

A K W E L S A P A R

THE  
REVENGE  
OF THE  
FOXES



G L A G O S L A Y P U B L I C A T I O N S



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REVENGE  
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FOXES

# THE REVENGE OF THE FOXES

by Ak Welsapar

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TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY RICHARD GOVETT

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*In my heart I never lie.*

Sergei Yesenin



## LOVE FOR LIFE

In Neskuchny Gardens the glow of the birch and aspen trees was quietly dying. Moskva River, densely filled with yellow leaves, was softly singing its autumn song. All around there reigned a silence, nourished by the rain and the moisture under the earth; it rested on the leaves which were falling from the tall trees of the gardens, on their rises and descents leading away from the noisy avenue, from the endless stream of cars near the river bank, which at this weary pre-evening hour was somehow deliberately deserted. In this silence the conception of the future springtime seemed to be taking place; this was the sunset of the Great Day, which every year begins with the noisy springtime break-up of the ice.

“Will this autumn be my last?” I thought, sitting almost at the very edge of the water. “And will I die suddenly?”

Now, several years from the day when I was completely immersed in one question – life or death, I can see still more clearly how close was the abyss... which, to my great happiness, did not engulf me. And today my spirit aches for those young lives broken off in very take-off, for those friends of mine, for whom the rivers of springtime will no longer start to rumble as they break the ice, for whom everything is stilled for all eternity in a deep winter sleep.

\* \* \*

I remember that autumn, I remember the vicissitudes of time and the departing warmth, I remember the feeling of pain. Each leaf of the old oak tree in the hospital courtyard would break off and fall, as if counting the minutes; longing and grief filled my spirit. The doomed autumn leaves would try with their last strength to break out of their predestined circle and save themselves from extinction. They hastened in flocks after chance passers-by, alarmed by the movement of their steps. Caught up from the moist earth by a gust of wind, the leaves

would cling to people and tag along with them like stray dogs, ready faithfully to serve anyone not driving them away like noisome flies. But no-one would stop, they all passed by and, deceived in their treasured hopes, the yellow and red leaves would fall into the mud and long continue to flutter in an attempt to rise and rush after new passers-by.

I had plenty of time to observe the metamorphoses of that autumn, so unrepeatable for me; there was nowhere to hurry... a pity, there were few distractions, and all the ones that we had were thought up by me, by us, just slightly to brighten up our miserable hospital life. I remember we terribly enjoyed being strikingly different from the other patients wandering like the ghost of Hamlet's Father in plain, boring, colourless clothes, whom we met during the so-called 'short walks'. And we others, not wearing official gowns, were allowed to wear our own clothes! We walking wounded heart patients were in principle healthy people. And it was difficult not to strut our home wardrobe, thanks to which, hardly outside the field of vision of the strict nurses, (albeit for a short time, but with relish) we cast off the 'label' of invalid, and it was like becoming normal people like those flowing in the endless stream along the pavement of the huge avenue in front of the Institute of Cardiovascular Surgery. Sometimes we managed to melt in with this crowd, indifferent to everything and ever rushing somewhere, and go on desperate walks. Of course, this was done at great risk: you could not fall under the gaze of the doctors or the medical personnel – no one wanted to be written off before the operation for 'non-observance of the regimen'. Although our Institute was not one of nuclear, but human research, the regimen operating in it was no slacker, incidentally, than any place where Soviet (strict) rules and daily routine were in force for inter-institutions. Nevertheless we managed not only to cross the avenue and buy 'Pepsi' or 'Fanta' in the shop, but also go on long walks and travel on the Metro as far as the Lenin Hills and from the heights there cast a glance at the busy transient world which one of us might soon have to leave forever...

Who was to embark on a journey into such a distance depended on many factors, including the boldness of the patient, and on how he found himself in the Institution where at public expense (that is, almost gratis) the person was having his life returned to him. Whether he got into the Institute from a faraway peripheral hospital – a hotbed of flies and insanitary conditions, after a long queue of those waiting

to go under the knife, or whether they brought him here without red tape, backstairs by *'blat'*, by the standard bribe. Of great importance also was the status occupied by his patron in the institutional hierarchy and consequently the status of the patient himself.

But enough of that. I am now occupied by something else: the fearlessness of the heart patients who, not of their own will, found themselves facing the choice "to be or not to be". Trusting the surgeons with their hearts, they firmly decided – TO BE!

\* \* \*

When they led me to the doors of the ward, I glanced at the sign – No.6... Immediately there floated into my memory the name of the classic which 'glorified' the number of the ward of sad fame, yes... a fine start, it augers nothing joyful for me, but we will hope that the ill-omened number will not be fateful for me; anyway, the writer was telling the world a story about lunatics and not heart cases.

"Vitya... Slava... Akhliman..." I was introduced to my ward neighbours by Olga Nikanorovna, the Ward Sister for children with innate heart defects. "They are good children and great fun!"

"What fun!" I thought as I looked around the ward and met the eternally sad eyes of Vitali. "Just try and laugh it off!"

"I am going now and you take your places!" the Sister said smiling, in a tone which might be appropriate in a café or a bar but not here among people awaiting a risky heart operation. "Here is your linen and everything else," added the girl handing me the sheets. "Babka Nastya said she would make the beds so wait, maybe..."

"No matter, I'm used to it."

"Take care..."

With the departure of the young Sister it became even more melancholy in the ward. Having briefly given my name, I somehow bungled the moment of acquaintance and hurried outside, unable to bear the pressure of three pairs of eyes scrutinising me. Perhaps I'll feel better outside the walls of the ward.

The garden was lovely but just as miserable: I wished for nothing, I foresaw nothing good, I dreamed of nothing. All around autumn reigned, leaves were falling, there was the odd passer-by, not far away the avenue hummed, and in the midst of all this was I, but what of

that? So melancholy, it was enough to make you sob! My nearest and dearest were so far away that it was better not to think about them. In an attempt to drive away this monstrous thought, I looked helplessly around me: there were people as miserable as I. Under the old oak tree sat a threesome, men in grey overalls. They had probably huddled together to jointly drive out their sadness and longing... I wondered where I should go, to the avenue or to those people as yet totally unknown to me. I had just decided to approach them (I would anyway have to get to know them sooner or later – they were coming down from our floor, as I was going up with Sister Olga) but I was prevented by a middle-aged woman.

“Anatoli Yakovlevich...! Tolya...!” her voice rang out and one of the men quickly jumped up from the bench.

“Manya...! My Masha has come!” his mouth immediately stretched into a smile.

I decided not to make their acquaintance and quietly went away. I wandered a little in solitude, and not being able to think of anything of use, decided to return to the ward.

“What a miserable institution, eh?” I muttered, standing with my back to the Memorial to Bakulev.

My words, not addressed to anyone in particular, were heard, and this is what is strange! An answer followed.

“Here they operate on the heart of the Motherland!” pronounced a sickly thin young girl in a simple dress, standing at the doors of the Institute.

“And has She a defect?”

“Yes,” she replied with a barely noticeable nod.

“Specify,” I said, continuing my ‘interview’. “Is Hers innate as well?”

“Judge for yourself,” she said, looking at me with a frown. “It’s obviously not acquired so it needs radical intervention, surgical moreover. In any case that is how it seems to me...” she added.

“Excuse me, young girl, but how old are you?” I looked into her big, slightly bulging, thoughtfully sad eyes, extremely surprised at her sophisticated talk.

“What, is it of such interest?” she made a sickly face.

“Well,” I shrugged. “It is of course interesting for... I have to know what to give you: flowers or sweeties”

“Impudent!” she was offended and left.

This conversation left in my spirit something not very pleasant, unclarified, uncertain. I seemed to have offended this young girl – fine, if she is really still a teenager, then, like a child, she will sulk for a bit and then forgive the unintended insult. I did not have long to wait for clarification. When, after a walk, I went down into the basement to the changing room, the young Sister Olga Nikanorovna met me with a curious look.

“What are you doing, Nazarli, offending our girls?” In her question I could not help hearing a frank challenge. I had no means of objecting, so I restricted myself to a response with an indiscriminate: “Have I really offended someone?”

No doubt the Sister took my question as a veiled attempt to object. Not unsurprisingly, she did not delay with a thorough reply and gave me a direct moral lesson:

“If you consider 18-year-olds to be children and 25-year-olds to be grannies, then, of course, all is in order! Does that not embarrass you?” she elicited, looking at me with either a teaching or a corrupting look from under her thickly painted long eyelashes. Her eyes wavered deceptively between absolute seriousness and mystery. “Is that not offensive, eh?” she drew out each word theatrically reproaching me, whilst at the same time arranging something in the cupboard. “Or where you come from in the Karakums – is that the practice?”

“No! It is not the practice,” I quickly responded, upholding the right to the high cultural standards of the people of my native desert. “I simply did not recognise the adult in her, and she, as it turns out, has already managed to tell tales on me?”

“That sums it up... you need to be careful when dealing with women,” the Sister advised me quite sincerely, surprisingly mildly and with a certain tenderness.

“I will try,” I replied with a smile, almost at a loss.

“We will be checking...”

And she did check: our relationship began to develop with extraordinary storminess. Only a day later we locked ourselves in that same changing room, hid from everyone, and especially from Babka Nastya, and kissed passionately, like actual lovers.

“The greatest danger here is Babka Nastya!” Olya warned me immediately between kisses. “Kissing here is forbidden, meaning it is not welcomed, and Babka Nastya has taken upon herself the role of

voluntary inspector. She is trying to eradicate love in the Institute and considers that it is superfluous here...”

The girl told me this breathlessly, abruptly, descending more and more to a heated whisper, which made our kisses hotter and more desired, because – may Babka Nastya know this! everything forbidden and persecuted is much sweeter than what is permitted. That Olga was right I soon convinced myself. Babka Nastya persecuted loving couples as the Inquisition did heretics. “It’s not done here!” she would shout for all the Institute to hear, the louder, the nearer it was to night time. The trouble was, Babka Nastya herself, to all appearances, was no small a sinner in her youth, and could with one glimpse calculate with mathematical precision who was looking especially in whose direction and who was not indifferent to whom. This is how she whipped up our illicit love with swinging blows, not allowing it to burn out within the tedious walls of the Institute of Cardiovascular Surgery.

“Baba Nastya, you should go home,” we would tell her nearer to night time. “What are you, the watchman? What do they pay you for? You are Matron, your time finishes at 1800 hours!” She would not go. She chased us everywhere and shamed us. “Baba Nastya,” we would tell her. “Don’t chase everyone, you haven’t the strength for it! The future belongs to us if, of course, we live to see it...” But no, she would not agree! “Go home, Baba Nastya,” we would tell her. “Tomorrow you have to get up early, you have to go round the wards and check that they’ve all gone to sleep in their own beds!” But she would not leave her post. She would mumble that the Metro was closing early, that it did not operate round the clock or maybe till five in the morning. Evidently, at home no-one was waiting for her, or she had no-one to order about. And so, she lived at the Institute.

Did Babka Nastya understand our feelings? Did she realize that for many of us sick people each day was like the last, the very last in our lives? We were not being unfaithful to our lovers, nor were the girls being unfaithful to theirs. We were not betraying anyone, we were only trying to cheat fate. We young men and women heart cases saw in our chosen girls and boys a source of Life, from which we had to drink deep before embarking on a perilous voyage poised over a dark abyss...

“Against all Babka Nastya’s knavish tricks,” I would tell my dear Ward Sister Olga, “you and I have one claim: we want to love! To love



each other desperately, and this requires of me to love and of you a sea of tenderness to captivate the soul! For you are, perhaps, my last love on this sinful earth.” And I thought to myself that I might never come to see the mother of my child, she is so far away and my life may be broken off at any minute. “Olga, Olenka, they say women cannot really love, they are only capable of pitying a man, so pity me as the peasant girl pitied the brigand at large, whose time was up, and is now being led blindfold to the branched oak. Have pity on me as the storm pities the ocean, as the Heavens pity the Earth!”

In reply she held me tighter as if hiding me from the coming danger.

“I shall pity you, my sweet: I shall torment you as the storm torments the ocean! If only your little heart would hold out, everything will be alright with me, I seem to have been waiting all my life for you, I’m in love!”

“Tell me,” I continued, inspired by her reply. “Tell me, my precious, can I call you my very own? My Olga...”

“Nikanorovna, you mean?” she queried, for a moment breaking off her kisses, which had quickly become grown-up ones.

“Yes,” I replied, “Olga (my) Nikanorovna!”

“You can call me Dish, only don’t put me in the oven!” she joked.

“Are you married?” I continued to ask her between ardent kisses.

“No longer!” she replied with a sigh.

“Ah, no longer? Don’t fret, I swear I never dreamt of better, in our time this is more of a merit than a shortcoming, it means you’re free...” She smiled ironically. I hastened to explain:

“I swear to God that divorce beautifies a woman and imbues her with living fire. You know, you belong to the better portion of tender creatures by whom I have been educated, taught to kiss. How delightful that we have hidden from everyone! I am yours, only yours, allow me to love you so that there awakens in me a wild thirst for life, so that I believe – I was born to love you and you me! Ah, Olya, Olga (my) Nikanorovna, I do not know if I have much time left in the world. Oh, I do not know... my heart is racing like an unbroken horse, at full speed, it is striving to the secret peaks of happiness, to the unknown, it wants if only a little longer to love in this world... we will not lose the precious moments, time is running through our fingers. You say, wait till night, when they are all asleep. Ah, have we enough time to

wait? Daylight is no bar to love, do not be fastidious! Incidentally, as I see it, you touch-me-not, Olga (my) Nikaronovna, by God, did you always sleep with your husband in an overcoat? Why do you tremble so tenderly? Your body and breasts are resilience itself, your lips are barely opened pistachios of Badkhiz! How did you and your husband spend the winter Moscow nights together in bed? What did your husband expect from this life, apart from you? A fleeting, transient, illusory life!”

My over-sensitive Ward Sister only kept silence, she was at this moment incapable of pronouncing even a single coherent sentence, she burned like a candle in the dark changing room, carried away by our suddenly kindled passion. Soon our brief ardent meetings in the changing room became regular.

“You understand,” I informed Olga (my) Nikanorovna, when we had once more managed to hide from everyone, and especially from Babka Nastya, who was scouring the far corners seeking out precisely us. “You understand, my final love. A meeting can be arranged or contrived but you cannot invent parting. This dream will end in an operation, blood, mortal anguish – you must know that not everyone returns from there alive...”

“You’re talking nonsense...” she whispered.

“I agree,” I replied. “Do not expect from me any profound insights in the changing room when there are only a few days left to the heart operation. I am at the mercy of life and thirst for love is my only living space. Let whoever wishes to, condemn me afterwards, but not now. Now there is nothing for me but love, for love is the supreme manifestation of life! There is nothing higher than love in this life and never can be. That is how life is created.”

“Lord,” The young Ward Sister whispered, trembling in soundless sobs. “How cruel is Fate, how cruel she is...”

“Don’t cry! You are now crying not for me but for yourself, because you often see those who stand on the margin between life and death. It is not known to whom this path is allotted, in the final count we will all sooner or later meet there... but better love me now than afterwards. Consider me already grass in the meadow, a tree on the roadside, a drop of the sea fallen from heaven! If I am not to survive the dangerous trial, if I am destined to leave for my forebears so early – so be it. Perhaps I am grieving in vain, seeking in this life a temporary refuge,

grasping at you, as at a straw? And if I am really to live on, then let life itself make this known to me, let it fight for itself. And if nevertheless I am not to survive... I will take with me into the darkness which awaits me, the warmth of your hands, the taste of your lips, the tremor of your body... I know you are my last love in this life."

"No," she quickly replied with surprising calm. "People like you fall in love often. I will not have time to blink an eye and you will be in the arms of someone else, you just see..." She suddenly looked at me with a soft reproach as if anticipating the events which, as she thought, must inevitably occur, all this in tears.

Now I embraced the girl still tighter, and stroked her shoulders, and she trustingly reposed in my embrace; barely waiting, she soundlessly brushed away her unsought tears. We were silent, each thinking our own thoughts.

How I want to live! Perhaps I will still be given time to enjoy the first rays of the sun at dawn, to delight in the quiet melody of the leaves, the sound of the waterfall, the twittering of the steppeland birds of a spring morning... how I want to live...

\* \* \*

Any of the seriously ill who could fully adapt to the Institute with its strong smells ingrained in the walls, its sub-standard sanitation, could be strictly counted among the strongest living beings in the world. Unfortunately, to the great distress of the medical personnel and the patients, the Institute obviously lacked the finance for capital maintenance, and so all the incredible efforts of the nurses and matrons were reduced to nothing, so what was the point of scrubbing the unpainted floor for years on end, if plaster was going to fall on it continually from the ceiling? Ah, if only someone from the yawning government heights would pay attention to the pitiable state of the Institute, flout the restrictions of the five-year-plan and help with funds?

But people will not get used to these outrages, they will just become reconciled and force themselves to submit to the circumstances, because only the person himself can compel himself to suffer anything, and no brute can do that for him. At the Institute people saved themselves in different ways: some, the older ones, who had lived

with an innate defect till their grey hairs, would pray, while others, the younger ones, would watch them and secretly, no doubt, they believed that in a neighbourly way some of that grace, which could be obtained by prayer, would be transferred to them. We, the young ones, found consolation in what the older ones could no longer and were not even resolved to find: we would fall in love. Love gave us freedom, it liberated us from the difficulties we experienced every minute. None of us wanted to finally admit that death was a reality. We both admitted it and did not admit it. We did not wish to feel like sick people, but willy-nilly we had to. We were continually tormented between two fires. This was so obvious that it was slightly irritating every time I was picked from the flock of my peers and taken immediately for some sort of routine examination: I would have tests, be listened to, tapped, radiated with various rays penetrating the human body with ultrasonic waves.

“You’ve done those tests on me already!” I would say indignantly. “And X-rays too! Sounding? No, we haven’t had what we haven’t got. Ashkhabad hasn’t got that, so it’s so far not possible. Why is the equipment not there? The equipment is there, it was bought in the last five-year-plan, but there is no-one to operate it. The specialists will be trained in the next five-year-plan. Yes, everything to plan! How should I know where they plan? In Moscow, probably!”

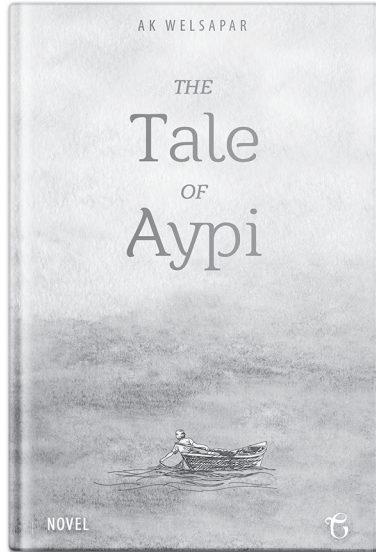
“When did you arrive?” Barygin, head of department, asks me. He is so full of the sense of his own greatness that he notices nothing around and straight ahead of him. (To everyone’s luck, this arrogant peacock was not to work at the Institute for long, he would soon be removed for certain violations.)

“A week ago, Semyon Semyonovich,” I reply. “I have a question for you... Can I transfer to a different ward? Which one? Practically any so long as the *fortochka* ventilation window opens, but in our ward it is jammed, there is no fresh air and it smells. I find it stuffy and suffocating. Yes, I can? Thank you! What? Re-register? (That means first book out, then book into the queue for the operation, with the same complaints, naturally... then wait a year or two...) I see, a mere trifle, just a formality! I will make use of it at the first opportunity, but not now, of course, as I’m already here.”

But success unexpectedly smiled on me! I was allowed to change ward without re-registering, because I was suddenly required in

# The Tale of Aypi

by Ak Welsapar



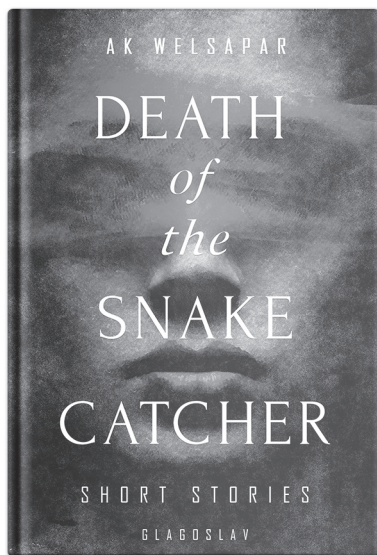
*The Tale of Aypi* follows the fate of a group of Turkmen fishermen dwelling on the coast of the Caspian Sea. The fear of losing their ancestral home looms over the entire village. This injustice is being made to look like a voluntary initiative on the part of the fishermen themselves, whilst the ruling powers cynically attempt to confiscate their land. One brave fisherman from the village rises up to confront them and fights for his native shore, as a response to an act of cruelty inflicted on a defenceless young woman centuries ago. This unjustly executed soul returns as a ghost during this troubled time to exact a terrible revenge on the men of the village.

The relationships among the characters mirror the eternal opposition between the forces of nature, with the intervention of mystical forces ratcheting up the tension.

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## Death of the Snake Catcher

by Ak Welsapar

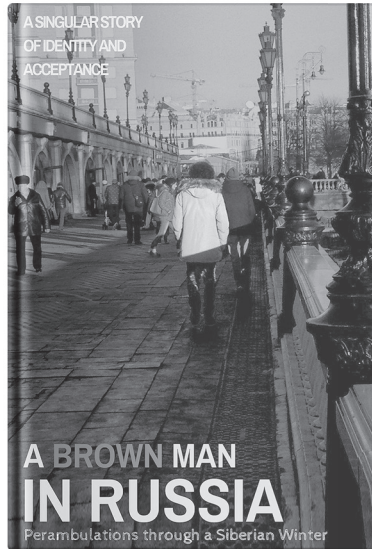


This book features people from one of the most closed countries of today's world, where the passage of time resembles the passage of a caravan through the waterless desert. This world has been recreated by a true-born son of that mysterious country, a Turkmen who, at the will of fate, has now been living for a quarter of a century in snowy Scandinavia. Is that not why two different worlds come together in *Ryazan horseradish and Tula gingerbread*, to come apart in *Love in Lilac*, in which a student from the non-free world falls in love with a girl from the West?

In the story *Death of the Snake Catcher*, an old snake catcher meets one on one with a giant cobra in the heart of the desert. In the dialogue between them the author unveils the age-old interdependence of Man and untamed nature, where the fear and mistrust of the strong and the hopes and apprehensions of the weak change places but co-exist as ever. *Egyptian night of fear*, in which a boy goes to an Eastern bazaar and falls into the clutches of depraved forces, is created in the writer's characteristic style of magical realism, while the novella *Altynai* celebrates first love, radiant and sad, pure as virgin snow.

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**A Brown Man in Russia -  
Perambulations Through A Siberian Winter**  
by Vijay Menon

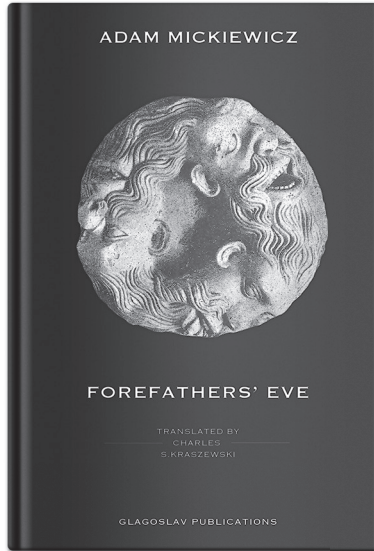


A Brown Man in Russia describes the fantastical travels of a young, colored American traveler as he backpacks across Russia in the middle of winter via the Trans-Siberian. The book is a hybrid between the curmudgeonly travelogues of Paul Theroux and the philosophical works of Robert Pirsig. Styled in the vein of Hofstadter, the author lays out a series of absurd, but true stories followed by a deeper rumination on what they mean and why they matter. Each chapter presents a vivid anecdote from the perspective of the fumbling traveler and concludes with a deeper lesson to be gleaned. For those who recognize the discordant nature of our world in a time ripe for demagoguery and for those who want to make it better, the book is an all too welcome antidote. It explores the current global climate of despair over differences and outputs a very different message – one of hope and shared understanding. At times surreal, at times inappropriate, at times hilarious, and at times deeply human, A Brown Man in Russia is a reminder to those who feel marginalized, hopeless, or endlessly divided that harmony is achievable even in the most unlikely of places.

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# Forefathers' Eve

by Adam Mickiewicz



*Forefathers' Eve* [*Dziady*] is a four-part dramatic work begun circa 1820 and completed in 1832 – with Part I published only after the poet's death, in 1860. The drama's title refers to *Dziady*, an ancient Slavic and Lithuanian feast commemorating the dead. This is the grand work of Polish literature, and it is one that elevates Mickiewicz to a position among the “great Europeans” such as Dante and Goethe.

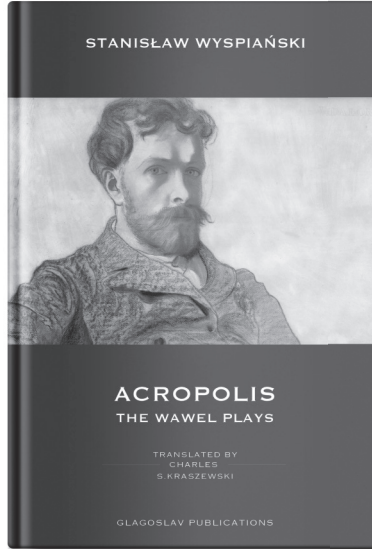
With its Christian background of the Communion of the Saints, revenant spirits, and the interpenetration of the worlds of time and eternity, *Forefathers' Eve* speaks to men and women of all times and places. While it is a truly Polish work – Polish actors covet the role of Gustaw/Konrad in the same way that Anglophone actors covet that of Hamlet – it is one of the most universal works of literature written during the nineteenth century. It has been compared to Goethe's *Faust* – and rightfully so...

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# Acropolis – The Wawel Plays

by Stanisław Wyspiański



Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907) achieved worldwide fame, both as a painter, and Poland's greatest dramatist of the first half of the twentieth century. *Acropolis: the Wawel Plays*, brings together four of Wyspiański's most important dramatic works in a new English translation by Charles S. Kraszewski. All of the plays centre on Wawel Hill: the legendary seat of royal and ecclesiastical power in the poet's native city, the ancient capital of Poland. In these plays, Wyspiański explores the foundational myths of his nation: that of the self-sacrificial Wanda, and the struggle between King Bolesław the Bold and Bishop Stanisław Szczepanowski. In the eponymous play which brings the cycle to an end, Wyspiański carefully considers the value of myth to a nation without political autonomy, soaring in thought into an apocalyptic vision of the future. Richly illustrated with the poet's artwork, *Acropolis: the Wawel Plays* also contains Wyspiański's architectural proposal for the renovation of Wawel Hill, and a detailed critical introduction by the translator. In its plaited presentation of *Bolesław the Bold* and *Skalka*, the translation offers, for the first time, the two plays in the unified, composite format that the poet intended, but was prevented from carrying out by his untimely death.

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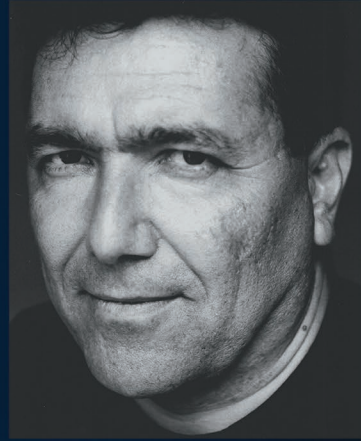
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Ak Welsapar is a Turkmen writer. He received his Master's degree in Journalism from M. Lomonosov Moscow State University in 1979 and Master's degree in Literary Theory from the M. Gorky Literature Institute in 1989. He leaved Turkmenistan in 1993, after being dismissed from the Writers' Association and Journalists' Association following the publication of his investigative articles about colossal ecological catastrophe in Central Asia. The regime in Turkmenistan declared Ak Welsapar an "enemy of the people" and his published books were confiscated from bookstores and libraries to be burnt. Association. He writes in Turkmen, Russian and Swedish and he is the author of more than 20 books.

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