *(born 1977) is a novelist and documentary maker who specialises in the topic of crime. Her first novel,* The Case of Nina Frank *(2007), was nominated for Poland's top crime-writing prize, the High Calibre Award. Since then she has published* Only the Dead Don't Lie *and* The Florist. *She teaches creative writing in Warsaw.*

Katarzyna Bonda has made a name for herself as the author of a series of crime novels about the Silesian profiler Hubert Meyer, of which the best, by far, is *The Florist*. The writer was also the first in Poland to introduce a police profiler character in her 2007 novel *The Case of Nina Frank*.

The protagonist of her most recent book, *The Devourer*, which opens a tetralogy, is a profiler again, but this time a female one (which is another novelty in Polish crime fiction). Sasha Załuska's own story is also a captivating one, though the reader only gets snippets of it.

Sasha is only thirty-six, but has been through a lot in life. She was a police detective, but after she made a mess of a serial killer's arrest and her alcohol problem came to light, she was fired from her job. However, the disgraced policewoman managed to get her act together. She gave birth to a daughter and started a course in Investigative Psychology at the famous University of Huddersfield, a hotbed for profilers. In 2013 the single mother and her daughter return to their home country. They settle in Sopot. A local businessman who owns a successful club contacts Załuska. He claims that somebody, most likely his business partner, a fallen rock star, wants to kill him. He commissions Sasha to solve the case. Załuska has no idea that she is getting herself into a highly complicated intrigue. Soon afterwards, the rocker is murdered and his female employee is wounded by a gunshot. The investigation leads the profiler to the case of the mysterious deaths of teenage siblings in the early 1990s.

Bonda writes crime novels with plots that are complicated, but clear and logical. *The Devourer* is no different. Most readers will focus their attention on the protagonist, which is not surprising since she makes a fascinating character, perhaps even one of the most interesting characters in crime fiction of recent years. However, there are two other themes featured strongly in *The Devourer*. Apart from the mystery and the motif of crime and punishment, it is a book about the Polish mafia. It seems to be an obvious subject, discussed over and over again in the media, mentioned every time another mobster is taken

to court, but it still does not feature often in crime fiction. Bonda describes the process of building the structures of the mafia in Poland at the turning point of political and economical change in 1989. At first these groups profited mainly from car theft and smuggling alcohol and cigarettes. These were very rough people, not afraid to get rid of anyone who stood in their way. However, Poland's transformation also brought about a transformation in the mafia. Mobsters entered into drug-dealing territory and then started hiding their criminal activity, disguising it behind the fronts of legal companies and entering the realms of economic crime. Armed bandits turned into ruthless businessmen unscrupulously using the power of money, practically exempt from punishment since they had politicians of various levels under their thumbs, as well as policemen and bureaucrats.

The Devourer is Bonda's best crime novel so far and one of the finest written recently in Poland. With this book, the Warsaw-based writer has proven that home-grown crime fiction can be more interesting than globally popular Scandinavian crime writing.

Robert Ostaszewski

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THE DEVOURER

sasha

had just reached the club. It wasn't difficult to find, because there were distressed people running around by the entrance to the building on the opposite side of the street. A woman lamented that they would be left in the darkness through the whole holiday period.

"Go to the kids, woman," her husband silenced her and got into the car to speed up the arrival of the emergency services.

The profiler entered the courtyard. She approached steel doors with Shiva's third eye in place of a spyhole. There was a sticker with the club's name and its logo next to the light switch. No signboard, no neon light. Nothing suggesting that it was a popular joint. But she'd had a look at Needle's Facebook page and knew that it was a fashionable place – if its attractiveness was to be measured by the number of likes. There were loads of them, over forty thousand. Knocking was to no avail. She looked around, came out of the building's entrance and approached the woman who now seemed calmer than before.

"Excuse me, do you perhaps know how to get in?" she asked politely and pointed to the club on the other side of the street.

The woman gave her a sideward glance.

"I don't go there," she snorted. "You need to ring the bell."

"Ring the bell?"

"There, on the other side, under a brick, there's a button."

Sasha thanked her. She smiled to herself. The woman doesn't go there, but she knows how to get in.

"But it won't work now. There's no power," the neighbour added. "You better wait. Soon they'll creep out of their own accord, those barflies." Indeed, there was a button under a brick and it didn't work. [...]

Suddenly the head of a pretty blonde appeared from behind the door. The girl was no more than twenty years old.

"Are you from the electricity company?"

A moment of hesitation on the profiler's part was enough and the blonde slammed the door shut. But she didn't manage to bolt it. Sasha grabbed the door handle and for a moment they were pushing and pulling.

"It's closed," the blonde reproached.

"I was commissioned by Paweł Bławicki." The resistance lessened. "I'm an expert profiler. I'd like to talk to Łucja Lange."

A furrowed brow and then a sudden giggle.

"She's not here."

"How about Iza Kozak or Janek Wiśniewski? It's urgent. I would rather come inside to explain."

The woman was still suspicious, but she opened the door.

[...]

"Did you want to see me?" A low, raspy voice purred by her ear.

She turned around. A short man of about forty was standing in front of her. She realised that the picture she had been given was not up to date. He'd changed his image for something more age-appropriate since. She also found him far more handsome in person. Dark eyes, squinting mischievously. A face covered with a few days old stubble. Boyish, dishevelled hair. Dyed blonde. He was dressed in a t-shirt, leather jacket, white jeans and leather Converse trainers. She was staring at him, completely baffled and petrified at the same time. Déjà vu only happens in films, but this man reminded her of somebody who mattered a lot to her. That person had been dead for seven years. Everything was different: the place, the joint, the clothes and the man's face. But the rest, all of the surroundings, matched. Votive candles, his silhouette in soft light and the darkness of the basement. She stood still like a pillar of salt and felt herself blushing like some schoolgirl. He extended his hand to her. He had a pleated bracelet on his wrist and a ring with a blue stone on his finger.

"I'm Needle," he introduced himself. The corner of his mouth twitched. Even that little grimace she knew very well.

"Sasha Załuska. Do you perhaps have a twin brother?"

"Not that I know of."

The blonde who let Sasha in joined them. She put her arm around the singer to mark her territory. He stiffened straightaway, getting into the role.

"So you're the star, are you?" Załuska regained her self-control. She noticed that he was vain, like all artists. A cheap compliment pleased him. "And you must be the girl of the Northern night?" She pointed to the blonde and smiled. The joke didn't quite work. The young woman pouted her lips even further into a duck face. Needle went gloomy too. "Pity about the power cut. I was hoping to hear some music."

"You don't need power to listen to music," he replied and hummed, "A girl at midnight, a girl of the Northern night. A dead smile on her face, eyes full of terrible fright…"

His voice was tuneful; he knew how to modulate it. It was a pleasure to listen to him, but it was an even greater pleasure to look at him. Załuska stood there, not knowing what to say. She had an impression that by embracing the twenty-year-old girl he was effectively flirting with her. The young one noticed that too. And she reacted in a correct fashion – she encircled the man's waist with her other hand. He's mine, her eyes said, fuck off, you old hag.

"Has Mr Bławicki told you I was coming?" Załuska asked. She registered surprise on Needle's face, but no sign of concern. "I'm not from the police," she explained quickly. "But I need to talk to all of the staff and first and foremost to you. As you know, somebody wants to harm Mr Bławicki and my job is to find the motive and determine the features of the perpetrator. Mr Bławicki doesn't think it's an outsider."

Needle laughed out loud.

"He thinks it's me trying to scare him." He pushed the girl away and kissed her on the forehead in a fatherly manner. "Klara, could you leave us alone, please?"

She left with hesitation.

[…]

"Will you have something to drink?" He showed her an armchair and sat down on a sofa next to it. Sasha shook her head. "You don't mind if I do, do you?" he announced, and then yelled: "Iza, bring me my gin."

A moment later a plump brunette with a pretty face appeared from the darkness. Her neckline was so low you could see her cleavage. Iza Kozak scrutinised Sasha thoroughly and put bottles, ice bucket and two glasses in front of Needle. Sasha was curious how they managed to maintain a cold temperature without electricity.

"We have two powerful generators." Needle said as if he could read her mind. He gestured at the woman. "Iza Kozak. The boss of all bosses. She knows this place inside out. She's been here pretty much from day one."

"Almost inside out," Iza corrected him modestly.

The women shook hands. The manager wanted to leave but Needle stopped her.

"Take a seat." He patted a place next to him and then addressed Załuska: "I have no secrets from her."

[…]

"Let's get down to business." Needle whacked his thighs. "What do you need and what is it all about?"

Załuska briefly explained the situation. She told him about her commission and how she imagined their cooperation. She didn't mention anything about the late night phone call or financial details.

"I'll need to talk to everybody. Separately," she stressed. "We can meet anywhere. I'm prepared to visit you at home. The more efficiently and faster we deal with it, the better."

"But what are you after?" Iza interrupted alertly. "I don't understand."

She was matter-of-fact and inclined towards aggression. Sasha figured out straightaway that she was the one running this club. Without her, all alcohol would get drunk and money spent. Iza Kozak was good at her job.

Załuska shrugged, which Needle found very amusing. He lifted the bottle and checked again if she wouldn't have a drink with him.

"I don't quite understand either," she admitted, staring hypnotically at the bottle. "My everyday job is creating profiles which are portraits of unknown offenders. I help the police, courts of law, sometimes private people or companies. In short – I can establish the characteristics of a person who committed an offence, I can figure out what age they are, what sex, and even, if there was a crime committed, where they live and work. I also find out the motive and suggest where to look for the person, if they're in hiding. I won't be able to say if it's you or you who wants to kill Paweł Bławicki. I can only list the features of the suspect. The person commissioning the expertise needs to draw their own conclusions and decide who fits the description. The police name the suspect. I have to admit that it's the first time I've accepted this kind of a commission."

They were looking at her with slight surprise.

"You can find out so much from conversations?" Needle was sceptical.

"Having a victim helps immensely," Sasha replied. "Injuries and a crime scene are a real mine of behavioural data."

Iza picked up a napkin and started twisting it nervously.

"But so far there's no dead body." Needle laughed. He grabbed his drink and sprawled out on the sofa. "Perhaps we should just wait? What's the point of straining yourself so much without a reason?"

Sasha didn't reply. She wanted to end this conversation as quickly as possible. She had to leave before she found herself asking them for a double drink. Right now one glass was too much, but later a bucketful wouldn't be enough.

Translated by Anna Hyde

MARCIN WROŃSKI

NEXT TUESDAY'S POGROM


© Tomasz Stawecki

Marcin Wroński *(born 1972) is the author of a popular series of retro crime novels set in Lublin. The fifth book in the series,* Pogrom Next Tuesday, *won him Poland's top crime-writing prize, the High Calibre Award.*

Next Tuesday's Pogrom is Marcin Wroński's fifth crime novel chronicling the adventures of Commissioner Zyga Maciejewski, a former boxer and an extremely effective police officer. It is without doubt the best novel in the series so far (Wroński plans to write another five). Therefore it is no surprise that it has proved popular with readers and garnered praise from crime fiction connoisseurs. Suffice it to say that Wroński's latest novel scooped every prize on offer for Polish crime fiction in 2014.

Next Tuesday's Pogrom departs from previous books in the series in that the entire plot is set in the period following the Second World War. Wroński, who in previous novels has proved to be an intelligent and engaging portraitist of the interwar period, handles the post-war reality with equal skill. Moreover, Wroński's description of Lublin in September 1945 is undoubtedly this novel's strongest feature: the authorities' merciless treatment of their enemies (both real and imagined), the partisan survivors, the desperate and lost souls with guns in their hands, the ruthless gangs of thugs, the blackmailers seeking to lose themselves in the crowds rolling through the city, the castaways of war and ordinary people seeking to rebuild their lives in a new reality, where the rules remain undefined and unpredictable...

In the preceding novel in the series, *The Winged Coffin*, Maciejewski was imprisoned by the UB (the communist secret police), accused of collaborating with the Nazis (which to some extent was true, as Zyga was forced to work for the Kriminalpolizei during the occupation). His UB persecutor – the sinister Major Grabarz – has now decided to set Maciejewski free. Of course, Grabarz's decision is motivated by self-interest and he imposes tough conditions on Maciejewski's release. Everything indicates that a Jewish pogrom is about to take place in Lublin, which is awkward for the UB officer. What's more, there's a pair of brutal murderers on the loose in the area. Only Maciejewski, an outsider to the new system, can uncover the truth and stop the bloodshed; and, while he's at it, rescue an old pal and get his wife back (she has long since written him off as a lost cause). In the chaos of Lublin in 1945, Maciejewski takes a beating from all sides, and yet, like a roly-poly toy, he keeps getting up again. And throughout he tries

to stick to his principles – within the possibilities available to him, which aren't great.

Above all, Wroński's novel is a wonderfully constructed crime story with a precisely developed plot that will keep readers on the edge of their seats to the very last page. It also features an interesting – thoroughbred, so to say – protagonist (alongside Marek Krajewski's Eberhard Mock, Maciejewski is one of the most fascinating characters in Polish crime fiction). Yet this is no ordinary crime story. Wroński demonstrates that one can write about important, serious problems in genre fiction, and touch the painful spots in Polish history, depicting them without simplification and from surprising perspectives. Few retro crime writers can combine an entertaining read with serious thought. Marcin Wroński is able to do that. This is just one of the things that makes him an outstanding crime writer.

Robert Ostaszewski

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NEXT TUESDAY'S POGROM

Wednesday, 12 September, 1945

"Mrs Wasertreger?"

The door was ajar and riddled with bullet holes. By now Zyga was tired of knocking, so he pushed it open. Standing there on show, he had merely aroused the curiosity of the neighbours overlooking the gallery which led to the apartments upstairs in the annex.

"Mrs Wasertreger?"

In a short dark corridor he stumbled over a basket, spilling some dried peas onto the floor.

"Lejb? Is that you?"

Zyga was pleased to hear Polish.

"No, it's Maciejewski."

Sunlight struggled to penetrate the room through the thick drapes made out of an old army blanket. There were just a few beds and a lopsided wardrobe against the walls. The woman – perhaps the victim's wife, if the cashier's account was to be trusted – was moving to and fro in a wicker rocking chair, while staring into a tea glass. Judging by the dried-up tea leaves inside, it had been empty since yesterday.

"Why is it you and not Lejb...?" She raised her head. "Leon, I mean."

The cashier had said she was very young but Zyga hadn't noticed that until now. There was something elderly about her movements, about her hunched figure, and the way she rocked in her chair. Only now did he see her smooth, unwrinkled face; her eyes were deeply sunken, though. She was no beauty but still a catch. At least when it came to women, Zyga would have spoken a common language with the late lamented Wasertreger.

Zyga glanced around the room but there wasn't much to look at. The only picture – a wedding portrait – showed an older man with a prominent Jewish nose; beside him stood a girl of about twenty, on whose head the hairdresser had created something disastrously unsuited to that round face and childish, but good-natured eyes. That same girl, thinner and a little older, was now looking at Zyga.

"Leon Wasertreger?" said Zyga, clearing his throat. "Your husband?"

"Yes, my husband," she nodded, reaching for the glass with the tea leaves inside. She raised it to her lips and took a sip of the imaginary tea. "Do you have a message from him?"

"Yes, but I have to be sure, you understand."

"Of course. Tea?"

She passed him the glass.

He raised it to his mouth and, taking care not to disturb the now mouldy tea leaves, pretended to drink.

"I have to be sure," he said again. "If you could tell me about the evening when you last saw your husband, I'll know I am talking to the right person. And then I'll pass on the message from Leon."

"Leon is my husband," she repeated. "He was lying there." She pointed at the door. "It's strange, isn't it? They were shouting: 'Open up, Wasertreger!', but he didn't open it, and then he lay there all the same, as if he had opened it. Those who open the door end up bleeding on the floor. He hadn't opened it, but he was bleeding too, only not as much. That's why I don't close the door, you see?" She smiled slyly. "If I don't close it, they won't shoot."

"How many of them were there?"

"Same as always, an entire squad. Then they took him away, supposedly to the hospital, but I know exactly where they took him, given that you've come, Comrade Maciejewski."

By now her smile was so naive and nauseatingly knowing that Zyga had to stop himself from turning around and leaving.

"What else did they say?"

"They were shouting: 'Secret police pig!' and 'Drop dead, Jew!'. Bang, bang, bang. But I know him, he was pretending to be bleeding, he's very good at pretending, even the doctor was fooled!" The murder victim's widow laughed. "Did they shoot at you, too?"

"Of course they did," Zyga replied with a serious look on his face. "Leon was with the UB?"

"You mean you don't know?" she asked suspiciously.

"I do, but I need to check," Maciejewski wormed his way out.

"He pretended to be. He was always pretending. Now he's pretending to be dead. But you have a message from him? Please give it to me at once!" shouted Mrs Wasertreger, her hand outstretched. "I've told you everything, that he pretended to bleed when they fired because he wouldn't open the door, 'you Jewish pig!', I was sitting here, I know he's told you all that. The message!" The woman's hand was twisted like the bird's talons on a militiaman's hat.

"I'm still not sure," Zyga replied calmly. "What's your first name?"

"I do beg your pardon! Care for some tea?" She reached for the glass again. "Oh, I'm sorry, you've already had some. What did you say your name was? Ah yes, Maciejowski! I'm Perla... I mean Tekla... I mean Perlmutter... I mean Wasertreger... he didn't tell you?"

She looked at Zyga warily.

"He did. People tell us everything." Maciejewski clenched his teeth. Major Grabarz would be pleased people were quoting him. "Here is the message: 'Dearest Perla, I'm in good health and thinking of you. We'll meet again soon, until then keep well, your loving husband, Lejb'."

"And is there a letter?" Tears appeared in the woman's eyes.

"You know better than anyone how dangerous that would be. Leon wouldn't want to put you at risk."

"He wouldn't, he wouldn't!" The widow nodded fervently. "Did you know he even had a funeral? How funny! I mean, how could there be a funeral if he was only pretending? He said... promised... nothing would happen to him!"

"Goodbye."

Maciejewski tried to leave, this time avoiding the basket of peas, but while leaping to the door he fell over it again, it overturned and the peas scattered across the painted wooden floor. Mrs Wasertreger took no notice, Zyga even less, as he grabbed a strange man by his grubby shirt collar and dragged him inside from the corridor. The man was only slightly smaller than he was, but far more surprised.

"Name!" he hissed into the stranger's ear. The man smelled of nicotine and freshly consumed krupnik.

"And who would you be?" The man attempted to break free but Zyga had one hand under his chin and the other round his throat.

"I ask the questions around here," Zyga snarled.

"Darzycki. Stanisław Darzycki. I'm a neighbour," he wheezed. "I was the one who informed the authorities once that lot had stopped shooting. I'm clean!"

"So why are you so scared?" Maciejewski shoved him behind the door and pressed him to the wall. "There's nothing to be scared of, Darzycki, we're not under occupation now. Speak, Darzycki!"

"I'm scared you lot in the security service might think that since I wrote to the housing office..."

"You wrote to the housing office, did you?" Zyga persevered, not wanting to lose his advantage. True, he was carrying a ladies' Walther in his pocket but he didn't have any ID on him, more's the pity. "Something of a wordsmith are we, Darzycki?"

"Well, why is it that those Jews are shacked up in a room big enough to fit two families while we're crammed in together like rats? And now she's got that place to herself while we're..."

"...crammed in together like rats," said Maciejewski. "And that's how you'll remain until the housing office decides otherwise."

"Show me your ID," Darzycki demanded perfectly lucidly.

That earned him a forehand slap in the face, followed by a backhander too.

"Don't fucking push your luck, Darzycki. In the security service we're fully aware there's many a bastard who'd send his own wife onto the street, or lie his head off, or kill for a decent housing allocation. So quit bullshitting and tell me what you know!"

It sounded decisive enough to fool the man, but Zyga knew full well that he himself was pushing his luck. After all, "cops aren't whores, they don't go out alone at night", as you often heard in Kośminek before the war. The secret police continued this tradition, even in the daytime. A lone agent was a plausible sight in a public toilet, but not in people's homes. On the other hand... Of course, as there might be another side to the story, Stanisław Darzycki was admitting that when they shot Wasertreger he was at home, but he'd been afraid to even fart, let alone show his face. And as proof of his cooperation with the authorities, he'd promised to ask around in the building. Perhaps someone would sooner blab to him, as one neighbour to another... 'Citizen, if you could come back in a few days...'. [...]

"And what if I just took you down to the office?" Maciejewski growled menacingly, though this was the last ace he had up his sleeve – distinctly marked too. "You'll remember everything there. We'll help you to remember..."

"But there's already been an inquiry for Wasertreger..."

"So what? It'll be reopened if need be," ventured Zyga. "That's being decided by wiser men than you."

"If that's what the authorities have ordered, I'll try. Tomorrow. The day after at the latest."

"At the very latest!" Zyga turned and went downstairs.

Translated by Garry Malloy

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