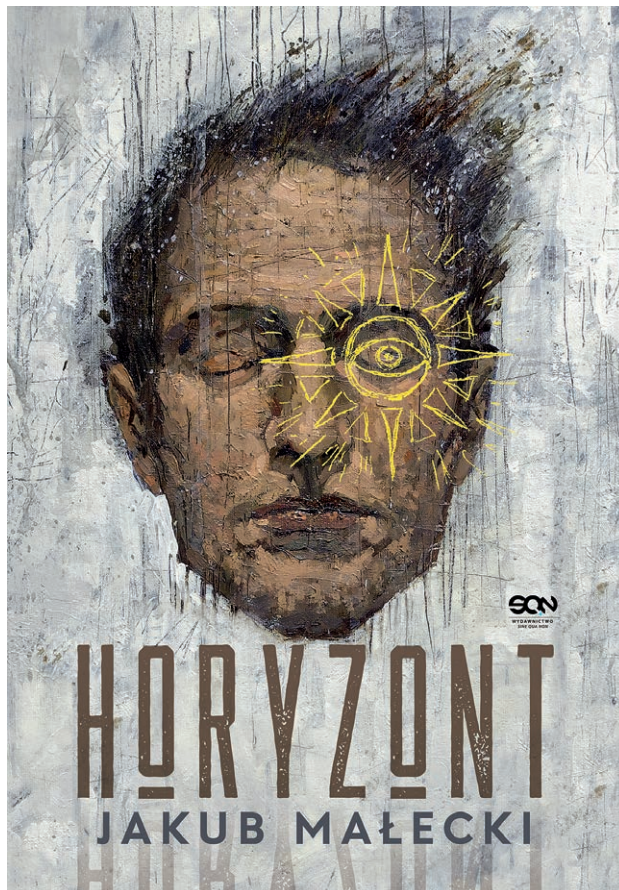


# New Books from Poland

**Spring 2020**



# Horizon



## Matecki constructs a convincing narrative about the realities of soldiering and life after deployment

Jakub Matecki's *Horizon* is a novel about war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and its victims. Mixing both fictional and autobiographical structures, Matecki and his main character share a name, age and place of birth, making us wonder how much of the author is present in this veteran of the war in Afghanistan. Not much, of course – Matecki, one of the most popular Polish authors of his generation, hasn't patrolled Afghan villages, disarmed mines or, like his novel's protagonist, made split-second decisions about whether to pull the trigger. But Matecki has also clearly done his homework and constructs a convincing narrative about the realities of soldiering – as well as life after deployment, once the only enemy is that hidden in the veteran's mind.

In brief, precise sentences evoking military commands, Matecki shows us his hero's state of mind as he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and struggles to pull his life back together. He's troubled by the gazes of people on the street; the neighbours' vacuum cleaner sounds like a rocket launcher, and vodka seems to be

the best sleeping aid. He only feels comfortable in the company of his army friends who've lived through the same experiences.

That is, until the former sapper meets the young woman next door, who herself becomes, along with him, a protagonist and narrator of *Horizon*. Yet her battlefield is her family. Her mother's tragic death, years ago, has left her with questions that she, as an adult, is now seeking to answer.

With each chapter, Matecki reveals new layers of this story, skillfully building suspense. And although the characters' struggles with the past bring them closer to one another, *Horizon* is neither a melodrama nor a romance, but a brilliantly written psychological novel of manners, with Matecki filling out these portraits with evocative details – flourishes, obsessions, weaknesses. It is the very imperfection of the characters that makes them so strikingly true.

Marcin Kube

Translated by Sean Gasper Bye

Here I am.

Bald and a little sweaty already, dirty shoes on the white carpet, a police car next to my left shoe, a comic book in my hand, blocks everywhere, two tanks on the floor in front of me, American ones, some kind of robot-dinosaur, a ton of little soldiers and a board game – I can’t see its name. The sweat is running down into my eyes.

On the wall, a poster from a film I don’t know, a drawing of a guy in a helmet, and one more – of a house, I think? A school? Alongside it, a large photo of some grinning cretin with a Finnish SAKO sniper rifle. A photo of me.

Milena led me in here a few minutes ago. She kept tossing glances my way, smiling uncertainly, expecting, probably, that I’d be happy to see all this. The toy soldiers. The drawing. That picture of me.

I wipe my forehead. I get up, toss the comic book on the bed, it slides off and lands on the police car. I rest my hands on my hips – there used to be no flab there, but now I have a little – and I do my best to remember how, exactly, I ended up here, at this moment, in this kid’s room, with dirty shoes on the white carpet. My old self in the photo is looking back at me.

Milena got up, placed her hands on her thighs and moved her face close to mine.

‘I’ll be back in a minute, literally, OK?’

I nodded. My sister touched my arm, then drew her fingers back.

‘Why don’t you wait in his room?’

So here I am, waiting, now more than slightly sweaty, and even more nervous than sweaty.

(...)

The room is like any kid’s dream, at least the dream of any kid back when I was small: large, with tons of everything everywhere – action figures, board games, puzzles and cars, plastic weapons, electronic gadgets.

I walk from the white door to the white desk, on which lie: a jigsaw puzzle box, a scribbled-on piece of paper and a mug full of felt-tip pens. I stand in the middle of the room, look at the wall again, and the guy in the photo looks back at me. Who took that picture of me anyway? Pytlak? Minty?

I imagine them hanging it up – the seven-year-old impatiently directing the work and the adult obediently carrying out his orders with a roll of adhesive tape –

his father, my brother-in-law Hubert, a computer programmer with colourful tattoos on his arms. I wonder what he was thinking when, at his son’s request, he stuck this large image of me here. I turn my head away and inhale deeply.

No, I can’t take this after all.

I start pacing between the desk and the door. I’m leaving, I’m running away, I’ll apologise to her somehow over the phone; she’ll understand. She won’t. I place my hand on the doorknob and I can hear their voices. I swear under my breath. Their voices are distinct now – hers calm, his reedy, excited. I rub my chest. It’s tight around my sternum; my vision’s going dark. My vision’s going dark and I, Mariusz Małecki, age 36, unmarried, cholesterol normal, two photos with the president and an honourable discharge from the military, stand here by the desk. I take a deep breath, hesitate a moment longer, then finally place my foot on the sill and jump out the window.

Excerpt translated by Sean Gasper Bye



© Marcin Łobaczewski

JAKUB  
MAŁECKI

Born 1982

***Horyzont [Horizon]***

**Publisher:** Wydawnictwo SQN, Kraków 2019

ISBN: 978-83-8129-543-7; 336 pages

**Translation rights:** Andrew Nurnberg Associates,  
anna.rucinska@nurnberg.pl

**Selected works**

*Dżozef*, 2011

*Dygot*, 2015

*Ślady*, 2016

*Rdza*, 2017

*Nikt nie idzie*, 2018

*Historie podniebne*, 2019

**Foreign language translations**

*Rdza* – Germany (Secession), Netherlands (Querido), Slovenia  
(KUD Sodobnost)

*Dygot* – Russia (AST)

**Selected awards**

Nike Literary Award (2017) – nomination

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2011) – nomination

# Elderberry Thieves

**Klimko-Dobrzaniecki has created a story about ordinary life, set against the background of unfolding world history**



**T**he elderberry plant is accorded particular reverence in European culture. On the one hand, it is purported to increase vital energy. On the other, it is also believed to shelter evil spirits. Therefore, it commands respect. Should it flower a second time in autumn, this can herald the death of a young and beloved person. What is more, as folklore has it, cutting one down or damaging it can cause a death in one's family. Antek Barycki, the main character of Hubert Klimko-Dobrzaniecki's novel *Elderberry Thieves*, becomes convinced that the world is truly governed by such principles – particularly the latter.

Life in Barycki's village outside of Lwów (today's Lviv) is life framed by the Catholic Church, folk beliefs and farm work. Yet this place of safety falls apart in a single moment, when the intensifying political conflicts of the late 1930s make it difficult for Poles and Ukrainians to continue to live side-by-side in peace. Barycki and his father are forced to flee their home village after a hateful neighbour's actions lead to their loved ones being burned alive. The young boy must grow up fast – and when he does, there is no going back.

The events of the wider world – the Second World War, the Nazi and Soviet occupations, displacement, Communism in Poland – not only drive Antek back and forth across Poland, but also strongly influence his evolving views and beliefs. The young man abandons the faith of his ancestors, dismissing it as a superstition, and becomes a Communist. As he advances up the career ladder (he is appointed factory manager) he forever renounces the old world, the only remaining symbol of which is the elderberry tree growing by his house. Antek doesn't search for reasons to why things happen; he doesn't analyse reality – he blends into it, adapting himself to the situation in which he finds himself.

Hubert Klimko-Dobrzaniecki has created a story about ordinary life, set against the background of unfolding world history. *Elderberry Thieves* takes the form of Antek's confessions and is written in the dialect of Poland's eastern borderlands, with a uniquely Eastern European sense of humour. In this book, it's not man who is master of his own fate – he is driven by events that no individual has the ability to influence.

Katarzyna Wójcik

Translated by Sean Gasper Bye



Stubbornness is a terrible flaw. Stubborn people have it tough in life, and find it harder to die than others do. But stubbornness alone won't kill you. There has to be a cause. Dad said there used to be a barber in Lwów who insisted he'd die in March. He'd told everybody as he cut their hair how his stomach hurt, he had a burning sensation in there, he couldn't eat, he couldn't even really drink. He was growing horribly thin but since he was stubborn, even though his poor health sapped his strength, he insisted on still cutting hair, though only until March, because in March he had to die. He'd be clipping hair, then suddenly tell a customer this was his last haircut because here it was, February, and he was going to die in March. Dad got a trim at his shop once too, in February, but there were two other guys sitting there waiting. And the barber said to my dad he was sure this was maybe the fifth time in his life cutting my father's hair – he knew because he had a good memory for faces, and even more so for hair – but that dad shouldn't come to him anymore, because he had to die in March. He started chatting to him about his stomach, the heartburn and about how his own father had had the same thing, and told him when he was a boy that he'd die in March, and then he did. It was a beautiful March, warm as May, a shame to die, but there was nothing for it... They'd set the date in advance – he had a good connection to the world beyond and had a dutiful nature, so since he'd made his appointment with God for March, there was no getting out of it. He kept his word. He died in March, but before he did, he bought his son – who would later become a barber and many years later also insisted he'd die in March – a beautiful bicycle. A red one. As the barber was cutting my dad's hair he tried to sell him that bike, but dad didn't want it, because there was nothing worse than buying something from people who knew their own date of death in advance.

(...)

In May dad went to Lwów to sort some things out. In actual fact it was to do with the barber. He absolutely had to see if the man's stubbornness had taken its toll. He dropped in at the shop. A different barber was cutting the customers' hair. So dad asked what had happened to the first guy. The barber said the previous owner had died in March. Was it his stomach? asked my father. Not at all, the barber replied – to dad's total surprise. After all, he'd been talking about his stomach, saying that was why he'd be passing away in March! That was when dad learned all the awful details. At the start of March, in the restaurant across from the barber shop, three gentlemen sat down to an elegant lunch. They had soup, a main course, dessert, and then waited for coffee. As they were waiting, one of them took out a revolver and shot first one, then the other of his lunchmates in the middle of their foreheads. They dropped dead on the spot. The murderer arose from the table and, to the waiters' horror, went straight up to them, but instead of killing them too, he asked for the

check. They gave it to him quickly. He paid. As he left the restaurant, instead of fleeing the police, he walked into the barber shop. The former owner had no customers, so he sat the man right down in the chair. The customer ordered a shave. The weakened barber felt poorly – after all his stomach was still troubling him – and his hand wasn't what it used to be. He nicked the customer. Then the man stood up and put a third bullet from the revolver in the barber's forehead. The barber dropped dead like the other two in the restaurant. The shooter sat back down in the chair and calmly waited for the police. Moved by the story, my father brought it back with him from Lwów. But, despite the crime that took place in the restaurant across from the barber shop, I still had the urge to take my parents and siblings out for a fancy meal sometime. So maybe that barber never got to savour an infusion of elderflower... If he had, he surely wouldn't have been so stubborn, because it was stubbornness that brought unhappiness down on his head. And actually in March.

Excerpt translated by Sean Gasper Bye



© Rafał Komarowski

HUBERT  
KLIMKO-  
-DOBZANIECKI

Born 1967

***Złodzieje bzu (Elderberry Thieves)***

**Publisher:** Noir sur Blanc, Warszawa 2019

ISBN: 978-83-7392-662-2; 232 pages

**Translations rights:** Syndykat Autorów,  
monika@syndykatautorow.com.pl

**Selected works**

- Bornholm, Bornholm*, 2011
- Grecy umierają w domu*, 2013
- Preparator*, 2015
- Samotność*, 2015
- Zostawić Islandię*, 2016
- Dzender domowy i inne historie*, 2017

**Foreign language translations**

While no rights for *Elderberry Thieves* have been sold yet, his remaining books have been published in Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Iceland, Serbia, Slovakia, and USA.

**Selected awards**

- Nike Literary Award (2006) – nomination
- Polityka's Passport Award (2007) – nomination

# The Short Film Cinema



## Multidimensional, lyrical and funny novel narrated by a dog

I'd strongly advise against reading this book on a train, because you might burst out laughing or crying in front of people,' warns one of the novel's fictional characters. It's not the only structural surprise here. A dog named Wabi narrates the story.

The novel revolves around an ultrasensitive man who, after waking up from a long coma, begins taking awkward steps into a world that's blindly rushing by. He escapes the thick oppression of the streets of Warsaw to find peace in the woods. There, he mingles with angels wearing officer caps of airline pilots.

He heads north, guided by a deep conviction that, through his journey, he will cure a girl's cancer when he arrives at the Swedish city of Uppsala. A madman? An idealist? The line is blurry.

Trudging through snow drifts, he ponders – do or die – the biggest questions under the sun.

The plot unfolds against the backdrop of Żuławy Wiślane, a 'beautiful depression' of virgin fens untouched by throngs of tourists rushing to the Baltic Sea. If the French speak of 'deep France,' this is 'deep Poland,' with the Gothic of Teutonic castles set amidst endless fields, locks, weirs, the half-timbered, arcaded

houses of rich landowners, and the remnants of Mennonite graveyards.

After reading the book, I ventured into those parts to understand first-hand why the sight of Vistula's alluvial valley left the novel's protagonist so awestruck. Now I know.

The author, who works as curator at the gigantic Malbork Castle of the Teutonic Order, takes to the forest like a duck to water. In 1981 he left the capital city of Warsaw to explore the backcountry. 'Our high-rises smelled of garbage chutes. We fought for every morsel of cheese. No one smiled. I thought, "You just can't spend every week, or year of your life waiting for the weekend, or a summer vacation".'

The story got me hooked with its moods reminiscent of Edward Stachura's *All the Brightness*, and the novels of Wiesław Myśliwski.

This multidimensional book defies categorisation. It contains much poetry and humour. Some scenes give you goosebumps while others make you laugh uncontrollably.

Marcin Jakimowicz  
Translated by Mirek Lalas

**M** could walk very quietly. Along the way, he had a particularly discreet companion in me. Generally, I couldn't travel right beside him since it's illegal. Dogs are not allowed to wander unleashed in the forest. They chase and startle wild animals. It happens – I can't deny it. Truth be told, we find it hard to ignore the scent of foxes, does, fawns, wild boars and other delicious game going to waste while roaming the woods. In some exceptional circumstances, however, we manage to suppress our wolfish instincts. We do so when we value something more than hunting. Something, or someone.

The law is totally blind to one's readiness for sacrifice. By design, it has no faith in gentlemanly predators. M did not suffer from such blindness, though. He could see and trust enough not to leave me behind the gate to the forest during his daily hikes. Hence, somewhat illegally, I was his faithful shadow, a companion from a distance, an unobtrusive protector. In the forest I would run up to him occasionally, only for a moment, to rub against his leg, exchange glances, wag my tail, or tug at his trousers when I had a hunch.

\*

Why did M roam the woods? As I said, it had to do with the tuning. M did his best to harmonise some areas of the forest and of the world beyond it. He did that whenever he heard a dissonance. A dissonance would indicate to him that something was weak, hurting, wounded, or withering. That was his profession, or vocation of sorts, a type of voluntary duty.

I will gladly remind all those who gorge on the fat sausages that cause pork sclerosis that he performed his duties as the sole proprietor of Tuning the Green and Beyond, Inc. Although the company turned no profit, it freed M from the unpleasant thought of being nothing more than a freeloader. Besides, he was also working on his own soul and body. And he had much to do there.

\*

What else? What else is worth knowing in order to understand him a little better?

On occasion, M would receive letters, mostly from Canada. Aside from that he read a variety of books quite often, or listened to the radio, preferably to pieces composed by the cantor of Leipzig who had a secret connection with the powers above; he liked the spruce tree outside his window, and he nursed me whenever I got roughed up by my buddies, or after I had taken some shot from a rogue smoothbore; he'd tell stories about knights and airmen to the kids from the hamlets, and stubbornly exercised his memory; he received a meagre pension, and often struggled with troublesome, racing thoughts; he thanked everyone for everything and would sometimes encounter pilot acquaintances with whom he claimed to have worked years ago.

In due course he met Marta and Monika, the daughters of K. Bernatowicz, the forester. He grew very fond of Monika, and fell in love with Marta.

\*

The younger sister, Monika, was gravely ill – much more seriously than the trees cured by my friend. A black stone that torments and kills people was growing inside her head.

M tried to help her. His method, though different from harmonising the trees and the world beyond, was also rather peculiar. He would tell Monika stories he found in different places in the forest already described by me. And – listen to this! Despite its apparent shortcomings, the treatment proved rather effective.

Once my friend began telling the Bernatowicz sisters different things to make them smile and laugh during their secret meetings in the forest, he was ready to swear that Monika started to grow more in tune. This doesn't mean that Monika started to sing famous arias from *Rigoletto* or *The Magic Flute*; day after day and week after week, however, her body and the thing inside it would gradually flush out the horrifying, jarring tones to reach the clear note of a typical nineteen-year-old girl filled with life and hope. M could hear that. He'd mastered that skill while harmonising the trees and the world beyond.

Excerpt translated by Mirek Lalas



© R. Kosowski/Foto Gość –  
Instytut Gość Media

**MAREK  
STOKOWSKI**

Born 1957

**Kino krótkich filmów**

**Publisher:** Wydawnictwo Niecate, Bytom 2014

ISBN: 978-83-64453-08-3; 272 pages

**Translations rights:** Wydawnictwo Niecate,  
wydawnictwo@niecate.pl

**Novels published**

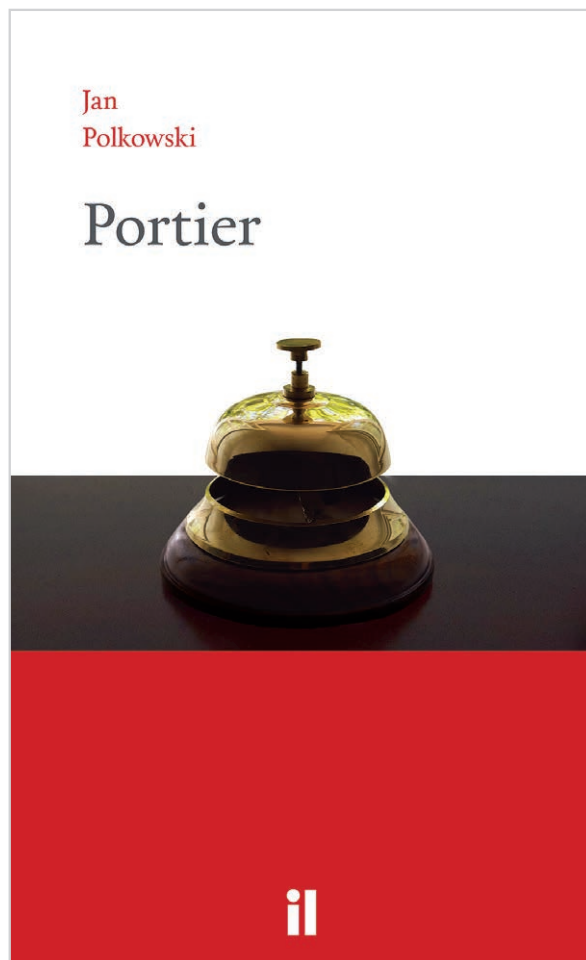
*Blazen*, 2004

*Samo-loty*, 2005

*Stroiciel lasu (powieść współczesna)*, 2010

Marek Stokowski is also the author of non-fiction books on Teutonic castles, which have been translated into English, German and Russian.

# Doorman and other stories



## An account of the chaotic and uncertain structure of reality

**The** latest short story collection by Jan Polkowski – poet, prose writer, columnist, publisher and editor – is modest in size: just four pieces. However, this slender volume is anything but modest when it comes to the writer's craft and the depth of his insight. It is anything but modest in its language, which flows in beautiful, striking phrases, or the importance of its subject matter, or the spell that it casts on the reader from the very first page.

The protagonists of these stories are desperados of a sort – people who are alienated and absent, who have turned their backs on the world and withdrawn from it, who are shut in a hermetic universe of their own passions, fears, desires, doubts or delusions. A provincial newspaper journalist in search of an exciting news story enters the flat of a dead philologist – a mad cataloguer of a single sentence, the seeker of a language within language and the sworn enemy of the printing press – and against his own will finds himself heir to the dead man's lunatic researches, taking on the stranger's personality and descending into

madness. Two musicians, an aging and isolated couple, sing a song about eternal love, but it is not clear how much of it is devotion and how much possession. A rich notary caught up in a complicated romance, which is devoid of affection and hence a future, passively remains in a marriage that is exactly like his romance, entertains fashionable company by making up stories of someone else's life, and on the train home on the eve of the Second World War changes his plans and remains to the end of the line. A painter living as if in a trap, in a world defined by his own obsessions, spends twenty years painting thirteen versions of the same painting of the same woman and then at one stroke decides to draw a line through everything he has done and disappear.

This book is a history of the illness of our times. It is an account of the chaotic and uncertain structure of reality. It concerns itself with the human being as a mystery deeper than the deepest chasm. It is an announcement of the end of the world.

Krzysztof Ćwikliński  
Translated by Eliza Marciniak



One glance was enough to conclude that the resident of the flat was a nutter. Back then I used to be cautious with my judgements and weigh my words carefully. It seemed to me that life was like a job at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Connections and confections; the curtain never falls. Sneers, caresses, frills, excesses and arse-licking. But in this case, it should be firmly said that the fellow – when he was still alive – must have been seriously screwed up.

I was frantically wondering if there was something to hang a story on here, something about him and this whole rather sad situation: a low-key tale, perhaps a little secret. I didn't expect anything sensational, but I could use a spicy morsel concerning the freshly discovered stiff. I wasn't looking for material for the *Odyssey*. I was just sniffing around routinely, to get my per-word fee for an evening beer and a buttered bread roll. And, unfortunately, I found it. (...)

I should have said to myself, this is a nobody, found another topic and shut him up inside copy totalling eight hundred characters with spaces. There would have been nothing left of him, zero, and zero problems. Zero questions and a hundred times less answers. He could have been a boring loony at most, the latest exposure of a banal downfall, nothing more than a strained pretext to scribble a slim note for the prying column about whatever.

The right words used at the appropriate moment can save a person's life or honour, restore order, create distance or build a defensive wall, act as an effective vaccine against all sorts of shit that a stiff might be storing in his cavernous closet. Or in his suspect skull. That's why one must use words extremely carefully. Use a slightly different word than is called for and the next thing you know, your dirty laundry is airing out in public, or you're hanging naked and defenceless in front of a camera, waving your white CV out the window, and losing face, cash, status or love. Or everything at once. (...)

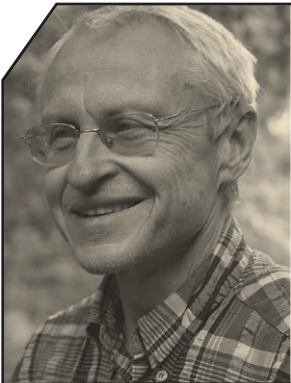
There were stacks of papers everywhere. On the desk, the kitchen table, the dresser, the chairs; the floor was covered with cardboard boxes, plastic crates and bags filled with papers. They were spilling out of two large rucksacks and even fermenting in the pots in the kitchen, except for one that was full of cooked and dried-up buckwheat groats. The overwhelming majority of these papers were single sheets the size of an average book, each containing a few handwritten lines. I glanced at them. I will never forget that moment. To be honest, I didn't even get to the end of the sentence. It didn't make the least impression on me; it didn't inspire a hint of a deeper thought. I only noticed that there were no cross-outs or corrections in the text. Only later did I realise that the contents of every single page were

identical. These were not notes; the text was, as the old term goes, a fair copy. (...)

The handwriting on the various sheets was fairly uniform. It might have belonged, and probably did belong, to the deceased resident. It was only after years of comparisons and intense study that I noticed the differences between individual instances, for example in the shapes of letters. For quite some time I was an ignorant amateur; I could not decipher the author's purpose or understand the intentions behind that kindly hand.

There were two reasons for the differences in the shapes of letters. One, rather obvious, was the author's age and state of health, meaning the increasingly uncertain, feeble hand and failing eyesight. The second, much more important and less obvious, as I will explain a bit later, was the result of the eccentric recluse's attempt to record his bizarre ideas and theories.

From the short story *Thirty-three words*  
Translated by Eliza Marciniak



© Józef Maria Ruzar

JAN  
POLKOWSKI  
Born 1953

*Portier i inne opowiadania [Doorman and Other Stories]*

**Publisher:** Instytut Literatury, Kraków 2019  
ISBN: 978-83-65662-43-9; 152 pages  
**Translation rights:** Instytut Literatury,  
krzysztof.korzyk@instytutliteratury.eu

**Selected poetry collections**

*Drzewa*, 1987  
*Cantus*, 2009  
*Głosy*, 2012  
*Gorzka godzina*, 2015  
*Gdy Bóg się waha. Poezje 1977-2017*, 2017  
*Pochód duchów*, 2018

**Novels**

*Ślady krwi*, 2013

**Foreign language translations**

France, Germany, Italy, Russia, UK&USA – poems in anthologies

**Selected awards**

Kościelski Foundation Award (1983)  
Andrzej Kijowski Award (2010)  
Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński Literary Prize ORPHEUS (2013)

# Not There

**Broad reflection on loss, absence or lack**



## NIKE LITERARY AWARD

**N**ot There is an unusual and extremely original book. Only a few of the texts included in this collection can be described as traditional reportage. The rest are a wide variety of items, most only a few pages long, and some are notes consisting of just a few sentences, or literally one single sentence. Rather than aiming at a formal experiment, Mariusz Szczygieł has subordinated all the texts included in *Not There* to an overriding theme – to do with loss, absence or lack. Reportage, conceived as a fairly exhaustive account that tells the story of particular individuals, places or incidents, is just one of the tools he uses here, as he presents his broader reflections on the topic defined in the title as 'not there'. Nonetheless, in the public response to this book, which won prizes including the Nike Literary Award, it was the more conventional approach that clearly prevailed – the texts that can be defined as traditional, long-form reportage had the warmest reception. One of these without doubt is *Reading Walls*, which tells the knotty life story of the Czech poet Viola Fischerová. Another is *Some Unknown Enemy*, which is about twin sisters

Ludwika and Zofia Woźnicka, who survived the Holocaust and later wrote books for children. Two other pieces of reportage have been highly acclaimed, this time not featuring people, but places as their central subjects: one about the Müller family villa in Prague, and the other about a shop in Budapest that sells off the belongings of people who have died.

One of the major themes in *Not There* is reflection on the possibilities and limitations of reportage as such, in other words, some thoughts about the present state of a genre that is highly valued in contemporary Poland. Szczygieł asks, among other things, what this genre has to say about the attitudes and penchants of its author, and on what basis an autobiographical tone can be brought into this strongly standardised narrative. There is no lack of ethical considerations in the book either; in a piece entitled *The Life After Life of Reportage* he discusses the dramatic consequences prompted by one of his articles.

Dariusz Nowacki  
Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

There was hardly anyone in the carriage, which I found disappointing. My emotion could be compared to the regret that many people feel when they realise there's nothing on TV tonight.

In every country the metro is like a stage and an auditorium in one. I enjoy the rapid change of cast. I enjoy the feeling that the same actor never performs twice. Unless by accident, but when that happens there's little chance of noticing, because the play has such a large cast and the stage is so capacious that you're not likely to spot a repeat entrance by the same character. Nobody has the starring role, and there's no director to impose his taste. It's the most democratic theatre in the world, because it's the spectator who decides whom to look at. It's not actually possible to listen to any conversation all the way through. The spectator is doomed to watch an unfinished show, which never features an entire line of text from capital letter to full stop. And you very rarely hear the punchlines. 'The Russkies have bought up the whole of Karlovy Vary now, can you imagine?' 'But I keep a close eye on myself', replies a woman. Unfortunately, the entrance of new actors forces you to become resigned to the fact that the dialogue has faded out. You could decide that that *was* the punchline. So what did it mean? How should you interpret it? A task for the journey to the next station, where a new act will begin.

In the metro I feel as if I'm communing with literary material as demanding as any avant-garde fiction – the dramatist builds up my expectations, but never satisfies them. But usually the carriage is like a theatre of mime, not drama. The performers have silent roles, and offer me nothing but their body language. A show of the struggle to stay upright on the moving, unstable stage. A show of how selected groups of muscles are employed to stop one from falling over and making a mess of one's role can be highly enjoyable. But there's more satisfaction to be had from watching the seated passengers. If the standing actor is beautiful in his effort, the sitting actor is beautiful in his lack of effort. Then I have a very personal portrait before me. The actor in the sitting role appears to have lost his sense of being on stage. He's no longer pulling in his stomach. If it's a woman, she stops tensing her face muscles. If it's a man, he stops holding his head up, so fewer spectators will see the tonsure of white skin amid his hair. The actor sitting without a stage partner is doomed to himself alone, and emanates helplessness. Helplessness accumulates in the folds of his skin, which is easily visible above the buttocks if he's sitting in a way that allows you to observe him from the side. In this position it's impossible to do anything about those folds. It's a show of one's weakness of will, which in a spectator like me prompts affection. If on top of that the actor closes his eyes, however hard he may insist that he's isolating himself from the audience behind the barrier of his eyelids, the audience might feel very differently

about it. And then we've got him! Some of the spectators are just waiting for this sort of moment. It's as if they're counting on the fact that between Můstek and Malostranská stations the actor will start the show of releasing his soul, which will rise above the metro tunnel right before our eyes. Closing your eyes in a public situation makes it more like an intimate situation. Changes occur in the face, and I think any actor, even if he's playing a nasty character, only has to close his eyes to become the embodiment of mildness and goodness.

But perhaps that's just my projection, because I'd like to see everyone with their eyes shut. I'm firmly convinced that it gives one a sense of power. The person who's looking has power over the person who isn't looking. Or maybe behind his closed eyelids the actor is waiting to see what the spectator will do to him? Perhaps he's ready for anything? For kisses from strangers, or a slap in the face?

Excerpt translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



© Albert Zawada

MARIUSZ  
SZCZYGIEŁ  
Born 1966

*Nie ma [Not There]*

**Publisher:** Dowody na istnienie, Warszawa 2018  
ISBN: 978-83-65970-31-2; 336 pages  
**Translations rights:** Andrew Nurnberg Associates,  
anna.rucinska@nurnberg.pl

**Foreign language translations**

Rights to *Nie ma* have been sold to Czech Republic (Dokoran), Italy (Nottetempo), Spain (Acantilado), Slovakia (Absynt). Szczygieł's books have been published in France, Hungary, Serbia, UK & USA, and Ukraine.

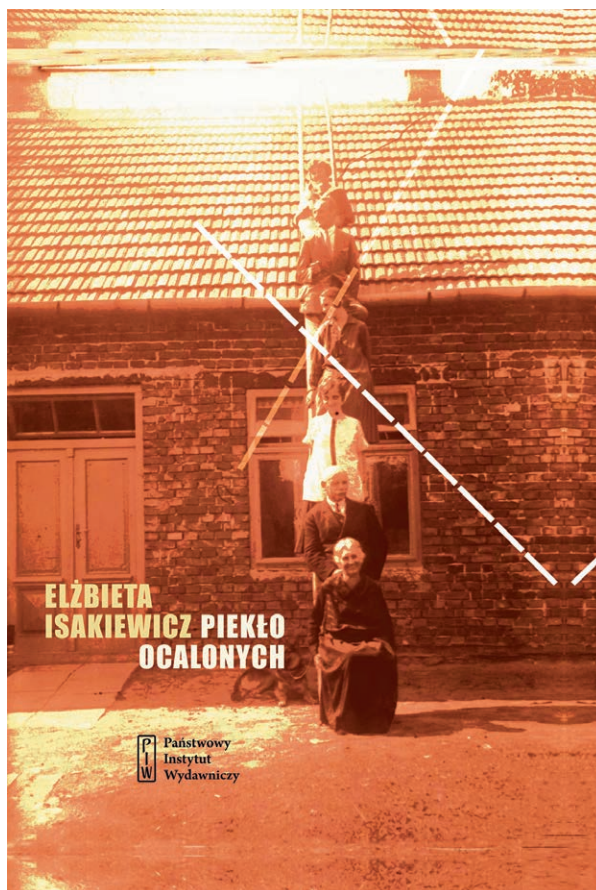
**Selected works**

*Gottland [Gottland: Mostly True Stories from Half of Czechoslovakia]*, 2006  
*Zrób sobie raj*, 2010  
*20 lat nowej Polski w reportażach według Mariusza Szczygła*, 2010  
*Łaska nebeská*, 2012  
*Projekt: prawda*, 2016

**Selected awards**

Angelus Central European Prize (2007) – nomination  
European Book Prize (2009)  
Nike Literary Award (2019), nomination and Readers' Choice Award in 2007  
Szczygieł is also the winner of several awards for his press reportages.

# The Hell of the Saved



## A child's point of view in a world of constant danger

**G**isela Shumkowitz from Buczacz, Meir Agami from Korzec, Janina Ekier from Kraków, and a dozen more names we are lucky to know not just from memorial epitaphs, or yearbooks: these are all subjects of interviews conducted by the author only several years ago, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Lila, Miriam, David survived the Holocaust hidden by their Polish neighbours, family friends and sometimes simply by righteous strangers.

The stories, of course, come from people who were just children back then – and the author's greatest achievement, aside from her task as a reporter to locate the people she wished to interview, lies in her ability to recreate a child's point of view in a world of constant danger. Young children, obviously, see the world differently than adults, as they focus on the nearest items, lack the ability to form a complete picture, and yet retain a strong sense of wonder. Even in a soot-covered world turning to ashes such peculiarities of perception come to the surface: Justina, Shlomo, and Avraham register the presence (or disappearance) of their Mum, Dad, Brother, and Hunger and Fear while also noticing the green of a fabric, the warmth of a stove, and the taste of bread.

Naturally, Elżbieta Isakiewicz's book enters a field fraught with painful and impassioned debates concerning the scale of Polish assistance (or paucity thereof) during the Holocaust, the balance of solidarity, indifference, hostility, and gratitude. There is a chance, however, that no such debate will use this book to argue its point, that no politician will reduce the book to a reference in his speech. Indeed, it just can't be done: instead of giving overall numbers, the book presents the voices of over a dozen old people looking back through the fog of memories to the snow, the fear, the hunger, and, ultimately, their own survival. We hear the rustling names of strange towns somewhere in Eastern Europe, we visit Polish attics, cramped apartments, and monasteries: unfamiliar places that smell different, but offer safety. *The Hell of the Saved* is not a final tally of the Righteous versus the Blackmailers – it simply tells a story of over a dozen saved lives. Yet, we have known for quite a long time now how much good comes from one person saving just one life.

Wojciech Stanisławski  
Translated by Mirek Lalas



‘How come, Mr. Leinwald? What are you saying?’ I step out into the factory courtyard, scanning it for the Gestapo men, and wanting to be picked up, but no one’s lurking in the courtyard’s dreadful emptiness. I linger there as if it were a stage swept clean of all drama until Sonia, my mum’s Jewish friend, a bookkeeper, notices me. ‘For God’s sake, what are you doing here?’ I tell her that I want to be in jail with my mum, but she urges me, ‘Forget your mum, just save yourself.’

I don’t want to save myself, I keep repeating, I have no life left, no parents, I have no one, but Sonia’s not giving up. ‘I’ll get you the papers. You speak good Polish and you don’t have Semitic features. We’re doomed to slaughter here.’

I loiter on the factory grounds for some nine days, attracting no attention, and not knowing whether I eat, or drink anything, or sleep anywhere as my memory forms a vacuum banishing that time to the realm of oblivion. I stay that way until I meet the forger – the afternoon when Sonia takes me to a small, darkened cubbyhole on a narrow, cobbled street away from main thoroughfares, where stray bluish pigeons stroll around. Inside, a bespectacled middle-aged man sits in a corner, writing something fervently without getting up to meet us. He lifts his eyes toward us only when Sonia says quietly, ‘Take a look at this girl.’ His gaze seems to x-ray every aspect of my face. ‘She’ll do,’ the forger sums up his examination, before turning around and disappearing into the shadows.

The birth certificate he prepares shows my name as Muszyńska, Ludwika, born one year before my actual birthday to make me seem older, from a mother who died at childbirth, and a father who fought in the Polish Army and was exiled to Siberia. The forger attaches a proof of residence issued by the city hall to the birth certificate while Sonia produces a new employment form stolen from somewhere at the factory. The quality of the job is poor: the papers look fake – while stamps usually go over signatures, these papers have signatures written over the stamps – so Sonia advises me to show them only when absolutely necessary. ‘The way you look and act is your best birth certificate,’ she stresses as she puts a clean change of underwear and a dress into a small suitcase, and draws up plans for the near future: I’m to go to some small town nearby, explaining that because I suffer from consumption, I must drink lots of milk and breathe fresh air, while Sonia herself will write to me on occasion and send me money. But I keep on resisting. I don’t want to go away and cut myself off from the world I know. ‘Have you read that book about Mata Hari?’ Sonia asks. ‘Now you have to act it out, and the better you do, the better chance you have to survive.’ At this, Sonia falls silent, knowing that she has hit the nail on the head; if Mata Hari could pretend to be someone else, why can’t I?

When evening falls I’m to leave the ghetto through a hole in the railing, tear off my Star of David armband and head for the train station. As we say goodbye, Sonia orders me to walk away quickly without looking back, but I do look back and, when I do, I immediately understand what she was trying to spare me. My last view of the ghetto is a building decorated with thirteen corpses. On that particular day, they hanged the entire Judenrat. I make my way to the train station, as numb as Lot’s wife.

Excerpt translated by Mirek Lalas



© Jacek Suliński

**ELŻBIETA ISAKIEWICZ**  
Born 1958

***Pieć ocalałych [The Hell of the Saved]***

**Publisher:** Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 2019  
ISBN: 978-83-66272-70-5; 448 pages  
**Translations rights:** Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy,  
e.szwagrzyk@piw.pl

**Selected works**

- Ustna harmonijka*, 2000
- Czerwony ołówek: o Polaku, który ocalił tysiące Żydów*, 2003
- Ulicznica*, 2010
- Kaprys (Przy)powieść o mężczyźnie i kobiecie*, 2013
- Lekkie halki czarownic i inne mikropowieści*, 2015
- Niewyśnione historie*, 2017
- Kocio*, 2018

**Foreign language translations**

Hungarian (*Czerwony ołówek*); *Ustna harmonijka* has been translated into English.

**Awards**

Józef Mackiewicz Literary Prize (2004) – nomination  
Grand Press Award for the best press reportage (2006) – nomination

# Violence and Words.

## On the Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt

Biblioteka kwartalnika  
KRONOS

### Piotr Nowak Przemoc i słowa

*W kręgu filozofii politycznej  
Hannah Arendt*

Wraz z publikacją *Eichmanna w Jerozolimie* podniosły się głosy sprzeciwu i żywiołowej krytyki. To chyba Israel Gutman, powstaniec z getta warszawskiego, jako pierwszy ukuł powiedzenie o „żydowskim antysemityzmie Arendt”, o jej „nienawiści do siebie jako Żydówki”, które w lot podchwycili inni. Nagłówek *Self-hating Jewess writes pro-Eichmann series for New Yorker magazine* – powtarzano w większości amerykańskich gazet. Anti-Defamation League, żydowska organizacja działająca w Stanach Zjednoczonych, zwalczająca wszelkie przejawy antysemityzmu, wszczęła przeciwko *Eichmannowi* kampanię na skalę niemającą żadnego precedensu. Mówiąc krócej, postanowiono Arendt wbić w ziemię, zatrzeć pamięć o niej, lecz naprzód zlinczować jako „kryptonazistkę”.

KRONOS

## A brilliant testament to the enduring relevance of Arendt's work

To repeat the fact that, even among Jews, there were individuals who, during the Holocaust, collaborated with the German authorities, is a risky endeavour – as Hannah Arendt herself discovered. In 1963 the well-known Jewish-German philosopher published her famous report *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which she covered the renowned trial of the titular Nazi war criminal, the chief coordinator of the *Endlösung*, or 'final solution of the Jewish question'. The controversies sparked by this book are among the key topics discussed by Piotr Nowak in *Przemoc i słowa. W kręgu filozofii politycznej Hannah Arendt* [Violence and Words. On the Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt]. The author, a philosopher himself, is a professor at the University of Białystok and deputy editor of the quarterly journal *Kronos*.

Nowak recalls the heated debate between Arendt and Jews both in Israel and the diaspora: in reporting on the Eichmann trial, she had violated the taboo against discussing the role played by the *Judenrats* (Jewish councils) in the German plan for genocide.

Yet the Jewish community did not mount a monolithic response to the Holocaust. Some of its members accepted administrative positions in the German death machine.

Arendt, however, was interested in more than just the Holocaust. Observing that the writer also directed her critical barbs at phenomena that we continue to witness today, Nowak quotes her words: 'It may even be that the true predicaments of our time will assume their authentic form – though not necessarily the cruelest – only when totalitarianism has become a thing of the past.'

The portrait of Arendt that emerges from the pages of Nowak's book is that of a lonely individual who suffered dearly for her intellectual courage. Perhaps there was something of the Old-Testament prophet about her. Her words, like theirs, were not heeded in her home town. Piotr Nowak's book is a brilliant testament to the enduring relevance of Hannah Arendt's work.

Filip Memches

Translated by Arthur Barys

Most men over the age of forty feel as if they've just graduated high school. They look into the mirror and reject the image that looks back at them. They resist the passing of their bodies and the irrevocable loss of freshness – their own, and that of the world around them. They know that they are but pale copies of their former selves, and they carefully conceal that knowledge. University lecturers have it even worse. They persist in the stubborn belief that it's everyone around them who's changing, not they. Students come, pass (or fail) their exams, grow older, and leave. Only they, the academics, hold onto their eternal youth; the ravages of time spare no one but them. It's easy to understand why. Year in and year out, they teach 'the same' young people, finding it increasingly difficult to tell them apart. What dominates their perspective and distorts their perception of their own predicament is youth as such, youth experienced, something that – almost by its very nature – thrives on illusion.

(...)

Already in his first letter to Hannah Arendt, Heidegger admits to having fallen victim to the Faustian myth that an 'alchemical' relationship with a clever first-year philosophy student would allow him to regain his youth. The seventeen-year age difference between the two was particularly pronounced when they first met. Exacerbating this divide even further was the difference in their respective social statuses. He was an up-and-coming, perhaps already famous, German philosopher; she was a nineteen-year-old German Jew who had been raised in a well-to-do, tolerant home unbound by religious superstition. Let us pause to consider the nature of their relationship. The letters Heidegger wrote to Arendt in this period are full of Romantic clichés and nonsense. We hear the rustling of leaves in the wind and the songs of nightingales; lovers flanked by ancient ruins confess their misdeeds, only to immediately forgive each other, and so on. They sit down to read Mann together. He tells her what to do and what to read, and she submits to him with all the foolishness of puppy love. No less importantly, she provides him with new corporal thrills. In his first letter to Arendt, Heidegger writes: 'We have been allowed to meet: we must hold that as a gift in our innermost being and avoid deforming it through self-deception about the purity of living. We must not think of ourselves as soul mates, something no one ever experiences.' Let us also imagine the place in which their relationship was born. It is Freiburg at the start of the twentieth century, where 'short hair and modish clothes attracted all eyes'. For a married university professor, the father of two children, to pursue a love affair under such conditions was nothing short of desperate. The intensity of their romantic relationship waned after Arendt transferred to Heidelberg University in 1928, and soon petered out completely due to purely external factors

beyond their control. Heidegger, after all, was a rising star in the academic world, while Arendt was a gifted undergraduate and, later, a doctoral student. She was also Jewish, a fact that bore a dangerous stigma in Germany around 1933. History and politics soon revealed the former lovers' other, hitherto dormant and unexpected, qualities: their ancestry, views, and attitudes toward particular individuals and institutions, etc. In the 1930s Martin Heidegger was appointed rector of a Nazi university, while Arendt became actively involved in the Zionist movement and soon fled Germany.

Excerpt translated by Arthur Barys



© Rafał Leszczyński

PIOTR  
NOWAK

Born 1966

**Przemoc i słowa. W kręgu filozofii politycznej Hannah Arendt**  
[Violence and Words. On the Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt]

**Publisher:** Fundacja Augusta Hrabiego Cieszkowskiego,  
Warszawa 2018

ISBN: 978-83-62609-64-2; 464 pages

**Translation rights:** Fundacja A. Hr. Cieszkowskiego,  
jakubwolak@kronos.org.pl

#### Selected works

*Podpis księcia. Rozważania o mocy i słabości*, 2013

*The Ancients and Shakespeare on Time. Some Remarks on the War of Generations*, 2014

*Hodowanie troglodytów*, 2014

*Umieram, więc jestem*, 2016

*Puszka z Pandorą*, 2016

Piotr Nowak is a philosopher and a professor at the Białystok University. He translated works of, among others, H. Arendt, W.H. Auden, L. Strauss, B. Pasternak.

#### Awards

Daedalus' Wings, awarded by the National Library of Poland, for *Violence and Words* (2019).

Nowak is also the winner of several Polish and international scholarships. He was a visiting professor at universities in Chicago, Hlesinki, Joensuu, and Berlin.

**BOOK INSTITUTE**



**©POLAND**

**NEW BOOKS FROM POLAND – SPRING 2020**

Texts by Krzysztof Ćwikliński, Marcin Jakimowicz, Marcin Kube, Filip Memches,  
Dariusz Nowacki, Wojciech Stanisławski, Katarzyna Wójcik

Translated by Arthur Barys, Sean Gasper Bye, Mirek Lalas, Antonia Lloyd-Jones,  
Eliza Marciniak

Edited by Agnieszka Urbanowska

English text edited by Charles Kraszewski and Peter MacLeod

Layout design by Bogdan Kuc

DTP artist Maciej Faliński