

**NEW
BOOKS**

DIRECTLY

**FROM
POLAND**

IK

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THE POLISH BOOK INSTITUTE is a national cultural institution established by the Polish Ministry of Culture. It has been in operation in Kraków since January 2004. In 2006 the Warsaw section of the Institute came into being. The basic aims of the Institute's activities are to encourage reading and popularise books in Poland, and also to promote Polish literature worldwide. These aims are achieved by:

- » publicising the best Polish books and their authors
- » organising educational events focusing on the advantages to be gained from the habit of reading books
- » the Translators' Collegium
- » the © POLAND Translation Programme
- » seminars for publishers
- » presenting Polish literature abroad
- » an information centre for children's books
- » providing foreign audiences with access to information on Polish books and the Polish publishing market
- » running **www.bookinstitute.pl**, the biggest Internet site dedicated to information on Polish literature

The Polish Book Institute organises literary programmes for Polish presentations and international book fairs, appearances by Polish writers at literary festivals and, as part of its work to promote Polish culture worldwide, issues catalogues on the latest publications entitled **NEW BOOKS FROM POLAND**, runs study and training events, organises meetings and seminars for translators of Polish literature, awards the annual **TRANSATLANTIC PRIZE** for the best promoter of Polish literature abroad, and maintains regular contact with translators.

The aim of the © **POLAND TRANSLATION PROGRAMME** is to support Polish literature in translation into foreign languages and to increase its presence on foreign book markets. The Programme has been running since 1999, and to date it has awarded over 800 grants. In particular it covers belles-lettres and essays, works of what is broadly described as the humanities (with a special focus on books about Polish history, culture and literature), books for children and young people, and non-fiction. The grants cover the cost of translation from Polish into the relevant foreign language and the purchase of foreign rights.

www.bookinstitute.pl is a source of information on current literary events in Poland and more, presenting new and forthcoming titles and providing regular reviews. It also includes biographical information on over 100 contemporary Polish authors, information on over 900 books, extracts from them, critical essays and publishers' addresses – everything there is to know about Polish books in Polish, English, German, Russian and Hebrew.

INSTYTUT KSIĄŻKI



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©POLAND TRANSLATION PROGRAMME

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

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

The Programme may cover:

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

SAMPLE TRANSLATIONS ©POLAND

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

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

"KOLEGIUM TŁUMACZY" TRANSLATORS' PROGRAMME

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

THE TRANSATLANTIC PRIZE

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

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CZESLAW MILOSZ YEAR

2011 marks the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Czesław Miłosz. Born in Szetajnie, in the heart of the Lithuanian wilderness, he was driven away by the tragic events of the 20th century, living consecutively in Warsaw, Krakow, Paris, and the United States, to return to Poland at the turn of the millennium. He was not only a poet, prose writer, a translator and an essayist read all over the world, but also an extraordinarily insightful observer and witness to the epoch.

The Miłosz Year program is made up of new book publications, conferences, discussions, and exhibitions devoted to the poet, organized in Poland and abroad – from Krasnojarsk through Vilnius, Krasnogruda, Krakow, and Paris, to New York and San Francisco. Its culminating point will be the second edition of the **MIŁOSZ FESTIVAL**, taking place in Krakow (May 9th-15th 2011).

To bring the poet one step closer to an international public and inform them of the approaching Miłosz Year events, the Book Institute, coordinator of the Miłosz Year in Poland, set the www.milosz365.eu web site in English and Russian. This is where you can come for all sorts of information about the planned events and the initiatives for Miłosz Year, as well as plenty of information about the Nobel-Prize winner himself – his biography and timeline, a bibliography of his works and their translations, a selection of writing, interpretations of his work, and many interesting photographs from various periods of his life.

We seek to make the Miłosz Year an occasion to recall the work of the great poet, and also a chance to reflect more deeply upon the way his literature and biography are entangled with the 20th century. The year when Poland assumes leadership in the European Union will adopt a catch-phrase drawn from Miłosz himself: "Native Europe."

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Photo: Jerzy Olek

Tadeusz Różewicz (born 1921) is a world famous writer, highly acclaimed as a poet, playwright and author of short fiction. His books have been published in fifteen foreign languages.

Tadeusz Różewicz, famous as a poet and playwright, is rather less well known as an author of prose, though some of his stories belong to the classics of the genre in twentieth-century Polish literature. This selection of his stories published by Biuro Literackie presents Różewicz as a writer who is deeply involved in historical events and in his own life story. His main protagonist is first of all a child undergoing his earliest experiences, then a young boy who idolises his older brother who is killed by the Nazis, then a partisan in the forest, and after the war a philosophy student trying to cope with feelings about the meaning of the life that have been damaged by the cruelties of war. Next he visits Paris with some Polish friends, but is unable to feel at home there or experience its beauty, while eternally attached to his Polish fate and memory. At the same time, in the title story he shows how little this memory means to some people on a modern trip to Auschwitz, to whom it is actually impossible to convey the full horror of what the prisoners endured.

In the stories that follow there is a growing sense of alienation as the fundamental experience of modern man, as represented by: an old peasant woman who doesn't know how to adapt to the "high society" in which her diplomat son lives; a Pole in New York; and Dostoevsky in Paris. Różewicz's heroes feel cut off from the Western world; they have trouble with it and feel uncomfortable in it, though they realise they need this world in order to authenticate their need for order and a hierarchy of values. In *Death in the Old Scenery* the simple Polish hero

makes a pilgrimage to the origins of tradition and culture when he sets off on the journey of a lifetime to Rome. But he is neither spiritually nor physically able to cope with his encounter with the (disturbed) origins of Mediterranean civilisation, and inside him the "heritage of centuries" turns into an obsessive internal monologue consisting of nothing but platitudes. Różewicz's stories are like a review of the traumas and mental injuries that the twentieth century brought to the inhabitant of the European provinces, as well as an expression of his personal "dissenting opinion" with regard to Western civilisation.

Jerzy Jarzębski

Translated by Anotnia Lloyd-Jones

EXTRACT FROM THE NEW PHILOSOPHICAL SCHOOL

It was the end of October or perhaps November, 1945. I knocked on the white door. A muffled sound, something like the grunt of a big beast, could be heard in response. I entered the philosopher's study. He was the most distinguished living Polish philosopher, a one-time student of Husserl, I was told.

I had enrolled at the university that autumn. The professor was giving lectures to my year group on the subject: *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*. I was burning with the strange ambition to join his seminar, even if it meant skipping the compulsory preparatory course.

I bowed to the philosopher, explained briefly who I was, how I came to be in his study and I asked whether he would be willing to accept me at his seminar. The professor smiled. With a warm, throaty voice, he explained that first I would have to enrol for the preparatory course. I winced. The professor looked at me closely and asked: "Well, young man, which philosophers have you read? How much philosophy do you know? Would you mind telling me?"

I began, feverishly, to recall what I knew.

I liked the scholar's fine head. It was like a high-precision machine, constructed some fifty years earlier, probably at one of the famous German universities. Despite the devastation of the war, it worked wonderfully well. It was something extraordinary. Only occasionally, in a middle of a lecture, the professor would turn his gaze towards the window and turn silent for a while. Beyond the window, all you could see was a piece of wall, and the November sky. I stood in front of him, in the military-style boots we had worn as partisans in the forest, and tried hard to recall the names of some philosophers.

"Well, I've read Socrates" – I said firmly, and then paused. The professor smiled and cocked his head to one side.

"In fact, not Socrates himself, but Plato's writing about Socrates" – I corrected myself. – "I've read Plato, Nietzsche..."

The professor gave me an encouraging smile.

"I've also read Bergson's *Creative Evolution*," I added with pride.

I couldn't recall any more names or books, and the professor seemed to be waiting for something further... Gradually, some names I had encountered during my school years came floating back into my memory – the names of "philosophers" and of friends with whom I had discussed subjects such as the meaning of life, the purpose of our actions, and God.

"I've also read Spencer and Draper" – both these names I uttered hesitantly, as I couldn't really remember what they had written about. One of these, Zbyszek and I had read in the park a year before the war broke out. It was a book, or rather a booklet in a tattered green cover. The author was called Spencer, or perhaps Draper, but at this moment I couldn't remember either the title or the contents of the book. I had forgotten about it during the Nazi occupation. It may even have been by somebody else. Now I recalled just one passage from it. It concerned the dogmas of the Catholic faith and the author was posing a provocative question: 'Has anybody ever seen the finger of the Holy Ghost?' I remembered this "finger" but didn't really know what the philosopher was on about, so I let it pass and didn't mention any of this to the professor. After a moment's silence, I brought up another name: Freud. The professor seemed interested. Here, I had a strangely clear recollection of making fun of a certain dream, in which a dreamer opened the lower drawer of a chest and peed into it: this was supposed to signify a suppressed sexual desire for his childhood nanny. But all this was merely a joke. Though, if we took a foot, for example, I was sure that I had read in a book by Freud about the role of the foot in one's sexual life. The psychoanalyst's argument seemed to us so funny that the two of us, Zbyszek and I, had learned it by heart. Even at that moment I could have recited to the professor the bits about the foot. "From time immemorial, the foot has been commonly treated as a sexual symbol in myths, according to which, a shoe or a slipper serves as a symbol of the female sex organ; therefore, in a perversion such as fetishism, only a dirty or smelly foot is a sexual object... A foot is construed as a woman's penis, the absence of which is strongly felt by female children..."

Needless to say, we ignored the logical elements of these learned deductions and this resulted in such nonsense that we split our sides with laughter.

The professor, leaning towards me, seemed to expect some new names. Unfortunately, I had almost exhausted my store of philosophical knowledge. I finally mentioned Schopenhauer 'the pessimist'. One more name floated up from the darkness, from the deep well, from the mists of childhood, but I did not say this name to the professor. It had a foreign ring to it and I had never heard it again since childhood: "Mulford". That was the name of the mysterious philosopher. I had never read Mulford, as I didn't yet know the letters of the alphabet at that time; his book was being read by an old man, married to a woman with burning black eyes, as he lay in an oak bed. Unfortunately, I knew very little about Mulford. I could no longer remember whether he wrote about hypnotism or hygiene, maybe he wrote about hippopotami or could it be hashish? In any case, he would most probably have been English.

This was the last name I mentioned or rather recalled. Anyway, I seemed to have been confusing it with the word "mouflon". However, I was not sure what a "mouflon" looks like. Where did this animal live and what did it feed on? One thing I was sure of, though, was that it had curved horns and a long, woolly coat. Perhaps it might also produce milk but these were pure assumptions on my part. About Mulford, however, I knew nothing.

Of course, I had also heard of Kant, but only in jokes. Apparently it was he who said: "*The starry sky above me and the moral law within me*". This was practically all I knew. Now, I awaited the professor's response.

The professor's grey eyes lit up for a moment and then the fire in them died down. He was weary, but maybe inwardly highly amused; or perhaps he was only tired and surprised.

"You fought with gun in hand, while we were saving human thought; you in the forest, we, wherever it was possible... I will give you a place on my preparatory course. Right now, we are reading Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*." – He gave me his hand. I bowed and left the room.

Translated by T. Halikowska-Smith



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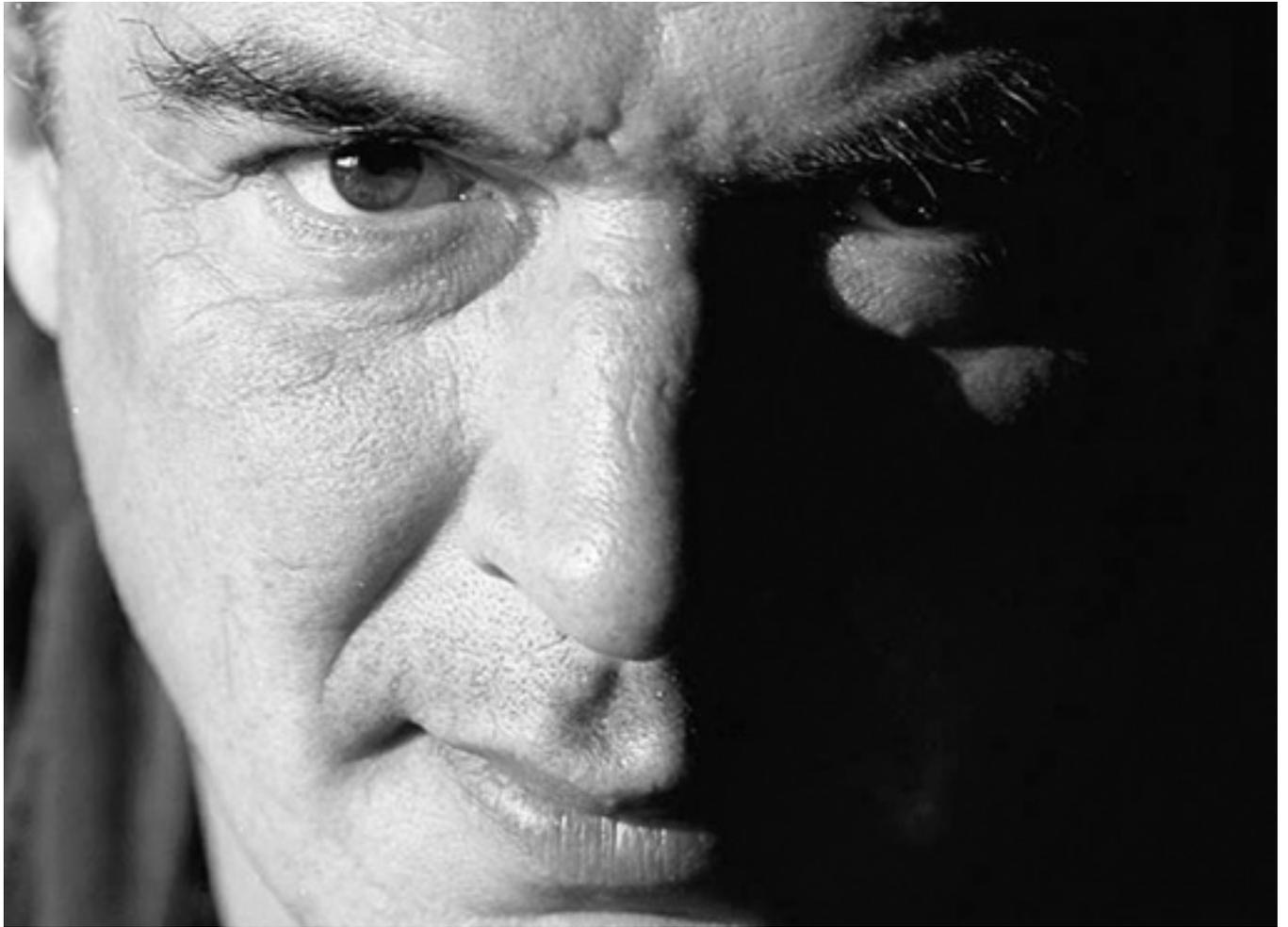


Photo: Piotr Janowski/AG

Andrzej Stasiuk (born 1960) Writer and columnist. His books have been translated into almost every European language, and into Korean.

"And now I've come here again" – so begins Andrzej Stasiuk's latest book. For many years now the author of *Going to Babadag* has journeyed through the countries of southeastern Europe and has reported regularly on these trips in successive "travelogues." What is it that draws the writer to Albania or the countries of the former Yugoslavia? What is he looking for there? Actually it's always the same thing: signs of decay, the dying off of various cultural formations, while at the same time – somewhat paradoxically – he traces the meaning of his own life and of the world at large. Travel, often monotonous and tiring, and also the after-the-fact description of experiences "on the road," becomes in this case a kind of meditation in the service of coming to know oneself. Then is *Diary Written Afterwards*, as its opening sentence suggests, purely and simply one more piece of "travel writing," another story about journeys in the Balkans? Not entirely. True, almost two thirds of this slim volume are taken up with impressions, filtered through memory, of several trips to Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia; but later in the text there is a clear break and Stasiuk returns, literally and figuratively, to Poland. It transpires that the writer's expeditions south, his excursions to places you won't find in travel guides, were meant among other things to gain some distance on his own country and on Polishness. Thanks to these journeys, to the juxtaposition of experiences outside and inside Poland, Stasiuk attains a clearer, sharper view of what was and is happening in his native country. The Polish part of the book is filled with bit-

ter pronouncements. The writer sees Poland as a country still unformed, unprepared, a country which cast off one alien mold (communism) only to allow itself immediately to be squeezed into another (consumerism); as a sort of country without qualities, a waiting-room country people either leave or remain in, hoping for "something," anything, that would give their lives meaning. Poland simultaneously captivates Stasiuk and infuriates him, attracts him and repels him; this may be the source of his somewhat nervous restlessness, his perpetual departures and returns. And – notably – everywhere he goes he sees this "nothing," the sign of decay. It's hardly surprising then, that "nothing" would be the last word of *Diary Kept Afterwards*.

Robert Ostaszewski
Translated by Bill Johnston

THE town lay in the shadow of Mount Pikëllimës. It was nine miles to the border. We'd gotten there too late. There were no more buses that day, either to Tirana, or to Kosovo, where Rigels was headed. It was four or five in the afternoon. Dust and heat pervaded the streets. The houses were no higher than two stories. In sandals, with our backpacks, we must have looked a little strange. Cargo vans pulled up and slightly tipsy guys asked us sardonically where we'd like to be dropped off, then drove away with a squeal of rubber. Kukës was the border region, and I felt it like nowhere else. Everyone was doing something, but no one had any specific occupation. Their work was like a nervous wait for a sign, a signal, a change in the situation. On the surface everything looked like it does elsewhere, the same idleness, sitting around, smoking, talking, but in the air there was alertness and tension.

We went into a bar to get some coffee and raki to help us decide what to do. The inside looked like a robbers' cave, but no one paid particular attention to us. The faces at the neighboring tables had seen it all. The raki tasted like gasoline. Rigels got into conversation with a man. They walked out in front of the bar together. A moment later he came back. "It was a misunderstanding. He thought I didn't have a passport and he was offering to smuggle me across."

Kukës wasn't doing anything. Kukës was waiting for an opportunity. Like a predator or vulture. That was how it looked at first glance. Kukës belonged to the men. Like the whole country. And the men had waiting in their genes. It was as if life and events only ever came from the outside. That was it: the whole country looked like a military camp during a ceasefire or an uncertain peace, and all these guys were soldiers on a pass. It wasn't even a question of war, but that someone would come and tell them what to do. Someone they'd acknowledge as their boss. Left to themselves they only knew how to talk and shake each other's hands. The streets belonged to them, and were filled with the smell of burning rubbish, the reek of rotting sheep's entrails. Their gold chains jangled as they sat among the trash heaps. In the houses, on the other hand, the realm of women, there was order, cleanliness, neatness. I've been in many Albanian homes and I know what I'm talking about. Taking off your shoes before you enter is a natural gesture of respect for these cozy, well-cared-for interiors. Whereas where the men's world begins, the shambles begins too. It's as if they had a boundless contempt for reality. As if everything aside from themselves was something like a cigarette butt or a patch of snot. They sat there in their knockoff Italian pimp shoes, their gleaming gay-boy footwear, at the edge of the gutter, and it never occurred to them to do anything about the stench.

Such were my arrogant thoughts at six in the evening in Kukës. Rigels finally found a car that would take him to Đakovica. Before he left he helped us get a room in a hotel. We said goodbye and he jumped into the white Toyota SUV. The hotel was deserted, cool, quiet. I was able to drink some dark Fernet and yield to those arrogant thoughts of mine, thumbing my nose at political correctness and respect for cultural subtleties. Both here and in Bajram Curri I'd experienced something along the lines of gender alienation. I always thought that, though to a greater or lesser degree depending on the circumstance, still, I'm a man. This time I'd discovered circumstances that were so radically male that I actually felt like a woman, or at least a eunuch. Everything around me was so utterly masculine it felt like a homosexual utopia. In a societal sense it was a country of guys. If they met with women, if they showed them tenderness and affection, they had to do it in secret, behind closed doors, as if they were indulging in deviancy. Whereas affection, love, tenderness towards the same sex was offered in the bright light of day, in every cafe, from the earliest hours. You had the impression these guys were born together, wanted to spend their entire lives together, and would die together hand in hand.

I sipped my Fernet, listened to the hum of the air conditioner, and recalled days gone by. I was dead tired. I wanted to leave. Albania is exhaustion. You can't relax because you're never alone. Even in a quiet, empty, air-conditioned hotel the solitude is illusory, because it, Albania, occupies your thoughts. Its men, its stench, its ancientness, its beauty, its existence, its madness. In Bajram Curri or Kukës you can't say to yourself: "Now I'm going to think about something

else, my childhood for instance." It won't work. When you come to Albania, Albania is all you can think about.

At five in the morning the receptionist knocked at the door. We'd arranged for this. He was going to take us to the bus for Tirana. We ate a quick breakfast, drank our coffee and were ready. It was still cold outside and long shadows lay across the sidewalk. The receptionist handed us over to the bus driver, smiled, and said goodbye. Using gestures, the bus driver told us to leave our bags in the bus and go to the cafe next door, because there was still some time before the bus would leave. The other passengers were already there. We had more coffee. Some of the others were drinking an early morning raki, which wakes you up even better than coffee.

Translated by Bill Johnston



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Photo: Agnieszka Herman

Agata Tuszyńska (born 1957) is a writer, poet, author of reportage and university lecturer who has written books on the theatre and a number of biographies, including one on Isaac Bashevis Singer.

It might seem that in the decades since the end of the war everything has already been written about the Holocaust, and that every version of the tragic fate of the Polish Jews had been analysed and presented. Yet astonishing and moving books continue to appear, such as *Accused: Wiera Gran* by Agata Tuszyńska. The main heroine of this biographical reportage by an acclaimed journalist is the eponymous Wiera Gran, a singer of Jewish origin, who in pre-war Poland was destined to be a megastar. During the occupation, wanting to be with her family, she ended up in the Warsaw ghetto, where she performed at a café, and later on she hid on the Aryan side. She survived, but what happened in the “times of contempt” cast a long shadow on the rest of her life, or to put it bluntly, ruined it. During the war, gossip was already being spread by people from the ghetto who said she had collaborated with the Gestapo. Even though she tried desperately to clear herself of the charges, appearing before courts and commissions which acquitted her, she never managed to silence her slanderers. After leaving Poland she tried to settle in Israel but was received badly there. Then she roamed the world, although she mainly lived in Paris. To the end of her long life (she died in 2007), she tried with obsessive consistency to restore her good name, the ultimate price of which was a persecution mania.

At the end of the book Tuszyńska writes: “I haven’t written a biography. I wanted to tell Gran’s story in the way it might be perceived by someone who, like me, did not live through the war, but who also, because of family involvement for years,

‘is still in the ghetto’.” She not only describes the case of a specific individual, but also considers the chances of getting to the truth about wartime events many years on, in a situation where most of the witnesses aren’t alive, the memory of the living proves unreliable, and evidence from decades ago is contradictory. She asks the question whether there really is any “truth” about these events. Moreover, *Accused* is above all a book of questions to which it’s hard to find unambiguous answers, an expression of the helplessness of today’s society when obliged to judge the behaviour of people who were forced to make dramatic choices in critical situations. And it’s something else too – the story of Tuszyńska’s tricky friendship with Gran, which ran through the final years of the singer’s life.

Robert Ostaszewski
Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

FOR the whole of May 1942 a German film crew was working in the ghetto. These “cinematic orgies”, as president of the Judenrat Adam Czerniaków calls them in his diary – *nasty, perverse, shocking* – showed Jewish residents of the closed district revelling in luxury. The Goebels method of manipulating the truth. A clip from the Schulz restaurant on the corner of Leszno and Nowolipki – tables laden with food: alcoholic drinks, meats, fish, liqueurs, white bread... This was the Jewish paradise. And further on there were erotic rituals at mikvas and at balls.

Maybe then, in that period, an event took place which Wiera would be ashamed of. She couldn't remember the date.

She was standing in the street with a musician friend. Suddenly, Szymonowicz appeared right next to them. He sprang out of nowhere, she sometimes said, and added that everyone in the ghetto knew this person. He was an officer in the infamous “Thirteen”, the nephew of her boss Gancwajch, who was a silver-tongued, daring Gestapo agent. I have no idea if Wiera knew that. He asked if she would like to perform... at his flat, now, at once, immediately, for guests from the Aryan side. She had no time to think about it, to answer properly or come up with an excuse. He was already hailing a rickshaw. The friend she was with said: “If you value your life, don't refuse”. And when she tried to explain, a hasty, muddled gabble, saying how could she sing without accompaniment, without being asked, he offered to play on the mouth organ. A willing friend, maybe her only sensible one, who knew what you shouldn't do – refuse those who were stronger than you. Szymonowicz asked how much she wanted. Or perhaps: how much do you require? Wiera can no longer remember. How much will you pay, she thought she said. He promised 500 zlotys, as much as Diana Blumenfeld usually took. (Mrs Turkowowa performed in several revues in the ghetto: *The Wardrobe Plays, A Kiss Before the Mirror, and Five Jolly Madcaps*).

Five hundred zlotys was a baker's weekly income! Gancwajch apparently paid that sum each month to the Jewish writer Cejtin. You could eat a filling meal for a zloty.

When they entered the flat, dinner was over. “I found her,” the host had announced.

Wiera remembers a drunken crowd of guests, and songs hysterically shouted back at her, standing by the wall. Smarmy looks and gestures. The excuse that she had a performance at a café just about to start. Panic. Escape.

She gave the money she received to charity. So she says.

What did she know when she ran into informers from the ghetto? How did she treat them, what use were they to her, how did they help and with what? She won't admit to any close friendships, intimacies or relationships that went beyond the professional or charitable. She tried to make use of her influences to help others – colleagues, children, those who asked and were in need. She knew lots of people like that. Had she ever been seen in the street with someone from the “Thirteen”? It's possible. Stefania Grodzieńska was seen too (seen, seen often? seen once?), and efforts were even made to build this image up into a nasty story. Without success – she had a husband who scotched the false accusation after the war.

The prevailing conditions within the ghetto's artistic milieu excluded careful social selection, recalled Antoni Marianowicz, a resident of the district, in his book *Life Strictly Forbidden*. Being a famous diva made it impossible to be isolated from the authorities.

Marianowicz came into contact with Wiera Gran as “an enthusiastic spectator”. He calls her his favourite singer, and a lovely woman too. He sympathises with the need to know your way around the “ghetto who's who”.

I don't think she knew their hierarchies, or could have distinguished their caps and the colours of the stars of David on their armbands in the auditorium. Gancwajch – quite small, in glasses – was visible, as the organiser of charity shows, though in time he was losing the ground under his feet and ever more urgently seeking an alibi for himself. She may have heard about the night-time banquet on which he spent 25,000, which would incriminate him, even in the eyes of the Gestapo officers. It could have been held at one of their favourite venues, the Hotel Brytania on Nowolipki Street. I don't know if she met Gancwajch's immediate underling, an offic-

er in the Warsaw Security Police called Stabenow. Or Żurawin, another Gestapo collaborator, whom Czerniaków complained about in his diary; reputedly he was being blackmailed by both of them.

It is doubtful that she had insight into this map of agent dependencies. She may have maintained sporadic contact with several of them. It's hard to believe she had any greater connection with them.

That night the weeds were pulled out of the ghetto, wrote Ringelblum. As the agents settled scores against each other, on 24 May 1942 the main ringleaders of the “Thirteen” were shot, including Szymonowicz.

The ghetto was repeatedly reduced in size. She changed address several times, but years on she couldn't remember the street names any more. Nor did the views from the windows make it any easier to find your bearings, as they were usually blocked by the wall.

She can't remember what day, in July 1942, she received the news from her friend Kazik, by phone, that they had managed to arrange her escape from the ghetto. She isn't sure if she used the word “escape” at the time. Maybe “exit”? For months this piece of the city behind the walls had been her world. The place where she woke up, worked, went to bed, felt the proximity of her family and joy from singing for others. She didn't give much thought to “tomorrow”.

She didn't practise any philosophy, apart from the duty to survive. Each day she got on with the necessary daily routine.

The arts had been closed down. Her place of work, triumph and compensation had ceased to exist. What more did she have to do in this lifeless place? Stay with her family? Perhaps, if she had known these were their last moments – the last economy cholent, cupping your hands around the candle flames for the last time, the prayer they would never recite together again? Should she stay with them, but to what end? And probably at the time you don't know that, and there are no guarantees, not in any direction. They're threatening transportations and extermination – can you, should you believe them?

She remembers some very hot days in early July, then lots of rain. She remembers the party at the newly opened gardens, and some ironical comments about Czerniaków's gesture. “He's playing a fanfare as the ship goes down,” people were saying. She observed and understood his joy. She went to more parties for children, who were still good at believing in the sunshine. An orchestra, choirs, the ballet. She tried to keep a spring in her step.

She remembers the panic among her friends around 19 July, when some were talking about being evacuated, others about a pogrom. Three days later she could read for herself the announcements on the walls about deportations to the east. On 21 July, as an expression of his objection to the planned massacre of his fellow citizens, president Czerniaków committed suicide.

So it may have been then, towards the end of July 1942, that Kazik found an Aryan address for Wiera.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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Photo: private

Wojciech Tochman (born 1969) is a journalist and writer, one of the most widely translated Polish news reporters. His reportage has been published in English, French, Swedish, Finnish, Russian, Dutch and Bosnian.....

“Why write a book about genocide?” Ask that, and you have to add the matching question: “Why read a book about genocide? You can be sure from the start it’s not going to be a pleasant experience.”

I have the answer to those questions. Wojciech Tochman’s book about genocide in Rwanda confirms it extremely forcefully. Genocide means killing people who are hated and despised in order to wipe them off the face of the earth – it means treating people like vermin, a blight on the world. The idea is to exterminate them so totally that the very memory of their existence will be gone forever.

The aims of genocide have to be torpedoed, first by saving people, then by saving the memory of them, of their life, and of the suffering and death that was inflicted on them. Tochman’s reportage effectively adds to the reader’s existence by making him aware of the experiences he documents. As we commune with the mechanism of genocide – only through words, a long way from machetes and the corpses of raped women – we realise that we have to shout “No!” in time at all promoters of contempt and hatred, even the most unobtrusive.

Today We’re Going to Draw Death shows the scars of the Rwandan genocide that can still be found today. These scars are the fortunes of particular individuals, both victims and their neighbours, who have committed crimes. As in Tochman’s book about Bosnia (Like Eating A Stone), in these dramatic accounts too, graves and long-delayed burials are important. But what matters even more is to gain insight into the cruel

events that were enacted in a country that can now be seen in its fragile, ostensible normality.

The book has some remarkable heroines, women who out of pure kindness once tried to hide someone in danger. But there are other people too, including clerics, whose attitude raises some disturbing questions. Tochman also bids us examine their immature attitude to the requirements of the border situation. This insight leaves a painful echo, but we must listen to this sort of echo too.

What for? To learn the lesson that we don’t know what we would do if we were faced with that sort of situation. As he talks about dark and terrifying things, at the same time Tochman gives a lesson in courageous sympathy.

*Halina Bortnowska
Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones*

THERE stands a school that never managed to be a school. There stands a woman, still as a statue. She's waiting by the entrance to the office block; she's in a long, colourful dress, her name is Juliette, she's forty years old, and she's holding a bunch of keys.

It was Thursday 7 April. The Tutsi had gathered here from the surrounding hills. Juliette had come with her husband and three children. The youngest was tiny, so she was carrying it on her back, in a shawl.

The school buildings, scattered over ten hectares, had only just been constructed. There was going to be a technical college here. The first term was due to start after the holidays. It was a luxury place with electricity and plumbing.

But when fifty thousand Tutsi, who had fled their homes to escape their neighbours' machetes, assembled in the school grounds, the water and electricity were cut off. So they'd weaken. The school was surrounded.

Hutu soldiers went in among the crowd and wrote down their names. They said they wanted to work out how much food to bring here so no one would die of hunger.

No food was ever brought. The list of besieged people was to show which of the local Tutsi hadn't reached the school grounds and were hiding somewhere. Whom should they track down, whom should they hunt, for whom should they set a trap?

Anyone at the school who didn't know how to get water for themselves, or at least some raw sweet potato, died after a few days and lay among those who were still alive.

A week went by, then another. The crowd were stinking and had no strength left for anything. Juliette took all three of her children and went up to the soldiers.

"Listen", she said, "I'm not a Tutsi, I'm a Hutu."

She showed them her identity card.

"What are you doing here?" they asked in surprise.

"I followed my husband here," she said. "He's a Tutsi. But we have made a decision that we can't manage without water any longer. He's going to stay here, and I'll go home with the children."

The Hutu soldiers didn't think about it for long. "No problem," they said.

She was pleased.

"No problem. You can go. But if you are a real Hutu, you'll go home alone and leave the children here."

Tribal identity is inherited from the father. In Rwanda this is obvious, no one ever argues about it. Juliette didn't argue either. She took the children and went back to her husband, in the middle of the crowd.

They started shooting. People ran straight towards the rifle barrels, and some of them even managed to get past them. But beyond the firing squad, in a second ring surrounding the school, stood the neighbours with their machetes.

Juliette, her husband and the children ran into the office block. When the Hutu came up to the door, she ran out to them, crying: "I'm a Hutu!"

"OK," they said, "get out of here."

She wanted to go back into the office for her family, but by now there was nothing to go in for.

Now Juliette is one of seven survivors from Murambi.

Another one is the child she was carrying on her back at the time. The older two and her husband are now lying here, under the concrete, along with fifty thousand others. Or they are lying somewhere else.

Juliette leads me behind the office block. There are some barracks, forty metres long and five wide. In each one there are six classrooms. Each of these is five metres square. Each is locked with a metal door. The keys jangle.

There are no school desks in the classrooms, just wooden bunks, racks made of raw planks nailed together.

On them there are people. Intact. They haven't decomposed because they have been desiccated. Their skin is unbroken. A silent composition of figures, sculptures, stinking monuments. They lie packed close together. Frozen solids. Usually bald, but some have black hair. In various poses: holding their heads, shielding their eyes

or ears, curling their knees up to their chins. Some are in singlets that have kept their colour, but more often they're naked. They're shielding their groins. Some are embracing each other. Others, quite the opposite, have their arms sticking upwards, as if trying to push something away. Mouths open in a scream. Or closed. They're completely white, as if made of milk-glass or ice. As if someone had sprinkled them with flour. It was lime – the favourite substance of those who shove their victims into mass graves. Tried and tested throughout history on all continents.

Juliette closes the first door and opens the next one. There are corpses everywhere. On display to be looked at. I can go in among the beds, I just have to be careful not to nudge one with my foot; sometimes there's a lifeless hand sticking out of the racks. Even if I touch it nothing will happen, no one will tell me to watch out.

I can count them, photograph them as exhibits, I can stay here as long as I like.

I can look some of them in the eye. They're open, gazing at me.

It's a sort of immodesty, pornography. I feel like a voyeur. I have entered the house of the dead, into which none of them has invited me. I'd like to get out of here now.

Juliette opens the next room. Although she doesn't say anything, I can hear: "Look!"

Children. They aren't three-dimensional, their skulls aren't round. Their flat bodies lie like slices of rolled dough. You can see where the nose used to be, and the lips, as if someone had glued them onto their faces for fun from another piece of dough. Keys again.

Now children in the embrace of their mothers. The babies weren't killed. They went on sucking at the lifeless breasts and died of hunger. They are still cuddling up to those breasts now.

That April, when the killing stopped in Murambi, the stench soon covered the entire district. Excavators dug huge pits in the school grounds. Bulldozers and excavators got to work, it wasn't easy. The pits were full, the bodies barely fitted in them. They were sprinkled in lime and a thin layer of crumbly, sandy earth.

A year after the mass murder, in accordance with the wishes of the survivors, they decided to open the grave and re-bury the dead under concrete slabs. That was when they discovered that those who lay just under the surface were still intact, like dried mushrooms. And some of the children's desiccated bodies had been squashed flat under the weight of the adults. Eight hundred and forty mummies were selected and put in the classrooms.

We say nothing. It goes on and on.

More metal doors, more small floury slices. I close my eyes. I know in a moment I'll open them wide in order to run out of here. I must look where I'm going to avoid touching anyone.

I'll escape. I'll leave Juliette without a word of farewell. She can guard her dead children here. She can go on standing like a statue, made of stone. She can wait. The proud sentry of her Murambi. It isn't mine.

But if I don't run from the house of the dead, it's only out of fear that in escaping, I'll see a machete in my hands.

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Photo: Petr Halousek

Mariusz Szczęgieł (born 1966) is a reporter and newspaper journalist who also used to work in television and radio. His book *Gottland* has been translated into six languages and won the European Book Prize 2009.

Mariusz Szczęgieł's new book crosses some borders. Once again he takes us to the Czech Republic, but this time he also crosses the boundaries of reportage. Rather than classic reportage of the kind Szczęgieł has produced before now, this is more like a cross between sociology and reportage. This book testifies to the author's ten-year obsession with Czech culture. It was during this period that he wrote *Gottland*, a historical reportage-mosaic portrait of the Czechs and Czechoslovakia in the twentieth century. That book was about the past, and this one is about the present day.

Szczęgieł watches Czech television and reads popular books, such as a novel by a young Vietnamese woman about Czech racism. The critics are thrilled, but the novel turns out to be hoax. He goes to cinemas and theatres. He goes to public toilets. At the one on Republic Square he is delighted by the following message on the wall: **CHERISH CASUAL KINDNESS AND BEAUTIFUL BUT MEANINGLESS ACTS.**

He goes to crematoria. At Ústí nad Labem he finds out that 300 families haven't collected the urns containing their loved ones, and that the oldest one has been there for nineteen years now, also that more mothers don't get collected than fathers. He asks the Czechs, who regard themselves as the most atheist nation in Europe, how they live without God, and whether it's worth being good if there's no punishment or reward after death.

He is surprised. He was once described as the most surprised reporter in Poland.

He tries to understand, and he doesn't judge or condemn. He starts with his delight at the message by the urinal, and ends by exposing the hidden face of Czech culture – a culture that eliminates everything unpleasant, nasty or painful from public debate. It's a culture that refuses to accept anything that's not peaceful (there are two key concepts in the Czech language: *klid* and *pohoda*, both meaning "peace"; the Czechs are affectionate to these words and lovingly give them diminutive forms). And it's a culture that turns whatever it can into a joke, that distorts everything. Czech culture, suggests Szczęgieł, is the culture of distortion, of avoidance and of bursting into laughter. And the Czechs are a nation that doesn't like to suffer.

Perhaps they have created a culture that works like an anti-depressant? wonders Szczęgieł. But an anti-depressant is a way of running away from the truth, replies the writer Jan Bala-bán.

Justyna Wodzistawska
Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

NAGANO

In the end, every nation has the need for pathos, and every nation has the need for a hero.

For the Czechs, both these needs are satisfied by ice hockey. Nothing in life fascinates them quite as much as the richest guys in the world racing about on a frozen surface, whacking a block of rubber with wooden sticks.

There used to be a theory that the Czechs' greatest obsession was mushrooms (and that was because they can get mushrooms for free, claimed the writer Jan Burian), but it was blown apart in 1998, when they became the Olympic ice hockey champions at Nagano, plunging Russia into agony and shame (once again, after twenty-nine years!) by beating them in the final 1-0.

After winning the gold at Nagano, the Czechs won the champion's title three times in a row, and ice hockey set in as an official religion.

The new Czech God was Dominik Hašek (born 1965), the goaltender who blocked the Russian shots in the final at Nagano. His nickname is The Dominator, and he has even had an asteroid named after him. "Hašek for the Castle!", chanted the Czechs, which meant they wanted him for president. He has a degree in history and philology and has donated a million dollars for poor children to be able to play ice hockey. He holds second place on the all-time list for the number of shutouts in a season (in ice hockey language, which is incomprehensible to me, that means excellence).

Jaromír Jágr (born 1972) is God No 2. A right winger, he plays with the number 68 on his shirt to commemorate the Prague Spring, the Soviet invasion and the death of his grandfather, who died in prison that year. He has been judged the best ice hockey player in the world; the puck clings to his stick like a magnet, a phenomenon that surpasses all understanding; the media devote as much attention to the highlights in his hair as to his goals. Following success in the National Hockey League he moved to Avangard Omsk, a Russian club, where he joined the Orthodox church and was christened. When the rink is empty and the lights are off, Jágr has been seen going out onto the ice to meditate.

Both players are admired and loved, and Czech men have gladly appointed them their heroes.

Yet it's not just the nation that has the need for pathos and the need for a hero. The opera has both those needs too. And so the idea was born of putting on an opera about ice hockey at the National Theatre in Prague.

Libretto writer Jaroslav Dušek and composer Martin Smolka really have made a new discovery in the art of opera: in modern times the only thing that can carry off the affectation, grandiloquence, dramatic tension and elation of opera is ice hockey.

The music was written in a post-minimalist style, the libretto in onomatopoeic style. The stage sets were built in the style of an ice rink. The conductor was dressed in a referee's strip. And the opera was called *Nagano*.

To the Czechs, Hašek is God, and so a man with a divine voice was cast in his role – in other words a countertenor able to produce a high female voice. And Jaromír Jágr sang a love duet with a sheet of ice. But it wasn't the gods who were the leading characters.

The real hero of the Czech national opera was the third goaltender, substitute Milan Hnilička (born 1973) – a player who has to be ready to go out onto the ice, but only in a situation where two goaltenders in succession have done badly, though it's hard to imagine the god Hašek not doing well. But let's say even a god can have a groin injury. So Hnilička rarely goes out, and probably doesn't have all that pleasant a role on the team. What's more, at Nagano he suffered an awful blow.

When the head of the International Olympic Committee hung the gold medals around the necks of the Czech players, he saw Milan Hnilička at the end of the line with no hockey gear, just in a tracksuit, holding a flag. He thought he was a fan who happened to be on the ice by chance and didn't give him a medal.

And it is this event that is extolled in the opera, *Nagano*.

Once again, Czech culture seems to be making an effort to meet a healthy social need, but responds to it with the concept of a half-baked hero. This is grand de-grandiloquising, heroic de-heroising.

And once again, instead of taking the opportunity to depict its great gladiators sincerely, it applies that most elegant way of avoiding sincerity: irony.

MY LAND IS PARADISE

There's just one single matter where the citizens of the Czech Republic are in total agreement, and there are never any arguments about it.

It's the fact that they regard their country as beautiful, a view that has been officially endorsed by the state.

In their national anthem the British ask God to save their queen, and they have no other expectations. The Hungarians ask Him to absolve their sins. The Dutch ask Him not to leave them. As they no longer want to be über alles, the Germans aspire to unity, liberty and justice. The Russians extol the mighty will of their holy nation. The Americans have the stars and stripes waving triumphantly over their free country. The French issue the summons: "Allons enfants de la patrie!" The Ukrainians stand in bloody battle from the San to the Don. The Portuguese march against the enemy cannons. The Italians join in a cohort, ready to die. The Irish man the entrenchment tonight in Erin's cause. The Lithuanians want to be guided by light and truth. The Canadians have an arm that is ready to wield the sword. The Austrians bravely stride towards new ages. The Argentineans still hear the noise of broken chains. The Romanians cry: "Wake up, Romanian, from your deadly sleep". The Brazilians shout about a heroic people. The Slovaks are awoken by lightning and thunder over the Tatras.

Even the Faroese, from a dependent territory such as the Faro Islands, declare that they raise their banner high and face up to danger.

Yet in their national anthem the Czechs sing about nothing but the fact that their country is paradise.

Water roars across the meadows,
Pinewoods rustle among crags,
The garden is glorious with spring blossom,
Paradise on earth it is to see.

And what are the Czechs like in the Czech Republic's most important song? They are "tender souls in agile frames", "of clear mind", "with a strength that frustrates all defiance" – "That is the glorious race of Czechs". A sedate sense of one's own value – a rarity among the tribes of the world. In the Czech anthem, by contrast with many others, the world outside the Czech lands isn't hostile either.

Someone will say the Australians also sing that their land is beautiful. Yes, but starting with the title they send it on its way: "Advance Australia Fair". The Danes also reveal what the beauty of Denmark is about ("spreading, shady beech trees"), but it's important that "strong men and noble women uphold their country's honour". The beauty of Bulgaria is boundless in its anthem, but beauty isn't everything, and so we are burdened with the mother's task: to give us strength to follow in the footsteps of those who died for the nation.

The Spanish anthem doesn't actually have any words, but it is a march. The world's anthems are full of advancing, striding, marching, capturing and carrying flags. In the Czech one, you'd be more likely to lie down. For what else is there to do in paradise?

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Photo: Joanna Helander

Wilhelm Dichter (born 1935) made his debut at the age of 65 with the novel *God's Horse*, which together with *A School for the Ungodly* (1999) and *Learning English*, which has just been published, form an autobiographical trilogy.

Wilhelm Dichter has made a late but excellent debut with his outstanding memoir-novel *God's Horse*. In it he describes his own wartime experiences: it is the story of a Jewish child hidden in increasingly inhuman hiding places, being gradually dehumanised. He continues the story of this child's fate in *A School for the Ungodly* and in his most recently published novel *Learning English*.

The third part of the series begins in 1968 when the Polish government, which had at this point severed diplomatic relations with Israel, was forcing Poles of Jewish origin to relinquish their Jewish identity or leave the country. Half of the Jews living in Poland at the time emigrated. Dichter was amongst those that left.

The story that follows both is and isn't a story of success. The Dichters have a third child, the husband who is an engineer manages to get a good job and the couple buy a flat of their own. The move isn't a success in the sense that they end up on the other side of the ocean at a point in time when the foundations of post-war equilibrium in the United States are being shaken: the war in Vietnam radicalises young people; the Watergate affair undermines faith in the Presidency; the recession results in unemployment and shows that the anti-capitalist movements are justified.

The rules of the game and the conflicts in this world are unclear to Dichter, but they do matter to him. Although he focuses on himself and his own family, he really takes in a great deal more. His powers of observation are a consequence of his

sharp mind but his way of looking at things is primarily a result of his wartime anxieties. Dichter also has his own specific, hidden obsessions. As a child he forced himself not to think about the fact that his father had committed suicide; as an adult he wants to remember that death and retain his memories of his father. However by doing this he revives the problem of his own Jewish identity, which he associates with the stigma of being a victim of persecution.

This contextual information is necessary to allow you to understand Dichter's resistance to learning English. The dam is breached and a flood of English reading matter sweeps into the narrator's life, but only at the point where he himself knows what it is he wants: he makes an effort to absorb the new language in the hope that it will enable him to understand his own life story.

This "American lesson," in terms of training for success, definitely taught him something, but learning from history, from life experience and by reading in English, has only now come to fruition, forty years later, in this trilogy of memoirs.

Przemysław Czaplinski
Translated by Kasia Beresford

THE headlights of the cars, which were catching up with us, appeared in the rear view mirror and rapidly increased in size. I glanced at them and wondered why I was racing away like a lunatic. Surely I wasn't fleeing Brooklyn? Perhaps it was because Michał's story had reminded me of the conversations about communists and anti-Semites that had been carried on in my home for a quarter of a century? Both these subjects, intricately intertwined, trailed behind us like the dirty cloak of war. We could not cast it aside.

Shortly after we were liberated my mother revealed that the Russians had arrived only at the last possible moment. Just a few days longer and we would have been done for.

"Our money had run out," she said, opening up her hands..

"They saved your lives," said Michał.

She nodded her head in agreement:

"I would have kissed the ground at their feet, if they hadn't been such a load of thugs."

We fell silent. A moment passed before Michał spoke, assuring us that socialism would sweep away all the inequalities in society and eradicate anti-Semitism, destroying all its roots. I took these words to heart.

"Those Russians don't lack for anything, either, but they keep shtum because the NKVD keep them all on a short leash," said my mother bitterly. "We have to escape and leave Borysław, while we can."

We returned to our homeland, to Poland, and Michał became the managing director of a small crude oil refinery in Ligota. People who were trying to reclaim German factories came and went in our apartment, which had formerly belonged to Germans.

"Are they Polish communists?" I asked my mother.

"They're scavengers," she scowled.

I got the opportunity to see communists in Trzebinia: there the managing director's villa, which was permeated by the smell of crude oil which seeped out of the huge refinery, was frequented by the managing directors of the foundry, the rubber company and the cement works, and also by people in uniforms around the times of referenda and elections. Sitting at a generously laden table, they would laugh and talk politics until late at night. Sometimes my mother would let something slip about her beloved city, Lwów, and then she would disregard her husband's ominous glower and cry out in a high-pitched voice that she had her own opinion and that that was that. The guests would chuckle and drink to the health of the lady of the house, praise her chicken broth with noodles or her beef on a bed of beetroot. There was an amazing garden there! A rose garden. It extended over about a hundred metres, right up to the refinery. When the weather was good I would play there in the afternoon with my friends, who lived in the wooden barracks at the back of the villa. Their parents never visited the house.

After the parliamentary elections Michał joined the Foreign Trade Department of the Central Committee of the Polish Workers' Party. We moved into the first floor of a freshly plastered yellow house amongst the rubble of Warsaw. In the corridors and cloakroom of the Queen Jadwiga School, where I started in the middle of the year, the boys called me a Russian bootlicker and didn't let me forget that it was the Jews that murdered Jesus. Once she'd heard about this, my mother went to see our form teacher, the priest at St Michał's church, but when that failed to help she started to pester her husband over breakfast.

"What about that non-religious school in the Żoliborz district?"

He put aside his cup of coffee and said, "They don't have any places."

She tapped the saucer with her teaspoon.

"They're letting Jews from Wałbrzych leave for Israel..." she let her voice hang in the air.

"I'll phone the headteacher," he said, as he wiped his mouth on the tablecloth.

"I won't stay here on my own!" she warned him.

"I'll phone today."

I didn't want anyone on the street to hear her, so I closed the door to the balcony and watched from above as Michał got into his brown Citroën with its double silver chevron on the bonnet.

After a short while, Michał was transferred to the Department of Foreign Trade, and once there, he was appointed to the post of deputy minister, although it did not happen as quickly as mother had expected it to. From then on his chauffeur drove him everywhere in a green Opel Kapitän.

In those years our circle's feelings about communism fluctuated between the apogee at the time of Michał's promotions and his business trips to Moscow, London, Peking and Tirana, and the perigee at times of politically motivated trials, particularly at the time of the Kremlin doctors' plot, a point when Michał was struck with fear that the Party itself was stirring up the anti-Semites against us.

"You said it would act as a shield," my mother hissed coldly.

"In principle you're right, but in fact..." he started to say.

"Sod that for a shield! We need to get out."

Our attitude towards anti-Semites never changed. Our Polish friends despised them and we hadn't the words to express our fear and hatred.

"Would she betray me if the Germans came?" my mother pondered after making a new friend.

"What on earth do you mean by that?" I said indignantly, even though while shaving I examined my head carefully against the *Generalgouverneur*' Hans Frank's Jewish identification profiles.

When I spoke about anti-Semites I always used the same words in exactly the same order.

"Is it possible to get through to other people?" I once asked aloud.

"You mean to people that are different from us?" my mother guessed what I meant.

"Yes."

"No."

Suddenly, as if in a black and white photograph, I saw Mr and Mrs Michalski, who lived in one of the Finnish houses in the Mokotów district. They were tall and cheerful. They had black spaniels beside them. He was a bigwig in the Central Committee of the Polish Socialist Party, but after the so-called merger of the parties he was left out in the cold. Where did he work? Was it possible that he wasn't working? No, that was impossible. Everyone worked somewhere. I had talked to them for hours while eating fruit from their garden, but I couldn't remember what about. I hadn't made use of my "inner eye" at their place; moreover I had even fantasized about being their son. Never before had I gone that far in my dreams of not being a Jew. In the summer of 1950 I rode my bike there and although I have no recollection of the bike rides, I remember how I used to prop my bike up against the fence in front of their house and that the gate was missing. Just like Pangloss, Mr Michalski cultivated his garden and bred dogs (years later we bought Ida from him). Once, while petting the puppies in a cardboard box, I asked him whether people who were happy still wanted something more.

"Happiness has its limits."

"What about unhappiness?"

"It is bottomless."

Translated by Kasia Beresford

* *Governor-General*



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Photo: Andrzej Wróbel

Marek Edelman (1922–2009) the legendary leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, cardiologist, and political and social activist.

This is a book you read in one sitting. It records a series of conversations between two well-known journalists and Marek Edelman, one of the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. After the war, this outstanding cardiologist was hounded out of a Łódź hospital by the Communists, took part in the democratic opposition, and became a member of parliament after Poland regained independence in 1989. He was not only involved in Polish affairs, though – he also helped to organise aid to victims of the war in the former Yugoslavia and was engaged in promoting Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. This was the man Václav Havel called “the embodiment of all that is best in Poland.” The book is based on a simple premise: these conversations with Edelman revolve around the ten commandments. Edelman, who died last year at the age of 90, witnessed possibly the most horrific catastrophe in the history of humankind. He was a person of great bravery and difficult character, who, as Lech Wałęsa once remarked, “doesn’t fit into this world of comfort, token gestures and pretty phrases.” In the book he returns chiefly, although not exclusively, to events that took place during the war and the Nazi occupation, and speaks of things often hard for us, living as we do in safe normality, to bear. He compels us to see the gulf between obligation and law on the one hand and the world of human experience on the other; he speaks of situations that expose the untenability of all moralism, and the shabbiness of sanctimonious drivel. Edelman prefers to trust people rather than God. He also has an aversion to institutionalised religion, which he regards as

a synonym for power and its attendant ideology. Nonetheless, he defines in these conversations what it means for him to lead a good life. A short commentary by a person for whom Edelman was an important figure accompanies each of them. Konstanty Gebert writes: “He regarded religion as harmful nonsense. ‘Faith is something alien to me; what I really don’t like is demonstrative faith,’ he once told me. I believe that it’s important to believe in God. And even more important is to trust God, to live life according to his teachings. But most important is that God can believe in you. That you’re not a coward, that you don’t run away, that you don’t betray goodness, whether you believe in God or not. God could believe in Doctor Marek Edelman: in the Ghetto Uprising, in the Warsaw Uprising, in March 1968 and during Martial Law, in the convoy to Sarajevo and at his patients’ bedsides. He knew that He wouldn’t be disappointed.”

*Marek Zaleski
Translated by Katya Andrusz*

– THE **most important question is: what is most important to you?**

– I’ve already said it somewhere: life is the most important thing, and if one’s life isn’t in danger, freedom is the most important. But then people sacrifice their lives for freedom and then it’s not clear what’s most important. That’s it. Bravo. Something like that. And so it has been for many years.

It’s already been printed somewhere, you don’t need to repeat it. I don’t remember exactly how I said it, but I put it well.

– **Yes, you did.**

There was something else you said well. You told us that when you were fired from the hospital, an old friend turned up and said: “If things get bad, I’ll hide you.” As you put it, at the heart of the story was this: “You should give a beaten man a home. Hide him in the cellar. Not be afraid of doing that. And always oppose those who do the beating.

– It’s true that when they fired me from the hospital, my friend Blachnicki contacted me from Radom. We worked together as third-year students. Later he married well, moved to Radom and became a big-shot registrar straight away, in charge of fifty beds. Nice guy. He had mitral stenosis, he was a sick man. But when we were younger we had to choose a specialization – we were already doctors, but the department of health said we all had to have a specialization, otherwise we’d earn less, etc.

So Professor Jakubowski said: “Come by tomorrow to take the exam.”

So we’re standing in this corridor: Rysiek Fenigsen, Blachnicki and me, because we were the only three twits they could drum up. And suddenly Blachnicki went all dizzy. We ask: “Why are you so worried?” He says: “Because I won’t make it.” I say: “Idiot, he won’t ask you. If he’d wanted to ask you, he’d have thrown you out long ago.” We went into the professor’s office, he only asked for our student record books, signed them, and that was it.

But then, when they fired me, he was already an important registrar there in Radom. He had three rooms and a kitchen, and an alcove etc with his rich wife. It was 1968 and then he came to visit me. Elżbieta Chętkowska was with me at the time, he knew her because she’d been a trainee with us. And he said: “Marek, I’ve got everything planned out. We’ll wall off the alcove, we’ll put a cupboard there and you’ll be able to go in and out. You can hide with me for the rest of your life.”

He talked as though we’d just been occupied again. Elżbieta was so touched that she burst into tears.

– **One should always be on the side of those who have been beaten, whoever they are one should be on their side...**

– I put that well, don’t you think? What, don’t you like it?

– **We like it very much.**

– Glad to hear it. What can I add? It’s all clear, really, that one sentence expresses humankind in its entirety. In Romain Gary’s *King Solomon*, the heroine is surprised that her doctor, who admittedly is 90 years old, says that it’s difficult for him to visit her on the fifth floor; after all, she knows which cellar she hid him in during the war. Her implication being: I saved his life, because I didn’t turn him in.

So according to her, turning someone in, betraying them, is normal, whereas not turning them in is an exceptional deed. And that’s why this aged doctor is supposed to go all the way upstairs to her. Because that’s her due, because she saved his life.

That’s the Nazi mentality, which penetrated the French mindset and maybe that of other Europeans as well. After all, the French were free. Paris was an open city. The Germans went there to have fun. It was their dream, to go to France with the army. You drank cognac, you went to the brothel for girls, etc. It was terrific for them there! You could get hold of French cognac even in the ghetto, because the Germans brought it from Paris and sold it to smugglers, and they took it into the ghetto. All you needed was enough money.

Yes, there were rich people in the ghetto. They traded with the Germans, each cheating the other, and trade went well. Because the Germans didn’t have anything against Jewish money.

On the contrary, they were very satisfied.

For instance, Brandt and Mende’s people used to get their hair cut by a particular barber, because he could shave well. It looked as though he was going to live a life of luxury with them right till the end. Until they suddenly came round, took away his entire fortune and shot him. That was the mentality that said a Jew wasn’t a human, do you understand?

How did Hannah Arendt put it?

– **The banality of evil.**

– The banality of evil... But evil isn’t a banality – it’s a facet of human character. It’s the worst of human character. Humans are evil, because if they weren’t, they wouldn’t exist anymore. They were so evil that they wiped out all their enemies a hundred or ten thousand of years ago. And they stayed around because they ate both meat and plants, everything. They adapted better. And destroyed the competition.

In the same way, great states have relied on killing everyone within reach, as long as they had better crossbows and arrows.

Even nowadays, look at Poland... What did the Kaczyński government do to decent people? After all, you don’t have to kill someone in order to destroy them.

That’s the great misfortune: that humans are evil. And – by the way – you can see who’s good and who’s bad by looking into their eyes. There was a doctor who came to see me, an outstanding scientist, international conferences, books, they doted on her. Until her husband – also a doctor – was arrested and became suspect. Kaczyński’s people, by the way. I don’t know whether he was innocent or guilty... And suddenly she was alone. But her friends were afraid to give her their hand. And apart from that she was still wearing some beautiful shoes and a pretty sweater, and she was still earning some money somewhere, so she attracted plain envy as well and was disliked all the more.

Human beings have a despicable character. It’s a creation of evolution that hasn’t yet been tempered by civilisation. Perhaps humans will be different in a thousand years’ time. Maybe they’ll look the same, but civilisation will have tempered their behaviour.

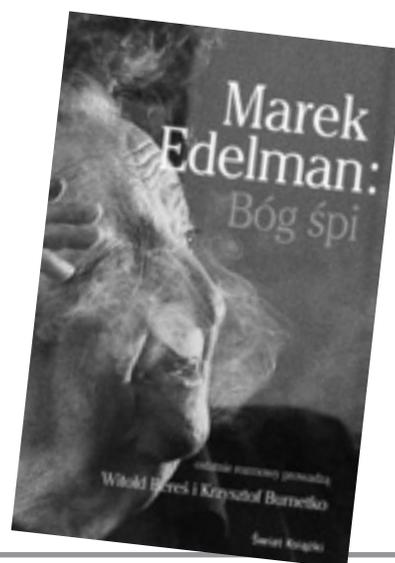
– **The ten commandments could be a tool to that end.**

– Religion. The ten commandments. Christ. Lovely things. But they had to be introduced by force. After all, the ten commandments were brought in because those Jews travelling from Egypt to Israel had to be brought into line somehow. Because they were bandits, hoodlums. It took them 40 years to get to Israel, because one lot was always slaughtering the other. Each of them wanted to get to this land flowing with milk and honey, but nobody knew where it was. It was only the leaders who knew, and they set the others against one other. Finally, the strongest group imposed those ten commandments on the others to make them behave. And anyone who didn’t submit was killed. The truth of the matter is that the ten commandments were introduced to human morality by force.

– **But religion does civilise people, somehow.**

– That’s true. It does civilise some. But others it doesn’t.

Translated by Katya Andrusz



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Photo: Krzysztof Strachota

Wojciech Górecki (born 1970) is a journalist, writer and diplomat. He is presently working at the Centre for Eastern Studies.

The author of *A Toast to the Ancestors* is not just a foreign correspondent, but also a specialist in political studies who has worked on the history, culture and politics of the Caucasus region for many years. He has travelled there not just as a political scientist and journalist, but also as an employee of the Polish Embassy in Baku, and lately as an expert for an EU mission researching the causes and effects of the war in Georgia in 2008.

Górecki gives us insight into the history and life of the people who live in these countries on the borders of Asia and Europe, whose multiculturalism has proved not just a blessing, but quite often a curse too, as is often the case for geographical and cultural borderland areas in situations where there is a lack of political stability – in this case, following the collapse of the USSR. Thus we find out a lot about the painful modernisation process of post-Soviet Azerbaijan, where Islamic fundamentalists who oppose Westernisation are increasingly taking the stage. The most fascinating parts of this altogether extremely interesting account concern Georgia and Armenia. Nowadays nothing there is quite the way we might have expected on the basis of reports put out by the sensationalist media, historians of former eras in the service of their states, or old literary works. Thus we read how Orthodox Georgia boasts of having given the world (i.e. Russia) the great Stalin, is still unable to cope with his legacy, and at the same time is entangled in conflicts and animosities with Russia that go back for centuries. We read about Armenia – a country tragically afflicted

by history, still living with their memories of the massacre of 1915, dodging between Russia (in fear of the Turkish threat) and the West, and with a constant feeling of connection with the Armenian diaspora. Górecki takes the viewpoint of a travelling reporter and historian who weaves his tale from dozens of personal stories, encounters and landscapes. He shares his surprise with us and helps us to understand not so much the squaring of the “Caucasian chalk circle” any more, but the recipe for the Caucasian geopolitical muddle from which new shapes are emerging for the future of the region.

Marek Zaleski
Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

THE ICON

“Stalin is a figure who played a unique role in the history of mankind,” Professor Gegeshidze told us. “History is aware of many people of this kind. There’s Christ. There’s Mohammed. There’s Confucius. There’s Alexander the Great. There’s Napoleon. And among them, in top place, there is Stalin.”

It was 1998. We had come to Georgia to make a film about the cult of Stalin. President Edward Shevardnadze had just opened the institute, the aim of which was to study the life and works of the dictator. David Gegeshidze, a philosopher, was head of the institute’s academic board.

Gegeshidze: “We gather and disseminate information about Stalin, and research sources that can cast new light on his personality. We try to keep our emotions in check. Our aim is not to make political capital, but an academic synthesis of the phenomenon that is Stalin.”

Professor Ivane Shengeliya, historian: “We want to understand who he was. Having a psychologist and a graphologist take part in our work is important, because even a single one of Stalin’s signatures can have great significance for research into his way of life, habits and attitude to the world around him.”

Dr Mziya Naochashvili, historian: “The Georgian nation has many heroes, but research on the Stalin phenomenon transcends the national aspect. He is not just a national hero. The figure of Stalin is the achievement of all mankind.”

We asked at the institute about Stalin’s crimes, including the famine in Ukraine and Katyń.

We were told that the prison camps were economically justified: without armies of prisoners Stalin would never have succeeded in creating such vast industry from nothing in such a short time.

Someone commented that in Ukraine there was famine before the revolution too: “Famine is an event brought about by harvest failure and does not occur exclusively under a communist regime. There were victims, but the number cited by the Ukrainians is inflated.”

Someone else expressed doubt about Stalin’s responsibility for Katyń: “He never gave the order ‘Shoot people!’ He never did that. He ruled the country and had more important things to worry about than killing. There were relevant organs for that.” We were also told that at Katyń everything happened in keeping with the law: “Whether or not the right decisions were made in this case is quite another matter,” explained the next speaker.

Businessman Otar Chigladze, who sponsors the institute (“in Georgia lots of businessmen are Stalinists; their companies enjoy order, all problems are resolved beautifully and their people live well”), commented that the children and grandchildren of those who were repressed do not want the world to discover the truth about Stalin. “Could a child who was only a few years old when his father was arrested really know if Stalin was good, or if his father was all right?”

“In Stalin’s lifetime they said one thing, and now they say another. Maybe some third idea will come up now, too?” said Professor Shengeliya, shrugging off our questions.

President Shevardnadze regarded establishing the institute (the full name of which is the Academic Research Centre for Studies on the Phenomenon of J.V. Stalin) as one of his greatest achievements. In interviews he explained that Stalin had been presented in “a vulgarised light” and that this should be changed. He gave these interviews in Georgian, for the Georgian media. He rarely spoke about Stalin to journalists outside Georgia. In his autobiography, *The Future Belongs to Freedom*, which was published in Russian, he wrote that destalinisation was a blow for Georgian amour propre; Khrushchev presented Stalin as not just a tyrant and a criminal, but also as an ignoramus and dunce, almost a halfwit – yet this man inspired millions to follow him, won the war and built an empire! Could a halfwit have beaten Hitler? asked Shevardnadze.

In a Georgian history textbook for the ninth year, published in 2003, it said in bold type that criticism of Stalin in the era of Khrushchev’s thaw turned into abuse of the Georgian nation: “It was emphasised that Stalin was a Georgian, which in this case was irrelevant.”

Towards the end of the 1980s, as the nations populating the Soviet Union were awakening from their torpor, raising their heads and beginning to demand recognition for their identity, the Georgians insisted on justice for Stalin. They founded the Society for the Ideological Heirs of Stalin and the International Stalin Association; another organisation demanded that Stalin’s ashes be brought home from Moscow. The Ossetians, who live in central Caucasus, also laid claim to Stalin (supposedly the dictator had Ossetian roots). In the mid 1990s readers of the newspaper *Youth of Ossetia* concluded that Stalin and Christ were the most influential personalities in the history of the world. “On the one hand,” the editors commented on the results of their poll, “Stalin’s victory can be explained by boundless love for a compatriot, on the other, this popularity might worry some people, as in recent years various wretched historians have shamelessly thrown mud at Him. Yet let us not forget that the voice of the nation is objective, and therefore true.”

The Stalinist Communist Party took part in the Georgian elections held on 5 November 1995 (it was number 27 on the list), promoting itself with the aid of posters depicting Stalin, and also a large portrait of the dictator that toured Tbilisi on the roof of a microbus. The portrait was illuminated by Christmas tree lights, and at night this entire twinkling convoy – several more vehicles came after the microbus, all with their sirens on, which must have come from ambulances or maybe fire engines – was like a crazy procession, a parade by followers of some Christian-pagan saint. In those years the nights in Tbilisi were almost black, the street lamps weren’t working and there were no neon lights. The pale glow of candles and oil lamps shone from the windows, and the burning tip of a late-night pedestrian’s cigarette left a trail behind it like a jet stream. ...

Three-and-a-half percent of the electorate voted for the Stalinist Party. Most of the Stalinists supported President Shevardnadze’s Union of Citizens of Georgia.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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Photo: Marta Eloy Cichocka

Inga Iwasiów (born 1963) is a novelist, poet, literary critic and professor at the University of Szczecin. Amongst other things she has published a collection of short stories entitled *Tastes and Touches* (2006) and the novel *Bambino* (2008).

Towards the Sun is the continuation of the narrative in Iwasiów's novel *Bambino*, which was very well received by critics and readers alike. However this book can be read in isolation as it is not necessary to be familiar with the preceding novel in order to enjoy it. *Towards the sun* is set in present-day Szczecin, but includes flashbacks that take us back to events that took place in the 80's and 90's. The story begins with Magda's arrival in Szczecin. Magda has come to say her farewells to her only relative, her aunt, who is seriously ill and dying. About twenty years previously Magda had moved abroad, first to Berlin and later to London. She became an IT specialist in a large company and travelled widely, expanding her horizons, finally settling near Amsterdam. The unplanned visit to Szczecin and, even more so, the company of Tomek, her childhood friend, stir up a string of memories and encourage the main character to re-evaluate her own life. Other characters appearing in the narrative include Tomek's wife, Sylwia, who works at Szczecin University, her boss Małgorzata, a professor, and Małgorzata's PhD student, Marek. Małgorzata is having an affair with Marek, a man twenty-five years her junior. Marek's father is also a significant character in the story: he was once an activist in the local branch of the Solidarity movement. In *Towards the Sun*, short episodes from the past lives of the characters mentioned above alternate with events happening in the present, complementing each other. There are many different themes that make up the fabric of this novel: the topics of social norms and environmental influences are intertwined

with psychological themes and erotica; the waking world and the unconscious world of sleep merge. Although the novel is kept within the bounds of realism, the author frequently moves away from the literal and the concrete. Iwasiów wishes to understand the motivations and aspirations of her characters, but above all she wants to convey the collective experiences of Poles born in the early sixties.

Dariusz Nowacki
Translated by Kasia Beresford

“IT’S good that you’re here, my child,” Ula had managed to say in the time they had together, and it still resounded in the empty ward now that she was no longer there; she was being wheeled along to the operating theatre. They hadn’t immediately re-made the abandoned bed – the hospital attendants would come to do that in a moment, armed with an array of buckets, mops and chemical substances – so Magda smoothed the bed as if on automatic pilot. She met the gaze of the woman from the bed by the window, probing and unfriendly, she thought, and then she changed her mind. The hospital attendants, two tired-looking women of indeterminate age, wheeled in a trolley with greyish sets of linen on top and blue sheets of plastic underneath, and another trolley containing cleaning materials. They first set about making the bed opposite. The patient from the bed by the window asked for a wet towel: her voice was full of pain, and the words barely escaped her parched lips. Magda walked up to the wash basin and looked at her own reflection in the mirror. In the mirror she saw that the woman’s gaze was vacant, incapable of assessing what was going on, unengaged. At most she registered that something had changed in the room, somebody had been wheeled away, somebody had come in, someone would go out, something would be brought in, they would tell her to swallow it, they would disconnect or connect something, stick it in, wake her up, ask her how she felt, as if they couldn’t see themselves, as if they didn’t have a stack of test results, printouts from the insides of battered bodies, results from monitoring people’s entrails. Besides this there were the unimaginable rushes of pain, the spasms of unforeseen recollections, apathy. She looked around and said, “Goodbye” and stopped awhile in the doorway. The sick lady did not reply, maybe she was dozing. There was a deathly silence and in the background you could hear the clink of metallic objects and smell boiled potatoes, cabbage, antiseptic and urine or something else. How would you know what else as a person from the outside? You would need to stay here for a longer spell: after a few days she would manage to distinguish the rhythms, tastes and smells. As she had just dropped in for a short time, she was a passer-by and could barely take in the accumulation of alien sensations; inwardly she withdrew from the flood of unfamiliar stimuli. In the midst of the noise there was an enclave of deathly silence, a crevice of dying time; almost no-one is qualified for this, except perhaps occasionally someone at the end of the line, visiting a person from the next generation to depart, someone qualified by force of habit with a proficiency that is the domain of the sage. The hospital attendants were already on the next ward, they were covering the empty beds with plastic sheets – “just like goods for sale put out on display, as if in some super hygiene-conscious store” thought Magda, as she also looked at the glassed-off nurses’ staff room, which was spacious and bright with walls that were painted willow green. She wondered what smell prevailed there. The smell of women? Or chocolate? Or coffee? Milk puddings? Blood? Or fatigue?

She walked through the empty corridor. Perhaps she should go to the operating theatre zone on the ground floor; actually it was below ground floor level where the recovery room was also situated. She would prefer not to go in there. She remembered visiting Uncle Roman – she had come especially, unnecessarily, like this time, because Tomek did not expect any support – there were women and men with their chests bared, equipment, lights on all day round, mistreated people and on both sides of the beds, the indifferent staff averting their eyes. It ought to have changed, but she knew it was just the same, in the same place: the corridor had been redecorated, the paint covering up bygone layers of suffering; behind the doors with a bell were the patients in intensive care, so that the life in them couldn’t simply escape; bodily functions were monitored at all costs, even, were it necessary, at the cost of finishing someone off by shining lights in their eyes twenty-four hours a day, by confronting them with the deaths of those around them. After all people do die in hospital, we shouldn’t expect too much. Nothing can defeat death. What would happen if they put Ula there... she had light-proof curtains, changed every twenty years for even more light-proof ones, she had always had an aversion to light. She had not had roller-blinds fitted, she liked patterned material. The light came in too early through the tall hospital windows, even at this

time of year, in the summer it would have been worse, it would have been awful. The patient on the left hand side had said something about the nurses keeping magnets in the staff room, that the nurses had magnets for the blinds, otherwise people would steal everything. What magnets? What was she talking about? And would the flimsy blinds, even assuming that they were attached with magnets, shield her eyes from the pain attacking them? Why did people steal? What did they do with the toilet roll holders they unscrewed? At the moment the coloured leaves still maintaining their hold on the trees formed a sort of filter; the sun was low in the sky, washed out, and it peered into those huge windows for barely a couple of hours a day. There was no protection, those who were not separated from the light by internal screens, which heralded their final passing away, could at most turn away towards the wall, as long as a drip did not prevent them from doing so. “Maybe they feel different inside,” Magda thought to console herself, “maybe only I am so afraid,” as I look from the sidelines at things they do not see here. Maybe they are on the inside, gently cushioned by their own bodies, a cushion of bodily tissues anaesthetised by drugs. Let’s hope so. Let’s hope so. Ula and Aunt Anna had liked to repeat themselves when wishing her good luck, they implored fate and shook their heads in time with the words: “Let’s hope that it goes well for you, my child”, which accompanied her every step, a new job, moving home, a new relationship. Later Ula was left on her own, without company, without friends. She continued to repeat these sentences starting with “Let’s hope” over the telephone and must have been shaking her head.

Maybe they would just take her back to the ward, she had to find out and wait. The nurse spoke to her in an unexpectedly warm-hearted way, as if she had known her for ages: “Your granny is still in the operating theatre. Why don’t you come back later, in the afternoon? There’s no point in waiting now.” She thought about how it happened differently in films, someone always came out to see the family, had a matter-of-fact discussion, patted them on the back. It was good that the nurse, at least, was patient with her, her words seemed personal, almost just like in a film, actually. It was only right to appreciate this, at that salary level no-one should expect too much and anyway, how many times in your life could you lower your voice to a warm alto in that way in order to reassure confused traitors? Those daughters who didn’t visit their mothers on a daily basis, brothers who lived thousands of kilometres away, unprepared colleagues from work, who easily moved to the other side where death rang hollow, inquisitive neighbours wanting to find something to gossip about. How many months or years did it take until you got the urge to tell them how it really was? What was it like to pretend that the bloke who brought his mother a koala bear teddy from the airport was all right, an OK bloke deserving of sympathy? The corridor in this part of the hospital had also been recently redecorated, thank goodness: it didn’t have those strange associations with prison, with war – the associations of someone who reads Foucault, of course. The beige coloured wall turned into an area with small tables and a coffee machine, where people in dressing gowns and track suits sat alongside others who were elegantly dressed. Why did people put on their Sunday best to visit hospital? Why a shirt or a white blouse? For whom was this Sunday best, this polite front, this masquerade?

Translated by Kasia Beresford



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Photo: Piotr Miazga

Ignacy Karpowicz (born 1976) is a novelist, travel writer and translator. One of the most promising novelists of the younger generation, he writes psychedelic fiction as well as quasi-reportage from Africa.

The title of Ignacy Karpowicz's novel is made up of the titles of two masterpieces of Polish Romanticism. Adam Mickiewicz's book of epic poems, *Ballads and Romances*, is regarded as the collection that initiated this era in Polish literature, and *Baladyna* is one of Juliusz Słowacki's best dramas. Knowing the sources of this pun, it is easy to see what it means, but it's not quite so easy to explain what exactly this mish-mash is. Explaining the concept of "Poland" is no less tricky a task.

Yet what we have here is Poland, "on special offer", so a small group of gods makes its way there, above all Olympian gods, supported by divinities from some other religions, including Jesus, Osiris and Lucifer. What are they appearing on earth for? To confirm the existence of transcendental beings, and to restore the values which are ignored by the religion that unites the inhabitants of the global village – pop culture. However, their noble intention comes to nothing, as the only difference between the gods and people is that the gods are immortal – what's more, only in the physical (or metaphysical) sense of the word, and only up to a point.

The novel opens with the monologue of a Chinese fortune cookie as the carrier of existential principles, by which several of the earthly heroes seem to be guided. These characters are connected by family relationships and friendships, and include: a nurse called Olga, a 50-year-old single woman burdened with the stigma of killing on demand; her niece Anka, the living incarnation of "CosmoGirl"; teenage Janek, a typical demoralised social orphan with no future; and Bartek and Rafał,

two university lecturers who question the point of their own research. Each of them is suffering, so each of them could do with a radical change. Or a miracle. Can they count on the heavenly invasion to make it happen?

All I shall betray is that in preparing his ironical treatise on the modern human condition, Karpowicz does not fall into the pop-culture trap. He adeptly avoids formulaic plots and steers the fates of his human and non-human characters in perhaps the most unexpected direction. Philosophical thought finds full expression in the form of this book, via its tragi-comic tone, its way of juggling narrative methods and its mixed composition. The result could be an extremely interesting story (as far as Polish creativity goes) about what post-modernity is in a post-communist country.

Marta Mizuro

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

JESUS

My name is Jesus. Jesus Christ, and my tag's Ichthys. I'm very popular, right at the top for two thousand years. I mainly appear in the Bible, which next to *Hair* is the biggest musical of all time.

I am a god, the one and only god. I am the gate and the way. I am the light and salvation. I am the shepherd. For real.

I am the one and only god in the Trinity. That means the one and only god is also my Father and the Holy Spirit. We are a unity, although we are also separate. Not a bad idea, just a bit complicated. From the start I told Father and the Dove that people wouldn't get it. The subtle, well-fed minds will understand, of course they will, but the stupider, underfed remainder will be confused about who's who. I said we should wait with the Three in One and vice versa until people discover that the world has more than three dimensions and that quantum physics is only the start of the road to understanding it. But they said no. No, because concealing the triple nature of unity and the unity of the Trinity would be a lie, and building a religion on a lie is risky in the long run – we've had plenty of examples from earlier eras. No, because the only road to salvation is via the truth. The truth, by the way, is me.

Of course I was right. I'm sort of omniscient. Not that I was pleased about being right. It's simply that every god should adapt to the level of his (potential) believers, to the historical moment. After all, I'm not going to proclaim in the Stone Age that every person has the right to spam and a broadband connection. There'd already been some friction over editing the Ten Commandments. To my mind the Ten Commandments weren't very developmental and too long from the start – after all, not everyone has a good memory. But they said no, there had to be ten points. If there are ten points, you can't insist on the text being coherent or effective. Firstly, you can observe the Ten Commandments and still be a bad person. Secondly, the commandments linked morality and law too strongly with the family, and as everyone knows, families only ever come out well in photos, apart from which the family is a historical concept, subject to time and susceptible to change.

The next problem is language. I said to the other two thirds of me: listen, let's not do this in Hebrew or Aramaic, those languages will die out – look at the forecasts and simulations; let's wait a few hundred years, I said. I am the god of love, my manifesto should be expressed in the language of love, best of all in French. But they (that is I) said no. We're not waiting. Well then, I say, how about English? There won't be any problems with mistakes in the translation. But I (that is they) also said no to that.

The next problem, and it's an important one, came out of the constitution of me myself. So I'm a god and a man. Two separate natures, but in one single body – that's what the Council of Chalcedon ruled, and I went along with this decision; it reached me exactly approximately four hundred years after my death, at a benefit for my activities. The idea of two natures isn't bad, and the implementation isn't bad, but once again something didn't go quite according to my way of thinking. In my view, the resurrection turned out to be a cardinal error. We should have dropped all that Egyptian heavy stuff. For people to be good, they have to understand that there's nothing waiting for them after death, there's no heaven and no judgement. And even if someone does get into heaven, it'll be a bonus, a real prize for those who weren't expecting anything.

Except that I was saying my thing, and my other two thirds were saying theirs – that without heaven and hell people wouldn't be good, there'd be no salvation and the whole thing'll be a flop and a bore. And once again it turned out I was right. I'm a god, and even if two thirds of me are in disagreement with me, I do know how the world's going to end.

That's why I'm planning to come down and die. Nothing spectacular – no cross, no agony. That didn't work out. The crucifixion turned out to be premature. This time I'm going for cataracts, rheumatism and senile dementia. I'm planning to descend with Nike, my sweetheart, I'm planning to give up the omnipotence, do the shopping and catch the flu. I'm planning to do minor good deeds. Miracles are out of the question. I'm planning to pay the rent and spend eight hours a day at work.

I'm an anthropophile. I love people. Maybe because I have a sense of humour. There's no love without a sense of humour. I suggested replacing one of the commandments with this one: "Thou shalt laugh every day, and even more on the holy day. Laughter is a good gateway, balsam for the heart and the eye of salvation". It didn't fly.

Salvation is the central point of all the dimensions, and it's where I plan to lead people, to a point within matter, because apart from matter in all its various planes there is nothing – just the ultimate dimension. I believe in apocatastasis: universal salvation. Without hell, limbo or the abyss. In this belief I am in the minority. Two thirds of me insist on the Last Judgement. I argue that Creation is a good thing, and so on every, even the most despicable being, you can see the stamp of good. It's hard talking to a majority, especially in unity.

I admit that over the past few centuries I have had doubts about apocatastasis, and in general, about myself, or actually about one third of myself. After the show in the Red Sea I really hit rock bottom. Nike told me about Zeus' plan. I didn't like it much. Later, when Nike had gone off, I was sitting there, head drooping, in despair and in a dilemma, when I had a revelation. The Olympians' plan doesn't go against my own plans, but works in their favour. Please understand that I've never been a fan of the idea that there's only one god: I was outvoted, which in itself is a paradox. I've always thought it's better to cooperate with other gods than to fight them. It looks to me as though the Greek plan gives all of us one more chance. This time I won't make the old mistakes again: the resurrection, as I said, is out; hell, heaven, purgatory – out; and the Ten Commandments are suspended. I need something simpler. One point will be enough, maybe with footnotes, such as: Everyone has the right to happiness. To laughter. To make a mistake. To love. We can draw lots on it.

This time I'm going to pull it off. I am the Pantocrator, alpha and omega, omnipotence and eternal light. I am the gate and the church. I know that's nothing to get worked up about, but sometimes it's worth reminding yourself who you are.

I'm filled with hope. Hope, as it so awkwardly happens, is the only one of the plagues that didn't leave Pandora's Box. Or actually, Barrel, by the way.

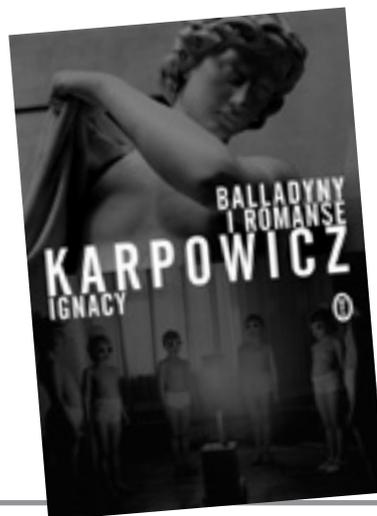
I freshened up, got changed, and rushed off to see Nike. I told her everything, and while I was there I met Aphrodite. She's even more beautiful than they say. Nike declared her love for me. We're going down together, right after Athena and Osiris' festival.

Osiris is my pal from way back, before the crucifixion. He was the first god to rise from the dead. And not far from Golgotha either – by plane it'd be an hour, a little shorter on angel's wings.

So we're going down. The veil of heaven will part for the very last time. The curtain will rise. Hallelujah.

I'm off to the jeweller's – I'd like to propose to Nike. I need a ring; perhaps something made of adamant?

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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Photo: Julia Kapińska

Sylwia Siedlecka (born 1980) is trained as a Slavist and works at the Polish Academy of Sciences. She knows seven living languages and three dead ones. She has translated Slovakian prose and poetry. *Pups* is her authorial debut.

Young Polish writers are returning more and more to poetic styles, such as so-called turpism (designed to be anti-aesthetic by introducing tones of ugliness) or surrealism, that were most popular about a half century ago. It may be that the selection of forms of expression that rely upon the deformation of reality signals a disenchantment with the palpable "here-and-now" as well as an unwillingness to engage with running socio-political debates. Either way, Siedlecka's stories are not based in any defined time or space. Admittedly certain set pieces connect some of them to the twenty-first century, but there are also tales in the collection that take place in other worlds (such as the remarkable story "Children").

Although many characters and situations described in these stories have an oneiric provenance, and the development of the plot follows the logic of dreams, in other cases what we have is really discreet surrealist staffage. But what connects these works is the fact that for the most part their protagonists are sick people, physically or mentally deformed, abandoned, forced into the margins – of literature, too. In exhibiting their world, the author commemorates their existence, which we see especially in those stories in which the narration is entrusted to a sensitive young woman trying to alter the order of things, to return a sense of humanity to those condemned to inertia and oblivion ("Plaster," "Last-Minute," "Hotel Barcelona"). Although the behavior of the self-appointed "sisters of mercy" is irrational, at the same time that serves to motivate them: it comes from a deep-seated sympathy. The gestures of the women

protagonists seem crazy only because they differ sharply from the indifference generally shown to those wronged by fate.

Pups is an exceptionally coherent collection. It's held together by the same philosophy, the poetics of surreally distorted reality, as well as Siedlecka's engaging, lyrical language. The evocative sequences depicted here are simply captivating, and they remain in your mind for a long while, forcing you to re-think your understanding of the world. This book cannot be ignored, nor its author, who has shown herself to be a truly unique personality from the very start.

Marta Mizuro
Translated by Jennifer Croft

KIDS that haven't been christened don't go to heaven – when they die they're carried off to hell by big buses.

The children have left behind their bodies, so small you could easily put them into a violin case. What is the fate of those bodies? Many of them end up on a table, they autopsy them, professionals look into their insides and find out the same thing over and over again: beneath the rib cage there is a heart and two lungs, and obviously white bones, red blood, a little flesh. Some of them look into their heads, it doesn't take much to bisect the skull, you just have to have some shears, the skulls of children are soft, after the incision the head opens up like a ripe fruit.

They make great baby-dolls, so beloved by little girls, out of some of the bodies. Inside you can put a barrel organ or a device that imitates crying. You install little springs in the eyelids that make the doll blink. The eyes don't dry out because they're varnished, and they're always shining. But you can't buy those dolls just anywhere, only in special shops, and they don't make very many of them, either, it's expensive, they're so-called hand-made crafts, less and less popular in this day and age. The last master craftsman like that I heard about some eight years ago. He lives – if he's still alive – in the little town of Chichester in the south of England, and his name is Augustinus.

The fate of many bodies is unknown, but I can tell you about the posthumous fate of the souls of those children: I happen to know something about that.

Big buses run day and night, in good weather and in bad, so that the eternal order is preserved and so that everything goes smoothly. They go both ways, some to hell, the others to heaven, such is fate. Their route runs through the mountains, it's chilly, there are smooth granite rocks, almost no plants, the air is brisk, and the sky cloudless. The children who are damned travel upwards along a switch-back – the myth about heaven being above and hell below is the invention of a pair of crafty guys, you can believe me or not, but I assure you, it's exactly the opposite. Heaven is located in the sheltering core of the earth, warm as amniotic fluid, while hell is way up high, amidst heavy cloud masses, and who knows where it ends.

The bus climbs upwards, the fog thickens, the pressure falls. The children are aware of this, but they don't cry. They are well behaved. Some of them have pacifiers in their mouths, smuggled out from this world.

The bus to paradise goes downwards, lower and lower, where there are lots of trees, the grass is succulently green, and the roses purple. There are some animals there, too, but gentle ones, they don't have claws or teeth, and even if they do, they don't use them. The children look at the roses, they can touch them, and they don't prick themselves on thorns, because in paradise everything is made of light. There aren't any weeds in heaven, either.

There is in the eternal timetable a moment when the children's buses pass each other. And then for a second the eyes of the kids from one bus meet the eyes of the children from the other bus, the children look at each other without being able to say anything or make any gesture in greeting – they hadn't had time to learn yet on earth. That little short circuit is my favorite moment. Because the kids oughtn't to look at each other – did someone mess up somewhere, or is there just no other road?

Some of the newborns took animals with them, live ones or plush toys. A cat, four puppies, a toy panda, a rat, and in the fist of one child even a golden fish. It had been dead for hours, but the kid didn't know that, which was all right. The kids try to hide them, thinking that someone is going to take everything away from them. Nothing of the kind. Nobody's interested in animals. Some of them, impatient with the long journey, run away through the bus' airshaft, mainly the soft plush toys remain.

The journey goes on, it starts to get dark, the children receive blankets and hot cocoa, they have to keep warm, because it's chilly. Some of them sleep, but most of them stay awake, dozens of pairs of eyes shine in the darkness like bats' little eyes. The children are patient. In the end they reach hell. The first thing that has to be done is to name them – they generally didn't get names while alive. You couldn't say that their names have been chosen with particular care, but they definitely aren't entirely random, either. Two twins

(yes, sometimes both die rather than just one) will be named Kamil and Emil, a pretty girl with black eyes and very red lips will be called Carmen, and so on, and so forth.

They have names, but they don't use them. Evidently the names serve some other goal. In hell things are rather quiet. There is no fire, no deep-frying people, or ripping out fingernails, or flogging, or blood. It's like a November night, when you can't fall asleep, and in tossing and turning you observe a gloomy dawn through the window. The red is diluted, turns into gray, and then into a cold, milky shade, and somewhere out there there's a pair of crows perched on a branch, and the trees are bare. That's it, a dismal autumn.

The children don't get enough sleep, that's the first of the punishments that awaits them. Newborns need a lot of sleep, and in hell they only give them five hours. Because they have to work. But you have to be able to walk to work, you'll say. Yes, well, some of them can, they walk strangely, shakily, unnaturally.

Those that can't, crawl. Some of them aren't even capable of that, so they just lie there. I can't say why some of them can master the art of walking and others can't. Perhaps it's a question of their bone structure? Those that lie there look at the ceiling, but they're not sad. Who knows, maybe they're even happy that they don't have to work. Their substitute for walking is a weekly bath in the pool. The pool is enormous, the water in it is black and thick like chocolate or like venous blood. It floats the bodies of the children, even those that haven't learned how to swim. But they *can* swim, they remember that still from their mother's wombs.

The basin is the only place where music is played. Mainly tango seeps out of those speakers. On Saturday (which in hell is the same as Sunday in heaven and on earth) instead of tango the speakers emit the sound of a beating human heart. They attach wires to one of the kids lying down that run to the speakers, which transmit the rhythmic beating to the stereo system. No one is worried that someday a silence will fall, when the kid dies. You don't die in hell – hell is a second more eternal than heaven. The kid won't die, then, but nor will he go anywhere ever, he is, as they say, seriously ill, he can only move his eyes. But you would be wrong to think he's sad. I see joy in his eyes.

Translated by Jennifer Croft



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Photo: Piotr Kaliński

Jerzy Franczak (born 1978) writes poetry, fiction and literary criticism, and is the author of several volumes of poetry, collections of short stories, and essays.

Da Capo is the second part of a planned trilogy of novels by Jerzy Franczak, whose protagonists generally have trouble with their own selves, as well as problems in their family lives. The main character of *The Inhuman Comedy*, a young writer and a fresh-made husband, kind of by accident becomes the perpetrator of a violent crime committed against his own wife, and what's more, in the finale of the book he has to ask himself some fundamental questions about the moral value of literature, which when necessary will digest and reconfigure common baseness and cruelty into a "work of art," providing him with absolution. The hero of *Da Capo*, meanwhile, is first a timid child dominated by the people that surround him, next a sex maniac condemned to compulsive acts of masturbation, and finally a lifelong loser who, after a series of catastrophes at work and in his marriage, goes back home to his parents' place, where he is unexpectedly embraced by his father, who had terrorized him in his youth, even managing, in the end, to come to love that once-hated man.

Franczak's latest book is one of fine writerly craft, which isn't so surprising in a young but highly prolific author with many volumes of poetry and prose (not to mention his works of literary criticism) already under his belt. In this book he also carries on an endless dialogue with literature. His hero, so full of complexes, is somewhat reminiscent of the main character in Houellebecq's *Elementary Particles* (who has a similar kind of relationship with a very different brother), and through the figure of the toxic father, he is able to stage a debate with other

Polish authors of this younger generation. *Da Capo* – along with *The Inhuman Comedy* – is thus a work that is somehow characteristic of young, contemporary Polish literature. It shows how its protagonists have trouble defining their own identity, trouble with their entrance into the social forum, and ultimately trouble evaluating themselves; the traumas connected with this evaluation often have their origins in a defective family life and are passed down from father to son.

Jerzy Jarzębski
Translated by Jennifer Croft

I WALK into the house, my parents' house I mean, my heart is broken, my mouth is dry, there's a buzzing in my head. My dad opens the door. A graying, balding man with a considerable paunch. Yes, that's my father, that old man in the heavy military vest with a thousand pockets that nobody has any idea what they're for. From all the way inside the apartment I can hear the muffled mumbling of the television. I throw down my bag. "To what do we owe the honor of this visit?" my dad asks. I don't answer. We stand facing each other, my father and I, the prodigal son. I want to have a serious talk with him, man to man. I want to confess my sins to him, want to tell him the story of my whole messed-up life. I want to forgive him everything and start over. But he talks in a matter-of-fact tone, like he's giving instructions: "Take off your coat, wash your hands, have something to eat, then come to me." And he goes back to the living room to watch some detective show.

I'm sitting on the edge of the couch, wearing just my underwear, paralyzed with fear. Opposite me a guy, bald, dragon tattoo on his neck. He looks at me mockingly and carelessly aims his pistol at me. I've seen scenes like this hundreds of times in thrillers, and thinking about that makes everything unreal. The guy lowers his weapon and waves at Ewa, who quickly puts on a bra, obediently runs up to him, crouches down, and snuggles up to his shoulder, raising her head to look at him with feeling. She looks like she is begging for mercy for me, and in that gesture she suddenly becomes someone else, a complete stranger: she is not the Ewa I knew, she's the property of that man, his little doll, his little bitch, his piece of ass. While I tremble in fear and only think about whether I'm going to get out of this alive or whether suddenly a shot will ring out and then there'll be darkness and the end credits.

Those two images mark the limits of my world, my ultima Thule, the farthest-reaching land beyond which nothingness begins. But there are more images, many more, an innumerable quantity, floating by, linking up, overlapping. Those are like scenes from another life that has definitively ended, and I am looking at them through the eyes of the dead man. I see myself in different situations, mixed up with people and things, but that isn't me, that's someone else I don't know that's been imitating me for years on end.

Recently I spied on Alicja and Basia. I crouched down behind a closed-up stall that sells vegetables and watched the gate. After a little while, there they were. Like every day, Basia was going to preschool: little denim skirt, little pink jacket, little braids, Batman backpack, finger in her nose... Alicja was rushing her, the little one was sleepy, grumpy, sulky, didn't want to get in the car, then there was a tussle with the seatbelts, which get jammed, I was supposed to replace them, but I didn't do it in time... So basically nothing much, just an ordinary morning, but – I wasn't there, and worse still, me not being there didn't impede them in any way from functioning normally. The world without me was not a broken world. I stood there, twenty meters off, lurking behind a wooden booth, and looked, devoured them with my gaze, unseen but present, and powerless, like a ghost. Then they drove off, and I stood up and told myself firmly, "Okay, that's enough," but I didn't move.

Alicja with suntan lotion in her hand, squatting down on the edge of the comforter: "You're as pale as a ghost!" "As a ghost? You mean as death itself?" "Isn't it 'as a corpse?'" We both laugh, and then Alicja goes down to the sea, and I stay – someone has to guard our stuff. I lie face down to hide my erection.

Alicja walking around the apartment singing, glancing at me in passing, but when I try to embrace her she gently pushes me away and says, "I'm in a real hurry." Today is Wednesday, and Alicja is going to the pool, and I know that in a moment she will start nervously rummaging through the chest of drawers in search of her swimming cap.

Alicja with a mop, furious because yet again I got the Bathroom soaking wet. I'm sitting at the computer playing Age of Empires. "We need to get a new shower curtain," I shout out into the apartment, as though I wanted to justify it.

Alicja getting farther away from me, yellow bag in one hand, shopping list in the other. A moment later she disappears between the shelves. We're at Ikea. I'm sitting at a high little aluminum ta-

ble. Near me, behind a thick glass, there are children playing. They climb up onto the slide, jump, submerge themselves in multicolored plastic balls. Basia is in there, she's a little bit afraid of climbing, so she's standing to one side. She waves her little two-year-old hand and calls to me, but the glass muffles her voice. Not a single word reaches me, so I just smile reassuringly.

Ewa wants to take some tranquilizers, but I grab her by the hand. "Don't do that," I say. She freezes, surprised, and she looks at me with those green eyes of hers, she doesn't understand who I think I, what right. A moment later the struggle starts, pulling at the bag, the pills spill out, her lipstick, her lighter, Kleenexes, and then, in that scuffling, we will suddenly seize onto each other and feel each other's nearness, and we'll throw ourselves on each other, and we'll roll around on the floor in total disarray.

I guard against disarray, I arrange, I order, I can't do anything about it, that's my nature. I know that my father instilled it in me, for example folding my clothes in a little stack every evening, I can't do anything about it, in the morning I'm sleepy, and I like to have my stuff right there, unwrinkled. I move my books from shelf to shelf because you can classify them in different ways, same goes for CDs and photo albums. I also like it when something runs out and you can throw away the package, and often I actually force myself to finish off some yogurt or some juice or something, just to clear out the space. The same applies to newspapers, I generally look through them quickly and then toss them, and then I breathe a sigh of relief. Unfortunately, it's harder to deal with the past, nothing comes under a statute of limitations, you can't actually throw anything away, memories come back insistently, and you have to relive them all over again, write about them for the nth time, and over, and over. And I can't stand repeating myself. I can't stand repeating myself, but certain things demand to be returned to.

Translated by Jennifer Croft



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Photo: private

Justyna Bargielska (born 1977) Poet, author of three volumes of poetry. She was awarded the prestigious Gdynia Literary Prize in 2010 for book of poetry *Dwa fiaty* (Two Fiats). *Stillbirthlet* is her prose debut.

Stillbirthlet is a collection of 43 prose miniatures of modest dimensions. The pieces – most of which are no longer than a single type-written page – link the narrator with several themes running through the book. The narrator is a young, married woman – by vocation and passion a poet – bringing up two small children and trying to reconcile her domestic duties with her literary work.

Bargielska strives to synthesise these two realities. On one hand she portrays the everyday existence of Justyna (her narrator and heroine), and on the other she draws out metaphors from the most ordinary experiences, interweaving them with dreams and fantasies. This first-time writer of prose is clearly searching for a distinctive literary form; she would like – one surmises – to organise the text in such a way as to talk about ordinary things in an original way.

The motifs cementing this collection revolve around the experience of pregnancy, giving birth, and motherhood. First and foremost, there is the title motif. *Stillbirthlet* (Obsoletka in Polish original) is a neologism coined by Bargielska and derived from a Latin medical term (“obsoleta” is a synonym for a stillbirth). In Justyna’s world the experience of losing a baby seems a central and critical one, a figure of loss in general. As such, it does not only represent a female or marital drama – but something more. Influenced by this experience, the heroine begins to pose fundamental questions: about the meaning of life, the concept of happiness and about her own identity. It should nonetheless be stressed that everything played out here

is only hinted at, as it were, through fleeting images, reflections or fantasies. The events the main character participates in, the stories other people tell her, and all her individual experiences and reflections are “encrypted”, possibly through fear of their direct expression, but maybe owing to a conviction that what the author would like to communicate is inexpressible.

Dariusz Nowacki
Translated by David French

I'D LIKE TO TELL YOU ABOUT THE LAST TIME I GAVE BIRTH.

We set the date of my Caesarean section for 9 May at nine in the morning. It was fixed with the help of four calendars: mine, the obstetrician's, the anaesthetist's, and the press officer's at the District Office. Our chief concern was for the date to agree across all four. It did, even though the previous day I'd had grave concerns in my – pardon my French – uterus that I'd break the agreement. But in the end I didn't. I was supposed to hand in an entire job by the evening, and it was already half done (I'm a professional, after all), and that effectively inhibited my contractions.

On Friday morning, I got up at 1.30 a.m. and went to the bathroom to clean the grouting. Five hours later, my husband and older child got up, and we set off. We dropped our child off at the child-minder's on the way.

I was given a room in motivational orange, and a blue, appliqué birthing gown. I mistook my strange woolly-headedness for concentration, which emerged most apparently when, after a few friendly questions (HIV, Wassermann test, anti-hepatitis B test) the doctor asked, "Where was your last Caesarean done?" and I – after an interminably lengthy pause, during which I could easily have visited the star Vega, where I must originate if he was asking me questions like that, answered, "My abdomen." The doctor looked enquiringly at my husband, who replied, "Praga Hospital."

Then they came to take me to the operating theatre. They were unable to explain why I had to take off my knickers, but I decided to give in to their irrational arguments, because it may have been the last chance I had to give in to their irrational arguments concerning the removal of my knickers.

When I was on the operating table my gynaecologist said, "Oh, I've forgotten to examine you." At this point, it turned out I'd already been in labour for quite some time, in fact I was nearing the end, it's just I'd been distracted by the grouting and it had escaped my attention.

Then everything happened at breakneck speed: they got the baby out (looking like a raw sausage), took it to the next room to be measured, the paediatrician whistled to my husband to join him and the anaesthetic stopped working. I told the anaesthetist the anaesthetic had probably worn off, to which he answered, "What do you mean?" And that was the precise moment when I fell in love with him.

Then the paediatrician briefly came back with my husband to announce the baby's length. "Fifty-six centimetres," he said, at which my husband remarked the paediatrician must have got it wrong, upon which they disappeared into the other room again.

Then the anaesthetist, gynaecologist and midwife all left, having first said nicely, "Thank you." "Thank you too," I said.

And I was left alone with the other midwife; I in tears, and the midwife washing me. The tiles were a faded khaki.

Next time, I'd like to tell you about my cat Paweł's fatal fall from the balcony.

MY CAT PAWEŁ'S FATAL FALL FROM THE BALCONY

Paweł had been with me and my husband from the start. My husband arrived with him and a shopping bag containing a toothbrush and other such things, and the question of whether they could move in with me. They could, and Paweł at that time measured between eight and twelve inches, with one moustache white and the other black. Paweł then appeared in various family photos until the last Friday in May, when he died after falling from the balcony.

My sister and her son had come to visit. I don't blame her, because I now know that my careless subconscious killed Paweł, but to show the synchronicity I'd like to emphasise they had just come to visit and created their classic air-sign whirlwind, as my water-sign children and I looked on from the narrow border between indifference and a nervous breakdown. I had to open the balcony door to get some oxygen, and I have to admit it, and say I was beginning to lose control of the situation. And Paweł went out – we don't know when – and fell – we don't know when, but we do know on what – the concrete below. But I didn't see it happen, so I searched for Paweł in the wardrobe, cursing because he wasn't allowed in the wardrobe.

And then my husband came home from work and it became clear to us Paweł wasn't around the place in the narrow sense – so my husband went to see if he wasn't lying around the place in the wider sense. He wasn't.

And then, a little anaesthetised by hope, we were standing on the balcony late that night after the children were already asleep in bed. We were saying that maybe Paweł hadn't yet met his death if he had gone over to the adjacent balcony, to the neighbour whose wife and seven-month-old daughter had died in a car crash, because our neighbour's window had been open for a while that afternoon, but was now closed, and he was hardly ever at home. I was always pleased he was hardly ever in, because I hoped I'd never see him. As soon as the previous owner told us about him at the notary's office I didn't want to see him. We were once getting the kids into their pram in the corridor and someone came and went into our neighbour's flat, but my husband said it wasn't him, because he was taller and a bit classier. But through the gap in the open door I saw some bags of sugar in the hall.

And we were looking down and sideways at our fairly new place and its bald patio, when my eyes alighted on a black patch, something like a rubbish bag, by the communal bins.

"That isn't Paweł down there, is it?" I asked my husband.

"Course it isn't," he replied.

And the next morning he called me from work – he works in forestry land outside Warsaw city limits – and said, "Anyway, I buried him."

Translated by David French



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Photo : Grzegorz Święcicki

Tomasz Piątek (born 1974) Novelist, journalist and columnist. He made his debut in 2002 with his novel *Heroin*. Since then he has had twelve books published.

A Snake in the Chapel is an original story with historical and philosophical aspirations. The plot takes the form of the reminiscences of the half-Swiss, half-Italian Andreas Issli, who spent his childhood and adolescent years living in Krakow, and went to a Polish secondary school, but was perceived to be German by the Poles. Andreas uses three languages alternately, although none of them with ease. Piątek wanted to create the figure of the 'Other' in Polish society, someone who is trying to understand Polish history and the Polish mentality, while simultaneously having problems with his own identity. Piątek's protagonist befriends Janek, a young Polish patriot. The boys develop an unusually powerful and, to a certain extent, homoerotic bond. When the First World War breaks out, Janek goes to the front as a volunteer. Andreas follows him. However, the main character's rich and influential father ensures that his son is injured and sent home at the first skirmish with the Russians. Janek, in a moment of patriotic frenzy, is killed.

The senseless loss of his friend proves to be a turning point in Andreas's biography. From that moment on he tries to find the answer to the following questions: what is the origin of Polish suicidal courage and boyish valour, and why does Poland have to lose generation after generation of her most intelligent and bravest sons? Andreas undertakes studies in psychology, travelling to Vienna, where he meets Jung and discusses the destructive instinct with Freud. Finally, he joins the Nazi party and becomes a Nazi officer, which allows him to carry out

research into the Polish soul. With this aim, he travels to occupied Warsaw. His 'guinea pig' is a young poet and conspirator. Andreas does everything he can to stop the youth from suffering the same fate as Janek – but without success. The ending of *A Snake in the Chapel* is daring – Piątek engages in debate with Witold Gombrowicz, by putting his protagonist in the reality of life in Argentina (Andreas, like many Nazis, finds refuge in South America). This is a work which is provocative and viciously critical of conservative beliefs about the fate of Poland and the Polish national character.

Dariusz Nowacki
Translated by Garry Molloy

A PLAGUE. If only the thing I was fighting was a plague. Then, by opening this book, you would be stepping into a tale which is both beautiful and inspiring; into the story of two boys and an epidemic.

The boys play in the filthy courtyards of Krakow, jumping on loose cobblestones which ooze grey-black mud. One boy laughs and chases the other between the rack wagons standing on Szczepański Square, between the stallholders with their blue faces and cold eyes, between the visiting peasants, who look like rodents, or as if gnawed by rodents. The stallholders don't chase the young friends away, no farmer takes a swing at them with his whip. The moustached, toothy faces peering out from behind the heads of cabbages smile, because in the boys they see the same thing they see in their cabbages. Springtime.

Suddenly one of the boys kicks a rat or a pigeon which isn't quite dead yet. The following day he is in bed, his cheeks burning and his brow fevered. The angel in the long, white lace dress who changes the compress on his forehead is Mother. The angel in the long, grey dress with the apron, who tries to spoon-feed him mouthfuls of broth, is Nanny. The broth, compress and the two household angels cannot fight the dark forces at work in the child's armpits, which swell with pus, disease and putrid lymph. The boy dies, his friend cries. And then he makes a promise to himself and to his friend's orphaned parents, that he will dedicate his life to fighting the plague.

He goes to university, and there he becomes even more lethal than the plague itself. Lethal, of course, to the crawling entities which harbour death. A hunter of microbes, the scourge of God to whiskered, oblong and oval creatures. After a life fraught with hardship, and often poverty, the boy – now an adult – discovers a vaccine. And again he cries. It has taken a double sacrifice – one boy who gave up his life to the plague, and the other who dedicated his life to it – to bring about a result. Laboratories run at full steam, smoke pouring from flasks and test tubes, factories mass-produce the vaccine, the miraculous *serum antidotum*. And, once again, a discovery is given to the world by the sheer power of man – the power of heart, mind and hard work.

If only that were my story! It may not have been quite the same – I don't know much about the plague, I'm no epidemiologist – but I'm certain it would have turned out well. Unfortunately, the horrors that I was trying to cure were far deadlier. I only see one common feature: in my story – the actual story – there are also rats.

My name is Andreas Issli. I had almost completely forgotten that. To my ears the surname is starting to sound strange, and it sounds equally strange to Germans, Poles and Italians. I haven't used that name for years and I only write it down on paper now in the knowledge that nobody will see it while I'm still alive. It is a surname cursed by that most terrible of modern curses – Nazism. I am, or rather, was a Nazi for a short but fruitful time. I know, I know: I shouldn't even try to explain. I shouldn't try to clarify how I became one, or give my reasons for it – for psychologists of the now fashionable school of behaviouralism, it's merely symptoms that count. These enemies of the very idea of the soul – the behaviourists, not the Nazis – are trying to take over the most important committees now working on research into the soul. I would prefer none of them to research me, partly because if any of those behaviourists ever find me here, they will be the kind that work for the most unpleasant of committees currently exploring the soul. And by that I mean a certain powerful American agency which is carrying out particularly intensive surveillance of the hemisphere in which I now reside. This is one of the most important reasons why the text I am currently writing will remain my lifelong secret.

Everyday I descend into the depths of the Banco Libertador, where I entrust my latest batch of filled pages to a vault, making sure that they are properly numbered and ordered. This is a courtesy on my part to whomever will be looking at these notes after my death (and therefore a courtesy tinged with immortality). The supervisor of the underground vaults, the slim and large-eyed Rodrigo Bum, for some reason doesn't sigh or make a harassed face when I disturb his long hours of superb inactivity every day, but merely smiles boyishly. Actually, nobody makes a harassed face here, even if their name

is Rodrigo Bum. Here you can call yourself whatever you want: Diego Skrovanek, Carmelita Schweinfisch, or even – if our Great Archetype will forgive me this little joke – Jesus Rothschild. If it weren't for my past, I, too, could introduce myself as Andreas Issli here, and although I would be asked to repeat my surname every now and then, nobody would make that peculiar face, as if they hadn't quite heard properly or didn't quite believe their own ears; the face I encountered everywhere else. Perhaps I would have some problems if I introduced myself as Andrea Iselli – Italian surnames aren't exactly in demand here.

However, I don't introduce myself as Iselli, or as Issli. I am called something else now. But changing a name, even if it's a kind of therapeutic operation, doesn't suffice for long. You can't become a new person by getting yourself a new passport, even a perfectly forged one. You can't achieve it without pain. Sometimes it is impossible to become a new person and you just have to accept what you are. This is true in my case. Which is why, on these pieces of paper, I return to what happened. Exactly – to what happened. Not in order to white-wash myself, by citing my motivation, not to justify myself, but not to slander myself either. The goal is much harder: it is to see.

Translated by Garry Molloy



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Photo: Robert Wiącek

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 Julia Fiedorczuk (born 1975) is a poet, translator, author of short stories, and
 assistant professor at the English Institute at the University of Warsaw.

Maria's Morning is a cycle of short stories about life itself. The stories we read here are told alternately in the first and third person. When the characters talk, we are in the middle of the action, without being able to fully understand; when the narrator distances herself from the characters, the cruelty of their relationships is enhanced, but that distance does not help us to understand. We have come, then, to a world of simple events but obscure meanings.

The conventionality of the settings shows us that the author did not intend to draw up an exact picture of a particular time. More essential than historical scenery are experiences. In the first story we meet several persons of the female sex that will return in the next pieces: a little girl who rips an earthworm in half while she's playing; a young woman desperately trying to fit in who throws her cell phone out the window; a desperately lonely young woman who commits suicide by drinking drain cleaner. In the next story we meet Maria, the daughter of some poor woman, a little unkempt girl, smelling, mentally handicapped, rejected and held in contempt by her class. We watch her skip school and go off into the woods nearby, where she is raped. That experience returns in the story "Medulla." The main character of that story, a grown woman, the mysterious Leda, could be the continuation of that raped girl: her employer fired her because he wanted "some thing she didn't have, he wanted to drag something out of her – wanted to take something away from her – but in the place he penetrated, in the place where he was looking, all Leda had was a void."

The narrator of the last short story is all the other characters in one; she tells us that she is "many women, but none of them permanently." Names are thus transient, identity unstable – while experience of the physicality of life is shared. On finishing these stories, we have a feeling, some idea, rather than any certainty. We have a feeling, then, that we have read some straightforward stories about the trauma of encountering life itself. It is senseless; it is not fated to turn out happily. Instead it is exposed to a force that will not improve anything, that will not clarify anything. The center of that experience is the female body, as at the center of empty life itself there is the stone of death.

Przemysław Czapliński
 Translated by Jennifer Croft

LEDA didn't cause anyone any trouble. She didn't come to work late. She didn't leave before it was time to. She didn't have bad days. She didn't complain when the last customers would sit over their empty teacups long after the place had closed, which meant she couldn't count down the registers or close them up. Without a word of complaint she carried out all her obligations, as well as things she didn't even have to do. She would wash the ceramic floor tiles, she would polish the glasses until they shone like they'd been cut from the finest crystal; she would fill up the sugar bowls with low-calorie sweetener. Despite this, no one at Soy Green really much cared for Leda. Vitta, the owner, definitely did not care for her. In fact he had a great desire to get rid of her under whatever pretext. Leda made him uneasy, and even a little bit disgusted. He didn't like being close to her, and when it happened, in the evening, after they had closed, that the two of them were left alone in the empty café, just him and her, dusk suffusing the interior, he was overwhelmed by the desire to escape, restraining himself only thanks to his unusually good rapport with his strong internal self. With his – he liked this uncoiled word – ego. But where did that weird impulse come from? Was Leda ugly? No. In her way she was actually pretty, although there was something about her face that was so fleeting that when she wasn't there, Vitta, although he had tried, could not remember what she looked like. Did she not dress well? But she *did*. Her linen tunics (the mandatory uniform for the waitresses) were always immaculately white. It was true that sometimes she had leaves or dried grass in her red hair, but the customers who came to SG for a cup of white tea or a BioNature smoothie, which was the house specialty, believed that those vegetable accessories were supposed to emphasize the green character of the café.

Was she ever rude? Absolutely not. No customer had ever had cause to complain that they hadn't been waited on properly. In any case, how would the customer even phrase such a complaint? That there was something up with her eyes, that she looked at you like she wasn't looking at you? That she looked at you like you were thin air, like with that vacant look of hers she could see through you with x-ray vision, could see something she wasn't supposed to that ought to always remain hidden? That her impeccable manners, readiness, attentiveness, the immediacy of her reactions hid... But that was just it. Nobody could have said what exactly was "hidden" by that vacant look of hers, what exactly her fluid, perfectly adroit gestures, her tidy appearance, her humility, *meant*...

Vitta had caught himself many times observing Leda in a state of tension, as if she were his enemy. Her presence – so discreet – was painfully uncomfortable for him. He would glance at her in the hopes of finding some flaw, some fissure, even a hairline crack, to which the aversion that pervaded him could cling. Vitta wanted to find words that would help him pin down – defuse – her strange beauty. Saying, "Leda is such-and-such," "Leda, I've looked you over, you're this and that." He couldn't figure anything like that out, however, and his distaste for Leda remained amorphous and alive, like some strange, additional organ in his own tense body.

Sometimes Leda was carrying a tray full of tall glasses by, and Vitta tried to collect all his inimical energy into one bundle, like a beam of intense light, and to fix her with his gaze. His evil eye. He fantasized about Leda tripping on something, on anything, on the leg of a chair, on a rolled-up yoga mat that someone had tossed down on the floor, he saw in his mind how fear would sharpen the features of her delicate face and how a moment later she would land sprawled out on the ground, spilling multicolored smoothies, breaking glass, ruining the expensive hippy outfits of the vegetarian diners. But that didn't happen: Leda's gaze, nebulous, absent, never met his gaze. Focused on who knows what, she remained totally resistant to his pitiful black magic, and the glasses were reaching their destination without incident, while Leda was noiselessly retreating into the back of the café, where she began completing the next orders: cappuccino with extra foam and skim milk, fresh-squeezed juices, dairy yogurt with alfalfa on top.

The time of seeds passed so slowly that if someone wanted to measure it with a watch, the hands would have to spin around in a circle like crazy. Whole months, sometimes years, the seeds would

wait for the right moment, living just on what they had inside them, looking dead, motionless as little stones. A little bit of moisture and warmth, however, and the grain would start to swell, absorbing the water. First the roots would break through the husk. They would enter the earth like microscopic worms. Then sprouts would make their way out, naked and pale, with an enormous appetite for sunshine. The roots would release offshoots and grow in deeper and deeper, toward the warm insides of the earth. On the surface, the sprouts would grow green and release leaves, and the production of tissues, photosynthesis, would be underway.

If the plant was a tree, it would grow for many years. Its stem would harden and become covered in bark, while inside the ceaseless transport of goods would continue. The roots would become so strong that they could break through concrete. And they would break through concrete.

It was hot. The city was more and more saturated with sunlight, the air was more and more dense, the sounds heavier and heavier, and sensuous. Leda was standing behind the bar, pouring wine from the bottle into a carafe marked with the SG logo, its letters as convoluted as a serpent. She enjoyed the feel of the cool glass. She liked the deep red of the wine, the dark, fleshy voice of the liquid being poured that would gradually fill up the empty vessel and transform it into a precious stone. A ruby, thought Leda. The setting sun. Lifeblood. She smiled, completely absorbed by her task. Vitta's gaze tried in vain to catch hold of her face, her body. His gaze drifted over Leda's smiling face, her neck, her soft-white tunic. Vitta's gaze drifted over Leda, down to the ground, spilling out upon the floor like a puddle of murky water. In the middle of that puddle floated a single eye; it glared in all directions, helpless as a disarmed grenade.

Translated by Jennifer Croft



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Photo: Wojciech Modzelewski

Monika Rakusa (born 1966) social psychologist, journalist, author of screen-plays for documentary films. *Adam's Wife* is her second novel.

The point of departure for Monika Rakusa's story is the death of the eponymous Adam – a person universally known and respected, a writer and columnist considered the nation's default intellectual, who is killed in a tram accident. His death becomes the turning point both in the life of his ex-wife Rita and that of his current one, Anna. In their cases the work of mourning is connected with the need to analyse, to "work through" not only their relationships with Adam, but their entire lives. The story is a record of the detailed, at times painful, psychological vivisection of the two female characters. At first sight, Adam's wives seem diametrically opposed. Rita is a lifelong rebel who knows what she wants from life and is capable of putting her plans into action, even in defiance of everyone and everything, while Anna is a submissive puppet, who has been controlled by others since her early years, retreating into a world of her own – somewhat perverse – fantasies.

It turns out, however, that Rita and Anna have a lot in common. This doesn't just mean both of them have identical points in their biographies (Jewish roots, toxic mothers, the loss of a child), but that they follow the same providential pattern: that of women who are unable entirely to extricate themselves from the roles imposed upon them by their families and friends, who are unable to escape from the prison of forms. There are plenty of feminist motifs in *Adam's Wife*, and ultimately Rita and Anna find comfort in a sisterly relationship. It seems to me, however, that what this novel is really about is the description of the battle the heroines unceasingly wage with their

friends and families – in the spirit of Gombrowicz – wielding forms and philosophies of life. A battle, significantly, where there are actually no winners.

A sad conclusion, but Rakusa's book belongs to that genre of prose that doesn't offer comfort. Quite the opposite, it poses the reader some uncomfortable questions that are not easy to answer if one wants to be honest with oneself.

Robert Ostaszewski
Translated by David French

WHEN darkness falls, Anna is still sitting in the armchair. “Perhaps I ought to get up and turn a light on. Or possibly even a few,” thinks Anna. But she doesn’t get up.

She has so many things to sort out. So she really ought to get it all planned. In order not to become confused. But she doesn’t know where to start. Suddenly, all that free time terrifies her. And the space. Too much space. When she got rid of everyone, she ended up with six rooms – over a hundred square metres in all – for her exclusive use. The garden, the attic and even the cellar. That must be in the event she goes completely insane and decides to hide there.

It’s most bizarre. So much space for a person who has always had to put up with other people. Anna realises she’s actually never lived alone. The first hundred years with her parents. The next hundred with her mother. Then her father died. And all the formalities with the will seemed to last ages. Then redecorating the house. So when, at the end of 1997, she finally began living in the house, Adam moved in with her at once.

Adam had that disease that meant he filled up all available space – and more.

By some miracle, Anna kept her own room for herself. She furnished it with a suite of furniture from her mother’s flat: a bed, a small desk, a wardrobe and two small bookcases.

She added a rocking chair left to her by her father. Adam, and Adam alone, filled the remaining rooms. His things, secret hiding places, music, camera parts, chargers for unwanted mobile phones, old letters, boxes of photographs, booklets, entire newspapers or just articles torn out of them, computer printouts criss-crossed with coloured markers, or others, underlined with ballpoint pen, with notes and doodles in the margins. And books, spines uppermost, with old invitations or official correspondence as bookmarks.

There were lots of books like that everywhere.

Because he would always read several at once, often a different book in each place. And when he finished them he hardly ever put them back in their places on the bookshelves. More often he would arrange them in pile after pile, rising up against the walls. Only when a pile was about to fall would Anna step in. She would put the books back on – and later stuff them in – the large bookcase in Adam’s study. From every available angle, on top, from the sides and diagonally. The entire house was full of non-material traces of Adam. Here something horrified him, here he fell into a rage, here he launched into an hour-long tirade, and here something made him laugh until he cried. There’s a frightful coffee stain above the television in the drawing room, dating from when he flung a mug at one of the prophets of the Fourth Polish Republic. And he banged his head into another wall, utterly dejected by human idiocy.

Anna, on the other hand, acted – in each of her houses – as though she were merely stopping by. And only for a single night. So there wasn’t really much point making herself comfortable. She didn’t leave her fripperies lying around. Her cosmetics took up a modest couple of shelves in the bathroom, while the profligate Adam barely made do with four. From an early age she’d organised her space as if wanting to cover her tracks. And not make trouble for the people left to sort out her things after her death. She stored all her important documents in marked folders. She tore up or burnt the rest. She did the same with her letters and photographs. She threw away leaflets, old magazines and other waste paper. She sorted her clothes and put the rest in Polish Red Cross containers. She deliberately threw away souvenirs and other junk. She gave away any books she’d read which meant nothing to her. There happened to be a good reason for this. Working for a publisher she received tons of books. Without selecting them, she would have drowned in books after all those years. Books of every type and quality.

There was an inconsistency, however, in Anna’s overall non-collecting policy. She never threw away “guidebooks”. This by no means referred to travel guides. She’d stopped being interested in them long before. Anna had filled a large bookcase left by her father with them and put it in the so-called “guest room”. When she and Adam travelled they would use them, and would occasionally buy new ones. And sometimes maps, if the need arose.

Her real weakness was for self-help books and first-person journals. Every book from the “How Other People Live” category. The

stories of people who had a sense of fulfilment and self-satisfaction. For it had always seemed to Anna that there *must* be an objective key to happiness. Something she couldn’t find. That Sèvres standard for life existed. She read everything she laid her hands on about learning to live correctly. From left to right and top to bottom: Christian mystics, Hassidic rabbis, Zen and yoga teachers, masters of oriental martial arts, born-again businessmen, artists who’d converted to Islam, Muslims who’d given up Islam, Buddhists and Hare Krishnas, ecologists and vegetarians, doctors, and even experts on healthy eating. Since appropriate nutrition – as everyone knows – may also be the key to happiness. In addition, a large number of psychological self-help books: how to say “no”; how to say “yes”, “please”, and “thank you”; how to say less, with emphasis; how to say more about yourself without being boring; how to say unpleasant things pleasantly; how to achieve professional success; how not to become a workaholic; learning to live in a family; learning to live alone; how to talk to men; how to cut off pointless discussions; how to survive in toxic relationships; how to quit toxic relationships; how to cope with a toxic partner; how to cope when a toxic partner unexpectedly leaves; how to forgive toxic parents; whether we really ought to forgive; how to cope with the past; how not to think about the past; how to live without planning; how to plan and still be able to live...

Adam was really amused by Anna’s self-help books. And even more, by the fact that Anna believed in them sincerely.

Translated by David French



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Photo: Instytut Książki

Wojciech Chmielewski (born 1969) made his debut in 2008 with a successful collection of short stories called *Razor*. He also writes reviews.

The protagonist of Wojciech Chmielewski's short novel, *Coffee at Dorota's* – a painter who has not painted for several years and works in a commercial graphic design studio in order to support his family – sits for hours on end in a shabby café. He feels uneasy and insecure, conscious of crossing the "shadow line", and aware of the fact that something has to change in his life. And so he goes back in time, analyzing the road he has taken...

Despite appearances this is not yet another book dealing exclusively with the fortunes and misfortunes of an artist. Chmielewski has created a story of decidedly wider scope: one about insecurity as a basic element of man's condition these days, about the painful lack of roots which deprives people of solid vital principles. What is interesting is that the protagonist's tragedy belongs to the domestic variety. Of course, he lost both parents quite early on in life when they passed away after serious illnesses, and his artistic career fell apart, yet he could be considered relatively fulfilled. He has, after all, a family that is very dear to him and in whom he finds support and material stability – something that is supposed to be unexceptional, and yet it is fundamental. Except he still cannot overcome the unease that bothers him, and he is not sure whether he has made the right decisions.

He lacks any transcendental validation that would reinforce the sense of his actions. This could be God, or art perhaps; anything really which would give meaning to everyday existence. Therein lies the germ of the tragedy suffered by a protagonist

who needs validation but is unable to find it. Why is this so? Perhaps it has something to do with losing his "little fatherland", a small town in the Beskid province with the significant name of Silent Valley which, as a child, he left with his parents when they moved to Warsaw. It is not out of the question that it has something to do with the 1980's, which "formatted" the protagonist in a certain way. These years of socialist decline in Poland coincided with his coming of age. The author of *Coffee at Dorota's* multiplies possibilities rather than suggesting solutions. And no doubt this is one of the values of this work. Not many writers are able to write with such subtlety about insecurity as does Chmielewski.

Robert Ostaszewski
Translated by Danusia Stok

THE following day was Christmas Eve. I decided to treat myself to the old man's invention right from morning. The latter initially resisted and muttered something under his nose, but finally he brought a new bottle of murky liquid.

"After all, it is Christmas Eve!" he summed up the morning's banter.

And when I handed him the deposit for my stay, he brightened up completely and lit the stove. Pleasant warmth dispersed throughout the cottage. It had snowed during the night.

"I swept it aside this morning but it's going to snow again."

"The lake's no doubt frozen over, has it?"

"Completely. They're already cutting air-holes and fishing."

The old man was in a good mood but the chance for a bite to eat seemed bleak.

It was a day of fasting, and my host was going to the neighbours' for dinner.

"Come with me, Mister Artist. She cooks well," he urged.

I opened a can of herrings in tomato sauce. We ate and drank moonshine while we chatted. I was content although I could not chase away images of my father drinking, my mother in her grave and my grandmother in a distant town, which stung me from time to time. But I struggled as best I could.

"And is there a fiancée?"

"No."

"And will there be?"

"There will, there will."

"To your health," I said and raised my glass and suddenly remembered Wiesiek, with whom I had so often drunk similar toasts. I told the old man about Wiesiek's death; after all, he did remember him. My host blinked, lowered his head and expressed sorrow. He was a good lad, so talented. Silence fell.

"My other half," the old man picked up, "drank an enormous amount. She drank herself to death, too."

"Why? What for?" I asked stupidly.

"That's how she was. She drank and drank. And what are you doing sitting around in the cottage all day?" he said, changing the subject. "Aren't you painting anything with those paints of yours, or drawing?"

"That's how it goes..."

Then I fell asleep at the table. The restless nap lasted long enough for the old man to tidy himself up before going to his neighbours. I came to and saw him in a clean though creased shirt, a worn black jacket, hair slicked down and beard combed.

"Are you coming with me? They're waiting."

"I've got a headache."

I slowly dragged myself from the chair and washed my face with icy water at the wash-basin. I did not want to go with him. The idea had come to me to go for a night stroll through the forest and along the lakeside while the huge moon illuminated the icy plains. I had never seen anything like it before. My host left. I swayed for a moment on the stool and then set out. Through the forest to the lake. It was not snowing. I was surrounded by white and blue trees, black trunks. A cold draught drifted between them. The moon had not yet appeared. I tried to look carefully from side to side not to miss anything. This was, after all, why I had come here, for the place, so that it would change something in me, do something to me. At last the trees grew sparser and the lake emerged. Grey-white, the far side shrouded in mist; still, not breathing, ice tar enclosed on all sides by forest.

I stepped onto the platform covered in snowdrift and looked around attentively. Silence all around; frost nipped my cheeks. A vast landscape, rather gloomy. I began to wonder what the shores of the lake looked like from its centre.

At that moment, the moon appeared. A white light poured over the entire picture. I stepped off the platform straight onto the ice. I checked whether it would hold; it gave a little. Finally, I let go of the platform. The centre of the lake did not seem far but whenever I looked back I was still close to the shore. Snow started to fall gently then grew heavier, and when I turned a little later the shore was no longer there. I stopped and decided to return the same way.

After fifteen minutes of my walking the ice beneath my feet still crunched a little. I changed direction slightly and started to walk

faster. I was surrounded by emptiness and silence. And then came the pins and needles in my toes and the shudder running down my spine. I no longer paid attention to the ice, did not look beneath my feet. There was no chance of my seeing the shore in the blizzard that had started up. All I could do was keep walking.

More minutes of roaming went by. White ice, all around a whirl of flakes, yet I did not allow doubt to enter my mind. Perhaps because I could not concentrate at difficult moments, this was what was also happening now. My thoughts ran away with me, further and further, and settled a while on an image of Blondie putting on a stocking. Foot on chair, skirt hitched up and the energetic gesture – the last adjustment of her garter as it clings to her thigh. The luminous reflection suddenly went out. The girl straightens herself, tosses her hair. End of film. The next image was a slide of a carved sheep's head. The head nodded dolefully on a wooden railing, a thin membrane covering the animal's eyes from time to time. A muted baaing of a nonexistent animal resounded and then fell silent on the frosty expanse.

Then, for a moment, I felt I was not alone, that there was somebody watching me, closely observing me, perhaps that is why I could not let myself rest awhile on the sheet of ice. That time, in Silent Valley, the same somebody had been spying on me, sitting in the hollow of a tree trunk. I remembered it well. He was also watching me now and even blew at my neck very gently so that I didn't nod off.

The moon re-emerged from behind the clouds, and I saw that I was quickly nearing the black line of the shore. Frosted sticks of rushes now hit me across the shoulders, rustling pleasantly as I climbed the shore. At last I tumbled into a drift and rested. Only now did sweat pour over me. And onwards, cross country, through the forest. I did not know these places and floundered knee-deep in the snow while jostled junipers poured sparkling dust over me. I also remembered entering into a clearing and marvelling at the silver reflections of the moon on the snow-covered plains.

But the first lights were already flickering. I saw the shape of windows and, in some, burned the coloured lights of Christmas trees. The village was busy. Groups of people were making their way along the icy road to Midnight Mass. I shook the snow off and mingled with a group.

Translated by Danusia Stok



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Photo: Bernard Oszer

Grażyna Jagielska (born 1962) is a translator of English literature, a journalist and writer. Her translations include works by J.G. Ballard, Fay Weldon and Joanna Trollope. *Drearhideous* is her third novel.

The title *Drearhideous* does not mean anything. This invented word only brings to mind something dreary, hideous and mundane; something that deprives the six protagonists of any meaning in life and prevents them from fulfilling their dreams. Various elements combine to make up the dead-end situation of all the three couples. Anka and Julek's situation is determined by Anka's exuberant ambition of as she fantasizes about making a literary career for herself and being in high society while her partner dreams of a quiet life in the provinces. The unhappiness of the second couple, Baby and Krzysiek, is a result of Krzysiek's rashness: wanting to ensure his family a better life and make it up to his wife that she had to give up her musical career for him, he invests all their savings in worthless land. Then, the third couple – Darling and Darling – though nearing retirement age, do not move to the country because he, a television journalist, cannot come to terms with the thought of being pushed aside. The belief in a miracle, nursed by the characters who long for change and want to make their partners happy, is symbolized in the novel by the girl who distributes leaflets about competitions in which life's losers can win. The competitions, however, are mere projections. By introducing her, the author makes an ironic allusion to every man's dream of winning big.

Grażyna Jagielska specializes in domestic drama in which she tries to grasp a state of inertia and powerlessness. *Drearhideous* appears to blatantly lack attractions as her lost protagonists are unable to change. The author does not offer an

alternative to their uncomfortable life nor does she present the reader with illusions. Yet by portraying the situation in this way she is unconditionally honest – somewhat contrary to the expectations of a literature which forever proposes different forms of existence, ones which are unique yet can potentially become real. Jagielska, however, is right in showing that throughout their lives the majority of people "wait to find themselves" without doing enough to move forward and meet themselves half-way.

Marta Mizuro
Translated by Danusia Stok

THE sun hid behind the buildings on the other side of the rail tracks and dusk began to fall in the tenement building. Julek opened another can of beer and sat down in the armchair. Anka was sitting at her typewriter. She had gone back to her desk when Julek was in the kitchen, not watching her. Borys gnawed at a flea in his tail, curled up in a knot halfway between the armchair and the desk.

At this hour they should have been opening up a bottle of wine and sitting next to each other, thought Julek. Whereas here he was quaffing beer alone as he had in the past when he had only come to visit and she was doing something at her desk, tapping on the keyboard or staring at the notice on the wall. Nothing, in fact, had changed even though wherever he looked now his things lay strewn around, and in the middle sat a dog which belonged to them both. Its presence had not changed anything either. In a moment of greater enlightenment, after a fourth beer, Julek realized that whatever he did he would not drag Anka away from her typewriter. He could offer her this or that – work in the local Council Office, a dog, an apartment – and she would still choose whatever her old Suberb had to offer.

“I’ll get you a computer,” he said. “This thing hasn’t got any letters.”

Anka did not need letters. She had had them in her fingers the minute she had hit the first key, squatting among musty lace dresses and whatever the SS had left behind.

Now things were different. She looked out of the window and drew chrysanthemums between the words. She painted a circle and added tummies around it. She ran her fingers over the keyboard of a typewriter on which the font characters had been effaced. The old Suberb remained as silent as a tomb; it did not want to write. They could not make things work with the woman from Chechnya, and roamed around in a threesome – she, Larysa and the Suberb – with no ideas, merely filling more and more pages.

“As for my daughters, they had nothing whatsoever,” Larysa had said. “They sat in the cellar and waited until I returned.” She had been talking about the months she lived with her children in a destroyed town, searching for her husband’s body.

Julek opened another beer and smacked his lips at Borys without moving from the armchair. He tried not to think about Anka’s narrow, slender back and the tilt of her head. She only sat like that at the typewriter. He would buy her a computer. Never, ever would he hurt her.

“It would be best to die,” Larysa had said.

“That’s what she said but would she really choose death?” wondered Anka sleepily, without any genuine interest. Larysa had said that she wanted to die but she had held on to her crappy life like a drunkard holds on to a wall, despite all the evil. In summer she collected aluminium; in autumn she took the scrap metal north; and winter she sat out with her daughters in the cellar. She had done so in order to live, not die. Had she really wanted to die she would have laid down in the cellar, turned towards the wall. She would not have searched for her husband in all the mass graves she had heard about. She would not be saying she had seen too much.

Anka rested her head on her hand and with the other hand rubbed the corner of the Suberb, scraping off remnants of the black metallic paint. Julek sat in the armchair, drinking beer.

The neighbour was stripping the strawberry bushes of their last fruit in the yard. Even plants grew differently on her land, sometimes at completely different seasons; everyone knew that. She said it sufficed to look at plants in a benevolent manner for them to do what you wanted. When Anka was little, the woman used to encourage her to take some of these late strawberries or early Antonovka apples. Anka, standing round the corner of the tenement, leaning back against the wall, pretended she could not care less, but her mouth watered...

“I’ve seen everything there is to see here,” she thought, picking at the Suberb. Julek did not like it. “God knows what’s been written on it,” he would say. “Maybe you shouldn’t use it anymore. We don’t know how long contents like that live on. Aren’t they actually strengthened by tapping out new ones? Doesn’t something terrible make the transfer?.

“I’ll buy you a computer. The best on the market.”

He did not understand that the old Suberb meant something special to her. Deep down inside she believed she would not write anything without it. Half of the talent which emerged through her belonged to the Suberb; it could not be divided into two. They both had it or they did not have it at all. That was the price she paid for its daily presence in the room – total co-existence with everything it might contain.

The paint came off in tiny flakes giving Anka something to do at moments when living another minute seemed too difficult, almost not worthwhile. “I’m not going to write anything here.” She would end up like the neighbour, in an office or the school library.

The neighbour was returning from her vegetable plot along the path near the fence netting and waving a soft apple branch which had recently broken off with the wind. She was going to supper, drawing squiggles in the air and talking to somebody. She was talking animatedly or listening and nodding her head in agreement with herself or perhaps somebody who was returning with her.

Anka lowered her head onto the table; the old Suberb loomed in front of her like an enormous black mountain. She played with the keyboard; she pressed the lower keys, one, two... Julek referred to the Suberb as “the thing”, saying it was suspect, that it had to be after what it had been through. It might bring yet bring some curse down upon their home.

“Fine, let it,” thought Anka. She pressed another key. Then another. The keys leapt away giving off a thin twang. “Let something come. Anything. I’ll take anything and everything.”

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Photo: Sylwia Biernacka

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Agnieszka Taborska (born 1961) writer, art historian, and translator from French (including the work of Philippe Soupault and Roland Topor).

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Agnieszka Taborska is the author of a terrific book-length essay on the history of French surrealism called *Conspirators of the Imagination*. She is particularly interested in the late grandchildren and heirs of that Parisian revolution of the mind. "If Henri Michaux spent a night with Roland Topor, the fabulous fruit of that night would be Agnieszka Taborska," Natasza Goerke, the Polish writer (now living in Hamburg), has written about her. Her post-surrealist novel *The Dreaming Life of Leonora de la Cruz* has been translated into English and French. Her work as a literary translator and lecturer at the Rhode Island School of Design have made her very knowledgeable in American and avant-garde art and writing, as well. Her cunning fairy-tales for adults and for children have appeared in Poland, Germany, Japan, and Korea. All of her interests and passions come together in her latest book. *The Whale, or Objective Coincidence* is a collection of notes, curiosities, and anecdotes, the agenda of a globe-trotting medium clearing her path with a machete through a thicket of signs determined by who-knows-whom. In her travel notes from Poland, France, the United States and Tunisia, coincidence transforms into necessity, the marvelous poses as the ordinary, while an uncontrollable curiosity as to what happens next pushes onward into more trips into the great world and its environs. Agnieszka Taborska isn't the first author to have devoured the white whale of the world. But she, too, is like a fish in water in that plankton of events and anecdotes, in the gulfstream of little stories that could become successful episodes in a novel

or a film. Her prose is seasoned with a large dose of the fantastic and the miraculous, and the poetic realism of Laurie Anderson races against the humor of a Hitchcock film, while her voyeur's eye is a window onto a world in which everything is almost bursting from the excess of meanings, mysteries, and possibilities.

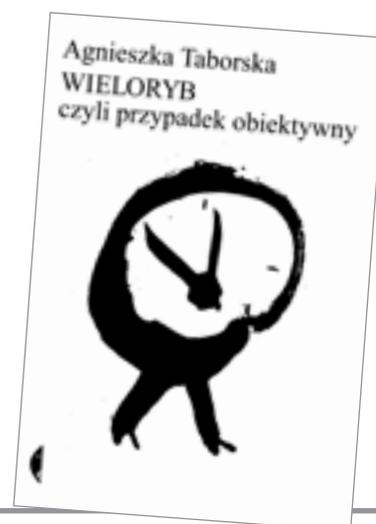
Marek Zaleski
Translated by Jennifer Croft

NEWSPAPERS

Newspapers today look like the illustrated press of the nineteenth century that Max Ernst used in his collages. He would choose illustrations depending on how melodramatic their poses and situations were: naked ladies, dressed gentlemen, abductions, fainting fits, rapes, murders, floods, fires, a close-up of a revolver, a trickle of blood oozing out of the mouth of an elegant victim, elegant interiors, paintings in sculpted frames, refined crimes, unexpected and effective. It sufficed to rotate the body of a young woman ninety degrees and hang it above the ground to make it levitate in an office full of bulky tomes, and the oneiric effect stayed in the memory for a long time. It sufficed to replace a landscape in a Baroque frame with a close-up of a thumb and decorate the back of the herald of astonishing news with wings for the melodrama to turn into a surrealist joke. What newspapers used to show the illiterate portion of their public a century and a half ago in evocative illustrations, ours describe in words. Doubtless Ernst would have approved the news in our contemporary media. A young woman dies after consuming too many fluids during the radio contest "Who Can Drink the Most?" An Orthodox nun in a Romanian convent, possessed by evil forces, does not survive her exorcism. In Madison, a thug attempts to swindle a Catholic lady out of money; she took vows of poverty the day before. An Italian priest organizes a beauty contest for nuns. A Brazilian priest dies in the clouds, hanging onto a thousand helium balloons. His risky stunt was supposed to raise money to build a spiritual resting place by the highway for truck drivers. A whirlwind sweeps up a bus carrying a sing-and-dance group on their way to a performance. Soldiers who summoned up spirits in their barracks are treated at a psychiatric hospital. It takes Yuri Lyalin, of Vologda, Russia, twenty-four hours to notice the knife in his back. Shortly after the launch in the U.S. of a television station that is supposed to improve the image of Muslims in society, its owner cuts his wife's head off. During her wedding reception, in her excitement, a bride swallows her wedding ring. A lady-astronaut famous for her courage in space plans to stab another lady-astronaut in love with the same man. She sets out on her long, criminal mission equipped with a space diaper, just in case. On the thirtieth anniversary of the death of "The King," an American dentist acquires for an astronomical sum the porcelain crown of Elvis. In a picture of an eleven-year-old Czech girl called Anička that has disappeared, the employees at the Little Ray Orphanage recognize their co-worker, the slight, quiet, thirty-four-year-old Barbora Skrolova, known for her habit of disappearing into the forest for a few weeks and living on ants. During a flight from Brussels to New York the pilot dies of old age. Northwest Airlines calls off a flight from Las Vegas on Easter Sunday when the pilot unexpectedly showers the passengers in a torrent of abuse. An army plane falls onto the home of Dong Yun Yoon in California, killing his wife and mother-in-law. Yoon states he bears no ill will against the pilot. An employee of Sydney airport is sentenced to two years in prison for the frequent theft of hair from female passengers' luggage. The poor guy would steal tufts stuck to clothing, brushes, and combs. He committed this crime at least eighty times, or at least that is how many plastic bags – with the passengers' information written on them – the police find in his apartment. An eighty-four-year-old Nigerian preacher is imprisoned for having eighty-six wives – according to the law, eighty-two too many. In a zoo in Atlanta, a Capuchin monkey escapes from his cage – twice – by picking the lock with a wire. Connecticut police puzzle over where the roasted chicken with a bomb inside on the shoulder of the highway might have come from. A donkey is arrested for stealing corn from a field on the Nile. A hunter shoots a duck, puts it in the fridge, and two days later his wife looks into the fridge, the duck raises its head, the wife takes it to the vet, the vet performs an operation, the duck is clinically dead but back on its feet after resuscitation. Thirteen golf balls are retrieved from the stomach of a rattling Labrador. Eleven dogs are eaten in Malaysia by an eight-meter-long python. The residents of a village catch him and photograph him with his bounty. A young whale mistakes a yacht for his mother and tries to nurse at it. A jealous man bites his lover's snake in half. Two individuals painfully bite the ticket-

collectors at the Wrocław Zoo. A drunk British tourist bites off the nose of a Greek bartender. A police station in Mexico is attacked by a swarm of infuriated bees. The rank of colonel in the Norwegian Royal Guard is obtained by a king penguin at the Edinburgh Zoological Gardens. American postal workers find, in a package sent from Taiwan as a "gift," twenty-six live giant beetles. Over three thousand kangaroos get into an army base in Australia. Put to sleep by a cannonade of tranquilizers, they are taken by air-conditioned cars to a less military place. According to the journalist's note, the amount spent on the transportation of a single kangaroo would be the same as the cost of a round-the-world airplane ticket. In the parking lot of a McDonald's a young man beats a peacock to death with a stick, convinced he was killing a vampire. During a power outage in India two sets of brides and grooms are mixed up and married to the wrong people. A seventy-year-old man, caught in the act of spying on female tourists as they pee in the woods, can't figure out what he has done wrong. In a retirement home a rat chooses the oral cavity of one of the retirees in order to give up the ghost in seclusion from the world. Another retiree left the year before while the nurses weren't looking; he still hasn't come back. The NYPD, called in by neighbors to an apartment that has started to leak water, find mummified corpses that have been sitting for eighteen months in front of a TV that is still on.... News like that distracts the weary reader from politics. They show the irrational dimension of our banal epoch.

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MARCIN KRÓL

WHAT LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI TEACHES US

WHAT LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI TEACHES US

Marcin Król (born 1944) is a philosopher, historian of ideas, publicist, author of over a dozen books, and professor at Warsaw University.

Recently published by University of Chicago Press (2006), the three-volume *Main Currents of Marxism*, recognized as one of the most important books on political philosophy of the twentieth century, is really Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski's calling card. The Professor Emeritus of All Souls College at Oxford left behind many works translated into numerous languages when he passed away last year, including: *The Presence of Myth* (1972), *Husserl and the Search for Certitude* (1975), *Religion: If There Is No God* (1982), *Metaphysical Horror* (1988), *Modernity on Endless Trial* (1990), and *Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?* (2007).

This beautifully written book by Marcin Król, friend and student, once Kołakowski's teaching assistant – today one of Poland's most active intellectuals – presents the Kołakowski phenomenon in an extremely accessible manner. It is the drama of a philosopher who insists on returning to the great metaphysical questions that still plague us today: what does it mean to be? What is reality? What is the purpose of life? Is the world meaningful? How can we be happy? In the face of the death of loved ones, do we simply content ourselves with the thought that everyone must die? Is there any way to escape from the well of misery besides suicide? Since there is so much evil and suffering, does that mean that God is either evil or powerless? Is pain a part of the divine plan?

In his book Król shows how Kołakowski criticizes the responses to questions like these as they have been formulated by European philosophy historically – first Kołakowski the Marxist,

then as a critic of Marxism and the great traditions of European rationalism, and finally Kołakowski the post-secular philosopher – and how responses to these questions can also be drawn out of Kołakowski's – the disciplined academic philosopher and present-day sage's – own thought. Full of personal reflections and anecdotes, Król's book is an essay in Kołakowski's philosophy and thought while also being a book about the adventure of thinking in a post-metaphysical epoch, making the hero of this adventure a man emblematic of the condition of twentieth-century philosophy.

Marek Zaleski
Translated by Jennifer Croft

MARCIN KRÓL

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PHILOSOPHY

is Kołakowski's main occupation. Sometimes interpretive difficulties arise from the fact that strong philosophical convictions are concealed in his work in the history of philosophy and the history of ideas. It would only be later books such as *The Presence of Myth* (1972) and *Metaphysical Horror* (1988) that would be openly philosophical (metaphysical) and not historical. Yet between 1955 and 1968, alongside numerous works in the history of philosophy, including, most importantly, his powerful book on Spinoza (1958), which was the edited version of Kołakowski's doctoral dissertation, as well as many essays and scholarly articles, there comes about in Kołakowski's thought an increasingly intense interest in the philosophy of religion and in religion itself. As much as in the pieces written after *The Presence of Myth* the interest in religion features at the very least benevolence, so in the earlier texts such benevolence is absent.

Today, reading *Sketches in Catholic Philosophy* (1955) or *Notes on the Contemporary Counter-Reformation* (1962) – both of these are collections of previously published pieces – is surprising. Their author is uncompromising in his contempt for the Church and at the same time, startlingly, from any perspective, extremely knowledgeable with regard to not only the teaching of the Church, but above all the teaching tradition. He knows Augustine and Aquinas with exceptional precision, and he also displays a kind of knowledge possessed, no doubt, by very few historians of theology or theologians at that time in Poland, and today by almost no one. In his monumental work *Religious Consciousness and the Church*, his aversion – to put it mildly – toward Catholicism and religion in general is no longer there, although that work – as we will see later on – is an expression of fascination with forms of faith outside of the Church.

To better understand – although obviously certain predilections and idiosyncrasies cannot be fully understood – Kołakowski's attitude, let us recall two things about his situation. The first is his education: the child who says in school that he is "irreligious," who never goes through the normal (even for leftist intelligentsia circles) process of indoctrination and religious education nor receives the subsequent sacraments – that child is already disposed in a particular way to the world of religion. Coincidence was decisive here in a number of ways, but that did have its consequences. As a young man, Kołakowski did not experience even the moral warmth of religion and only really came close to it after leaving Poland in 1968.

The second thing is the state of the Church at that time, namely, the pre-conciliar Church, which still preserved and ordered everyone to say at every opportunity the "Oath Against Modernism," which does not pay particular attention in its teachings to social ills, while as a solution to economic questions it stubbornly persists in a third road, whether in the corporate or in the solidarist version. Thus, in spite of the great work of Leo XIII, and in spite of the encyclical "Quadregesimo Anno" (1931) of Pius XI, the Church not only did not accept modernism (which was understandable in some ways and which Kołakowski himself appears to approve of, for the most part, years later in his short piece "A Note on Modernism," published by Znak in 2002), but also did not wish to make peace with the world at all as it underwent violent changes. Thus it was a Church in which philosophical reflection was unprecedentedly poor, and which displaced to the margins everything that was vibrant and interesting (Maritain, personalism, etc.), if not simply condemning it. The particular role of the Church in Poland in the years of Stalinism and beyond is a separate issue, which Kołakowski did not take up at the time, and which he did not appear to notice up until the latter half of the 1960s.

(...)

If now, after these introductory remarks, we take a look at Leszek Kołakowski's philosophy of religion, then we can forego the cutting remarks we might otherwise make on the clearly unjust judgments he pronounced and concentrate instead on the contents of his religious philosophy. In the first two books we see primarily the interests that will later accompany the author constantly. Admittedly in the text "On So-Called Thomistic Realism," he reproaches the Thomists for their minute discussion of the nine-degree hierarchy

of angels, but later – partly for fun – he was able to recite that entire hierarchy. In that same essay, while considering the links between Thomism and Cartesian philosophy, he shows why Cartesianism could not be accepted by the Church. This essay also reveals one of Kołakowski's main themes – or rather passions – perfectly linking rigorous philosophy with the philosophy of religion, namely the problem of subjectivism, or, speaking in an even more philosophical manner, the connection between the cogito as an epistemological absolute and the possibility of establishing mutuality. In Kołakowski's opinion, Descartes was bound to offend the teaching of the Church here, too, which says that the epistemological absolute, inevitably leading to subjectivism, precludes intersubjective communication, and because of this, it leads to a world without God. This problem fascinated Kołakowski throughout his life. It can be understood most simply as coming out of his stubborn search for some certainty about the possibility of passing on the results one has finally attained to anyone else.

So it was no accident that when I set out to write my master's thesis and went to see the professor (we were already on first-name terms), and I proposed for my thesis a kind of essay on the topic of the political and theoretical differences between the views of Albert Camus, with which I then sympathized, and the views of his friend (with whom he would later break for ever), Jean-Paul Sartre, genuinely amused, Kołakowski told me that I would be able to write about such things to my heart's content after my master's degree, but that for now I needed to write about philosophy, not about literature, and he suggested the topic "The Epistemological Absolute and Intersubjective Communication in Descartes and Husserl." Thanks to that I was exposed to "real" philosophy, including German philosophy, which truly gives one the feeling that one has "dabbled in" philosophy. I never regretted that I listened to that piece of advice, because for many years after I did not engage with rigorous philosophy, returning to it only recently, but that return was possible, as was studying the history of ideas, only because I had that tough schooling behind me.

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WOJCIECH BONOWICZ "Polish Signs"

ADAM WIEDEMANN "Carpet"

ADAM KACZANOWSKI "Monkey Skeleton. Whisper"

KRYSTYNA MIŁOBĘDZKA "Collected, Lost"

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI "Selected Poems"

EUGENIUSZ TKACZYSZYN-DYCKI "I'll Put My Poems in Good Hands"

Polish poetry is doing well. As usual – one would like to say. This obviously makes the reader optimistic. Even more so on account of the diversity of Polish verse. The authors of the most interesting volumes of poetry in the last few months do not speak with one kind of voice. There are among them distinguished upholders of tradition; there are also poets boldly transgressing the boundaries of poetry, even poetry understood in a very broad sense.

Several years after *High Seas*, a book honored with the Gdynia Literary Prize, Wojciech Bonowicz's new volume, *Polish Signs*, has appeared (Biuro Literackie, Wrocław 2010). And again we are dealing with poems of a high standard. The reader will immediately recognize the minimalist phrase typical of Bonowicz, and returning, too, are tropes and set pieces known from his earlier books. This is a poet who values consistency, thus he evolves his style gently, while his limited arsenal of poetic resources focuses the reader's attention on matters located beyond the horizon of the poem (conceived as an arrangement of words). No excesses, just shifting the accents of things, but so meaningful!

Debuting in the late 1990s, Bonowicz distinguished himself from his peers with his natural, so to speak, faith in community. (I say "natural faith" because in no way was Bonowicz connected with the trend that was popular at the time for poetry that was very ideological, patriotic, classicizing, and formally uninteresting.) In *Polish Signs* the emphasis is on what connects us – it's even greater now, and in fact here for the first time we are told what kind of connection we're actually talking about. The short version is that it is a community of the fate that is in the cards for Polish history and mythology. But we must repeat: Bonowicz is a discreet and refined poet, and he uses "Polish signs" with sensitivity: here there is more aura, suggestion, and questioning than there is statement. In his poetry it is easier to find the unmistakable music of the Polish language or echoes of the distinguished poets of that language than it is to find accursed Polish problems.

Adam Wiedemann in the volume *Carpet* (WBPICAK, Poznań 2010) does not want to pretend that poems write themselves

or that they are written by who knows whom with the quiet consent of the so-called author. He himself, a well-known, middle-generation Polish writer, is the originator here, and just about everything in this poetry begins with him. But only begins. The autobiographical is one of the more refined of the literary ruses, as we have known for a long time, and although Wiedemann does not avoid difficulties in his poetry, he doesn't seem to care too much about this particular one. "Desperately hanging in there you hang onto basically anything/but even that is better than clinging onto other people," he writes in the poem "Visit to an Old Lady." This is why short communiqués about the present activities or state of mind of the author are here only an introduction to an erudite meditation, subject to the logic of loose associations, full of literary allusions, word games, riddles, and red herrings. More than anyone, Wiedemann does not like to be bored in his poetry, and you never know what awaits you in the next line or the next stanza. And alongside this he has a surprising inclination toward imperatives and life truths, which can be seen, too, in the above citation. And however I might warn the simple-hearted reader against living according to Wiedemann's pronouncements, for it would seem that they were born of rhetoric more than of experience, this weakness of his for this form of language does reveal something important about his poetry.

With all of this complication, Wiedemann remains a lyricist; the world in his poems is colored according to his state of mind. And the fact that he has a completely postmodern mind, a very high level of awareness, and an exceptional ear for language, means that these poems turn out beautifully. Joy and freedom are his elements, but he is equally convincing when a phrase is charged with the bitterness of maturity or fear of solitude. From time to time he feels sorry for himself, and then it's worse, but only a little. Such is the Wiedemann of *Carpet*, somewhere between epiphany and pointed ridicule, the private and the general, the rhetorical and the material.

Monkey Skeleton. Whisper by Adam Kaczanowski (Wielkopolska Biblioteka Publiczna i Centrum Animacji Kultury w Poznaniu, Poznań 2010) is a book that very boldly departs

from what we normally consider poetry. Kaczanowski, for that matter, has never exactly stuck to the rules or struck up any dialogue with tradition. His prose and poetry volumes come, rather, from a fascination with comic books, science fiction, B movies, and trashy television. The gain from this is not inconsiderable: Kaczanowski's poetry finds the road to the reader at lightning speed and doesn't make contact with him so much as captivate him. The lack of pretensions and the strength of expression in this poetry are unquestionable.

The most important section of *Monkey Skeleton* is a cycle of long poems, made up of mini-scenes that make you think of a horror film based on the classic formula: an idyllic family is disturbed by the intrusion of an alien force, which quickly reveals its terrible intentions. Kaczanowski modifies this formula slightly: the alien force, the monkey, does not appear suddenly – in fact, quite the opposite, it seems to be domesticated, and it doesn't lie in wait for human innocence so much as assist them in successive episodes, laying bare the cruelty and stupidity of the human pack. We watch everything through the eyes of the children, who in their naiveté relate events on a one-to-one scale, sometimes trying to influence them through incantations.

Let us not be seduced, however, by cheap set pieces: Kaczanowski is saying something essential and known from the writings of philosophers. Man is an alley down which life has blundered. Beneath a thin layer of culture hides a tangle of drives; social rules unsuccessfully mask their brutal demands, the struggle for material and symbolic power. A skeleton clothed in human forms is the skeleton of an animal – standing upright doesn't change anything.

The first months of 2010 in Polish poetry were also a time of summing up. Many volumes of collected and selected poems appeared in bookstores. There is no way to address them all here, so I will mention just the most important ones, to my mind. Their authors are the distinguished representatives of three generations: Krystyna Miłobędzka, who published her first book exactly fifty years ago, Adam Zagajewski, a poet of the New Wave generation, and Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, born in 1962.

Miłobędzka's *Collected, Lost* (Biuro Literackie, Wrocław 2010) is a monumental book, and in a certain sense, an unfinished one. This marvelous representative of our avant-garde, whose work in the last decade finally reached a somewhat larger audience, carefully keeps her balance on the very edge of the poetic word. The margin of what isn't quite said, or rather, what always escapes even the language of poetry, is exceptionally wide in the writings of Miłobędzka. The meaning of any poem, in this case, is truly an open question. Paradoxically, however, "Queen Krystyna," as she is known to younger authors, is a poet of this world. From her debut, *Anaglyphs*, full of little poems bringing to mind the work of Francis Ponge, up through her newest books, including *allpoems*, a book that clearly connects with the tradition of concrete poetry, Miłobędzka tries to come close to the world, to catch it on the spot. Going hand in hand with these attempts, a sense of loss and of emptiness is a constant component of this unique poetry.

Adam Zagajewski has prepared the first selection from his poetic works in over a dozen years. His *Selected Poems* (Wydawnictwo a5, Kraków 2010) provides a good opportunity to investigate the road this poet has taken from his debut in the late 1960s, up to his newest volume, *Unseen Hand*, which appeared last year. *Selected Poems* is worthy of the closest attention: for the first time Zagajewski has decided to represent more fully works not really available today from the New Wave period, and above all from *Communiqué* (1972) and *Meat Shops* (1975). His rather cold relationship with those poems over the past few decades is cleared up, for the most part, by the well-known essay "Solidarity and Solitude," written in the 1980s. Poetry as rebellion and an instrument of social critique, the linguistic element – this was the Zagajewski that aroused such emotion years ago. It's good that he

decided to complete the image of his work with this essential component. The selection is closed by several new poems, unpublished thus far in any book.

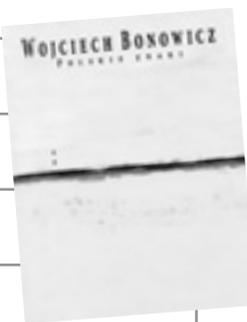
I'll Put My Poems in Good Hands – that is the title of the latest book by Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki (Biuro Literackie, Wrocław 2010). All of Dycki in a single volume! Several hundred poems obsessively revolving around a few motifs: the Eastern Borderlands, death, madness, homelessness, the body, and sin. Here we find unrepeatable – although based upon repetitions – difficult poetic intonation, words gotten out of forgotten dictionaries, a vivid bluntness, piercing autobiography, and ironclad formal rigor. No literary critic or manager or cultural politics whizz could have thought up a poet like this. It's marvelous that he exists and that he made his home in Polish literature. A classic of contemporary poetry.

Dariusz Sośnicki
Translated by Jennifer Croft

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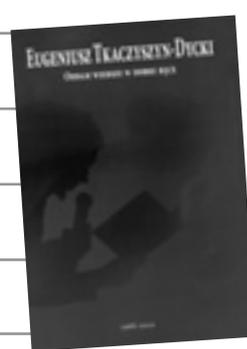
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