

Andrzej Kotański



POEMS
ABOUT MY
PSYCHIATRIST

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

ANDRZEJ KOTAŃSKI

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by Andrzej Kotański

**Translated from the Polish
and introduced by Charles S. Kraszewski**

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



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THE WRITING ON THE WALL

A FEW WORDS CONCERNING *POEMS ABOUT MY PSYCHIATRIST*

Charles S. Kraszewski

When Michał Zabłocki first turned my attention to Andrzej Kotański's verse cycle *Poems about my Psychiatrist* with the words 'a book of poetry that's outselling fiction,' my first (sincerely proud) reaction was *of course it is!* After all, how many times, over the years, have I argued that whereas poetry is the demesne of such a shrinking readership in America as to hardly merit the generous description of a 'niche market,' in Poland, my Poland, it is the *reader's choice*. I mean, Poland was the land of Mickiewicz and Słowacki in those sad years of partition, and of Miłosz and Herbert in the (arguably sadder) years of communist totalitarianism... Poland is the country where, to paraphrase Shelley, poets are the *acknowledged* legislators of the nation!

After all, who doesn't remember the lines of readers snaking down Basztowa St. in Kraków, queuing up to buy the newest offering from the pen of Jerzy Harasymowicz at the Pod Globusem bookstore on the corner of Basztowa and Długa?

But who am I kidding? Those queues evaporated somewhere around 1989. In 1990 Poland became a truly free, normal country; in 2004 a member of the European

Union, and a quick look at the most popular books at Empik (Poland's own version of Amazon) for the year 2019 will turn up titles like Christel Petitcollin's *How to Think Less*, Heather Morris's *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and Donald Tusk's *Sincerely*, to name just three, none of which are poetry. Further down the line we find the Polish translation of Michelle Obama's *Becoming*. Having a look at the list of bestsellers from 2022 — which I revisited on account of the recent, celebratory reissue of Kotański's masterpiece — I must say that the first ten titles that appear there are, well, rather even less ambitious than the 2019 list. The first serious book appears in the tenth position: *World War III is Coming*, notable, on the one hand, for being a book written by Poles (whereas most of the top ten are translations of American pulp), but again, nothing to get too excited about.¹

The most ambitious, in a literary sense, among the first ten or so books in the list of the one hundred best sellers of 2019 are several recent novels by Olga Tokarczuk. Now, although no one respects Tokarczuk's narrative talents more than I, one wonders how much those sales numbers were boosted by a certain prize she was awarded that year... and how many of those hastily purchased

1 As I write this introduction in March 2022, the title of this book seems eerily prescient. The publisher's blurb asks 'Is the world on the edge of nuclear annihilation?' — something that is on everyone's mind today, given the unjust and desperate war that Putin's Russia is waging against Ukraine; one in which the Russians, it seems, refuse to rule out the use of such horrible weapons 'if faced with existential threat.' And yet — you can't help chuckling — the authors, one of whom is described as a 'renowned geopolitical thinker,' were actually worried, last year, about 'whether the United States would go to war against China' and 'whose side would Russia take?' So much for prognosticators. Renowned or not.

copies of *Hemispheres* and *Drive your Plow over the Bones of the Dead* will be read cover to cover by those who bought them...? But more about Polish Nobel winners in a moment.

In short, Poland has become a normal western country, and the readers of Poland have acquired the usual tastes of readers of normal western countries, shaped by a now-unfettered book industry that dictates said tastes in a normal western way, in other words, by publishing what sells to the masses. Period.

Now, if anything, this state of things says even more about the achievement of Andrzej Kotański's *Poems about my Psychiatrist*. For if Poles have become a normal pulp-fiction, scandal-mongering, celebrity-stalking, self-help reading public (and Amazon statistics don't lie; yes, Amazon is in Poland too), how are we to explain the phenomenon of this book of verse? Still in print after ten years, and in the above-mentioned year of 2019 alone selling over 1100 copies (which translates into three people buying a copy every day)? As the author's publisher once remarked, 'As far as poetry is concerned, besides the Nobel winners, only Kotański sells.'

To anyone who really reads poetry for pleasure, the answer is a simple one. This is good poetry, very good poetry. To give just one example, from the first few pages of the book, let's have a look at 'My Psychiatrist Has Episodes of Fury:'

because of the winter
he says he froze to death during the Napoléonic wars
and this is why he hates with equal passion
Russia and frost
war and walking
so I advised him to forgive that particular incarnation

forgiveness ought to cure him of all his pain

but he says that it's difficult to forgive
l'Empereur

I get that

but who it is that I should be forgiving
there wasn't any time left to discuss

Kotański's poetry is characterised by the same lightness of touch that we find in the verse of Zbigniew Herbert — one of the most approachable, and yet deep, poets of the contemporary European idiom. It is a deceptively simple style, so lucid and pared to the bone as to be a perfect example of what Ezra Pound was talking about, when he said that poetry should strive to be as well written as prose. As in Herbert's verse, we find here direct statement, a subtle emotional charge, and a breadth of historical context which recalls the dilemma of Pan Cogito — the helpless individual, bravely confronting the steamrollers of power. But Kotański gives a special twist to the character of his witness to the world into which we are all thrust: the neurosis of contemporary western man. The poem ends with three simple lines, which are yet as powerful as a punch to the solar plexus: 'I get that / but who it is that I should be forgiving / there wasn't any time left to discuss.' This ironic, yet nerve-wracked exclamation would sound quite natural in the mouth of any of the protagonists played by Woody Allen. Is it this that makes the book popular, even amongst those readers who otherwise leave poetry behind them, once they emerge, relieved, from the Polish literature portion of their high school maturity exam?

The power of Herbert's sardonic verse arose from the manner in which it reacted to the oppressive communist junta he rejected and protested against. He lent a voice to the grey men and women of Polish society in the late twentieth century, who were faced with the same problems, historical and societal, as his great creation, the quixotic Pan Cogito. In one of his last interviews before his death, he lamented, only half-jokingly, the passing of that hated, Russian-imposed régime: 'Nowadays, I've got nothing to write about, save my illness.' It is almost a cliché to speak of the 'malaise of modern western man.' But even clichés are based on truth. Perhaps, in modern Poland, illnesses — real or imagined (and it is suggested that Kotański's narrator, like Woody Allen's characters, just might be a hypochondriac) — are the new oppressive reality of the middle and upper classes, where third-world problems have been elbowed aside by those of the first world? Pan Cogito belongs to the historical past. Kotański's unnamed patient is the spokesman for this generation of workaholic, underinsured, overmortgaged Poles, sweating in the rat-race along with us all, dealing with broken dreams, in relationships of various degrees of dysfunction.

If this is true, it can be comforting to no one. For what does it say of our society, if we are drawn to — perhaps recognise ourselves in? — the character of such a person, who finds himself in such a funk, that

This inability to live as I would wish
combined with my boredom with the life
I have
makes for vibrations of no high frequency

In his article ‘Stressed Brits Buy Record Number of Self-Help Books’ (*The Guardian*, 9 March 2019), Rob Walker tells us that

Sales of self-help books have reached record levels in the past year, as stressed-out Britons turn to celebrities, psychologists and internet gurus for advice on how to cope with uncertain times. Three million such books were sold — a rise of 20% — according to figures from Nielsen Book Research, propelling self-improvement or pop psychology into one of the fastest-growing genres of publishing. [...] While the genre has tended to be more popular with women, Keira O’Brien, data editor at the *The Bookseller* magazine, said authors [...] had successfully wooed a younger, angst-ridden male audience. ‘It’s almost like male readers are looking for guidance or reassurance on how to be a man in a post #MeToo world,’ O’Brien said. ‘It’s a noticeable skew which has never really happened before.’

The picture of the world that we are developing here is that of an atomised society — one in which human contact has been reduced to the minimum; in which social media have monopolised social interaction to such an extent that we are unsure of how to approach each other face to face. A progressive trend toward isolation is driving wedges between us, and our technology is certainly not helping matters any. Thinkers of such widely divergent backgrounds as the Anglo-Catholic T.S. Eliot and the militant atheist Jean-Paul Sartre are in agreement that isolation is the broad path to Hell. In Sartre’s play *No Exit*, three characters, literally in Hell, might conceivably escape it, if only they could

work together. Locked into their bickering individualities, however, co-operation is out of the question, and in Hell they shall remain. In Eliot's play *The Cocktail Party*, all of the main characters speed on their way to perdition as long as they remain separate, thinking only of themselves. They only succeed in pulling up at the last moment, avoiding the catastrophic ontological nosedive, when they re-integrate with others: Edward and Lavinia return to each other, and consciously strive to live as married couples should live; Celia enters the religious life, and gives her own life on behalf of others — finding, as her Master promised, an eternal life in return.

Quite similarly, what Kotański's narrator needs, at bottom, is not psychoanalysis, but love. The give-and-take, messy, devoted struggle in which one supports a real person, and is supported by him or her in return:

if the internet
contains all there is
perhaps the internet
created
all there is

muses Kotański's patient — significantly contextualising his atomisation in the technology which has progressively overpowered our human world.

all right
but Agnieszka
there's not a word to be found about her
on the internet

now you're starting to talk sense

It's not just that the psychiatrist prescribes good old-fashioned human interaction between man and woman as the cure-all to the patient's — real or imagined — problems. Deep down, that patient (Kotański's narrator) realises this to be the truth, himself. When asked if his wife is still living in New York, he replies:

yes she still is
on Grand St on the Lower East Side

and you still love her

so
I was right
you just want to piss me off

That 'and you still love her' comes at him, and us, with the same force as that punchline in the first poem quoted in this essay. He brushes it away, with anger, in the very manner of a person who knows it to be true, and is irritated at something he wished to be concealed being found out, stated baldly. So, depression. Kotański's narrator clings to depression as Linus clings to his security blanket. But the psychiatrist will have nothing of that:

even the monks on Mount Athos
get depressed

the world is in depression
so are we

let's talk about Agnieszka

It all seems so simple. Perhaps it's a bit too simple. Besides

his self-stated problems with women, Kotański's narrator is living out of joint in a city he would abandon in a minute, if he could, to return to his beloved Buenos Aires. That city — which the psychiatrist treats as a sort of *idée fixe*, an escapist rationalisation — presents itself again and again to the narrator's mind as a panacea. Until, near the end of the book:

today I sighed
Lord permit me to go back
to Buenos Aires

God responded
sure

I bet he didn't expect that! But, well, really. What's stopping him? Yet here we run the risk of committing a fallacy of progression. Just because these verses — the Agnieszka prescription and God's benediction of his return to Argentina — occur near the end of the book, they are not necessarily the solution to the problem that comes before them. For Kotański's narrative does not proceed in a linear fashion, from statement of problem, through discussion of options, to solution. Although the cycle ends, quite literally, with a full stop,²

I reckon that
my grandest illusion
is myself

in comparison with that

² The first edition, that is. The second, 2022 version, includes the 'Appendix' of ten new poems, which extend the cycle.

my psychiatrist is
tiny

teeny tiny
o like
this

.

such a very self-assured statement, coming from such an unreliable source, prompts us to doubt it as a problematical claim, and returns us back to the text to wonder if we've missed anything. But all this does is muddle our picture of the narrator all the more. He is impenetrable, like any other human being (including, perhaps, ourselves), and his story is a messy one — just like real life.

Now, on the one hand, there is the self-help book and the psychoanalyst's couch, both of which (to speak, I know, ungenerously) are nothing but pleas for someone else to take control of our lives and tell us what to do. On the other, there is helping oneself, getting a grip on oneself, and taking responsibility for one's own life. Frustrated by his patient's inability to progress towards a cure (and by turns thankful for the same, for selfish reasons) the psychiatrist erupts at one point and challenges the moper:

after all you could fly to Manhattan
and go see Professor Girdwoyń
or discontinue psychotherapy completely
and make some appointments instead
with an architect an interior decorator a supermodel
what do I know

So far, we've been talking about the popularity of *Poems about my Psychiatrist* from the perspective of the reader's

identification with the narrator. But there might be another reason, too. Kotański's cycle is a humorous book, and part of its popularity might be its cathartic, not to say exorcistic, appeal, which allows the reader to laugh at the devil. Not identification with the narrator, but projection: an invitation to the reader to make use of the narrator as a scapegoat. 'At least I'm not in his shoes...' one might say, chuckling at the situations in which the narrator finds himself, and which he describes in so sardonic a tone as to encourage our laughter. Yet, keeping in mind the plight of Thomas Hardy's anguished agnostic narrator in 'The Imprecipient:' 'O, doth a bird deprived of wings / go earth-bound willfully?' we can never overlook the extreme uniqueness of the individual human being — each and every one of us — something that, in another context, prompted Christ to challenge the know-it-alls surrounding the woman caught in adultery: 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.' So, is this simply a case of someone needing to 'get a grip on himself?' How can we be sure?

I adore expressions like this

you've got to finally recognise your potential
you've got to finally appreciate yourself
you've got to finally open up to people
meet them half-way

the narrator complains, as if anticipating the question. Would a date with a supermodel or a chat with an interior decorator be just as helpful for the patient as these — expensive — sessions with a medical professional? We, as observers, have no right to pronounce upon the matter. We are in the position of a person walking down a city street

and tossing a glance at the seemingly robust individuals who spend their days sitting on the sidewalk, begging for spare change. ‘Why can’t he just get a grip on himself, shave, and go look for a job? Any job?’ the frustrated nine-to-fiver seethes, without it even crossing his mind that the person in question *isn’t sitting there because he’s lazy, or likes to*. He can’t get up and ‘do what I would do in his situation’ because he is not ‘me’ and there is something quite wrong inside him, which prohibits him from doing what he would otherwise like to do himself. You don’t have to toss a coin into his cup if you don’t want to. But that said, you cannot make pronouncements about something, about someone, whom you do not know, and never will. Neither of Kotański’s protagonists is really capable of understanding the other. Ironically, though, the psychiatrist may be correct, but *à rebours*:

at this my psychiatrist says
illusions illusions illusions

he doesn’t believe the slightest bit in the existence
of real problems
he believes only
in the existence of illusory ones

A supermodel or an architect might be just as therapeutic and helpful for the suffering soul as a psychiatrist who will not recognise the reality of the patient’s problem. It’s easy, just as in our metaphor of the passer-by on the street with the indigent homeless, to say ‘the voices you hear are just illusions!’ (with the unsaid implication, *So deal with them!*); but, objectively real or not, the sufferer *still hears them*. It should be just as easy to treat the illusory voices as a *reality* that afflicts the sufferer, something that

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

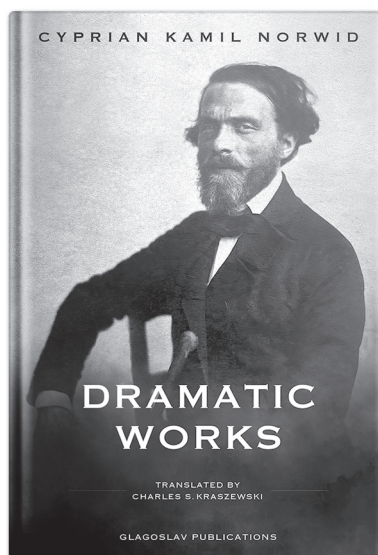
Andrzej Kotański, once called 'a star waiting to be discovered' by Biblioteka Kraków, is creative in poetry, prose, drama and the sung word. He debuted in 1990 with a collection of short stories entitled *Czterdzieści siedem tysięcy bankietów* [Forty-Seven Thousand Banquets], and since then has brought out three volumes of verse: *Elegia o płaszczu skórzanym* [An Elegy of a Leather Jacket, 1992], *Jutro będzie wiosna* [Tomorrow Will Be Spring, 1994] and *Wiersze o mom psychiatrze* [Poems about my Psychiatrist, 2011], the entirety of which is translated here into English. Kotański is the author of one play *Wersalka* [The Couch, 2000], and has composed many original songs in Polish, as well as translating songs from Italian, Spanish, French, English and Russian. Having studied Romance languages and literatures at the University of Warsaw (his master's thesis is a close reading of the French poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke), he has worked at the Institut Français in Warsaw, and also in advertising.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Charles S. Kraszewski is a poet and translator, creative in both English and Polish. He is the author of three volumes of original verse in English (*Diet of Nails; Beast; Chanameed*); two in Polish (*Hallo, Sztokholm; Skowycik*) and a farcical novel about the end of the world as we know it (*Accomplices, You Ask?*). He translates from Polish, Czech and Slovak into English, and from English and Spanish into Polish. He is a member of the Union of Polish Writers Abroad (London) and of the Association of Polish Writers (SPP, Kraków).

DRAMATIC WORKS

by Cyprian Kamil Norwid



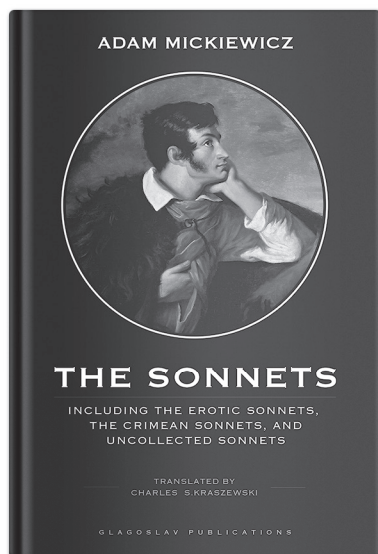
‘Perhaps some day I’ll disappear forever,’ muses the master-builder Psymmachus in Cyprian Kamil Norwid’s *Cleopatra and Caesar*, ‘Becoming one with my work...’ Today, exactly two hundred years from the poet’s birth, it is difficult not to hear Norwid speaking through the lips of his character. The greatest poet of the second phase of Polish Romanticism, Norwid, like Gerard Manley Hopkins in England, created a new poetic idiom so ahead of his time, that he virtually ‘disappeared’ from the artistic consciousness of his homeland until his triumphant rediscovery in the twentieth century.

Chiefly lauded for his lyric poetry, Norwid also created a corpus of dramatic works astonishing in their breadth, from the Shakespearean *Cleopatra and Caesar* cited above, through the mystical dramas *Wanda and Krakus, the Unknown Prince...*

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THE SONNETS

by Adam Mickiewicz

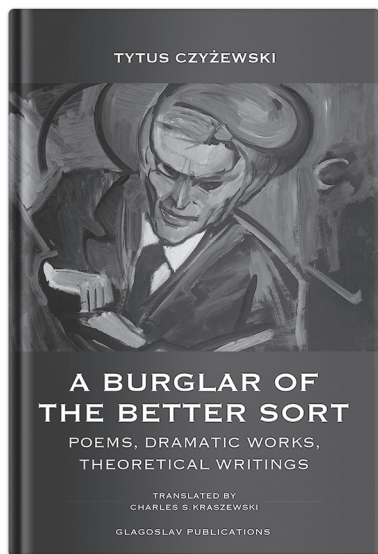


Because the poetry of Adam Mickiewicz is so closely identified with the history of the Polish nation, one often reads him as an institution, rather than a real person. In the *Crimean and Erotic Sonnets* of the national bard, we are presented with the fresh, real, and striking poetry of a living, breathing man of flesh and blood. Mickiewicz proved to be a master of Petrarchan form. His *Erotic Sonnets* chronicle the development of a love affair from its first stirrings to its disillusioning denouement, at times in a bitingly sardonic tone. *The Crimean Sonnets*, a verse account of his journeys through the beautiful Crimean Peninsula, constitute the most perfect cycle of descriptive sonnets since du Bellay. *The Sonnets* of Adam Mickiewicz are given in the original Polish, in facing-page format, with English verse translations by Charles S. Kraszewski. Along with the entirety of the Crimean and Erotic Sonnets, other “loose” sonnets by Mickiewicz are included, which provide the reader with the most comprehensive collection to date of Mickiewicz’s sonneteering. Fronted with a critical introduction, *The Sonnets* of Adam Mickiewicz also contain generous textual notes by the poet and the translator.

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A BURGLAR OF THE BETTER SORT

by Tytus Czyżewski

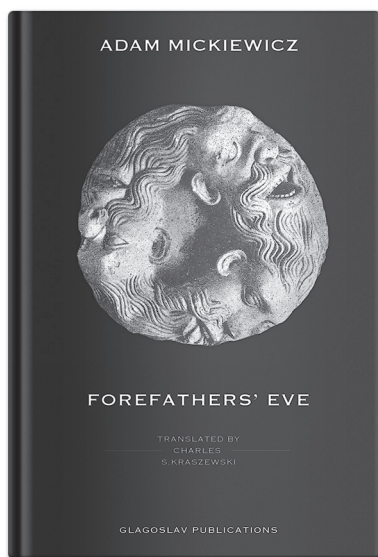


The history of Poland, since the eighteenth century, has been marked by an almost unending struggle for survival. From 1795 through 1945, she was partitioned four times by her stronger neighbours, most of whom were intent on suppressing if not eradicating Polish culture. It is not surprising, then, that much of the great literature written in modern Poland has been politically and patriotically engaged. Yet there is a second current as well, that of authors devoted above all to the craft of literary expression, creating 'art for art's sake,' and not as a didactic national service. Such a poet is Tytus Czyżewski, one of the chief, and most interesting, literary figures of the twentieth century. Growing to maturity in the benign Austrian partition of Poland, and creating most of his works in the twenty-year window of authentic Polish independence stretching between the two world wars, Czyżewski is an avant-garde poet, dramatist and painter who popularised the new approach to poetry established in France by Guillaume Apollinaire, and was to exert a marked influence on such multi-faceted artists as Tadeusz Kantor.

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FOREFATHERS' EVE

by Adam Mickiewicz



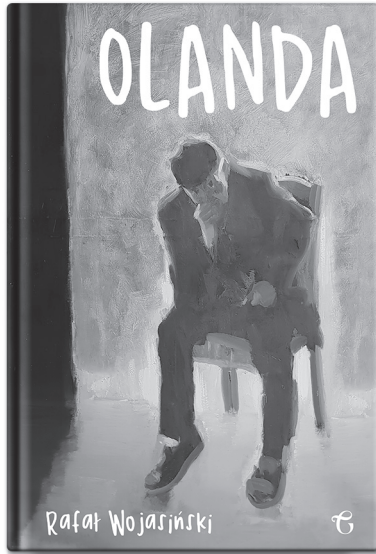
Forefathers' Eve [*Dziady*] is a four-part dramatic work begun circa 1820 and completed in 1832 – with Part I published only after the poet's death, in 1860. The drama's title refers to *Dziady*, an ancient Slavic and Lithuanian feast commemorating the dead. This is the grand work of Polish literature, 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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OLANDA

by Rafał Wojasiński

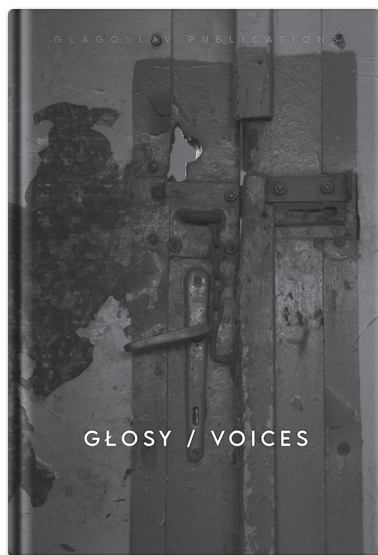


I've been happy since the morning. Delighted, even. Everything seems so splendidly transient to me. That dust, from which thou art and unto which thou shalt return — it tempts me. And that's why I wander about these roads, these woods, among the nearby houses, from which waft the aromas of fried pork chops, chicken soup, fish, diapers, steamed potatoes for the pigs; I lose my eye-sight, and regain it again. I don't know what life is, Ola, but I'm holding on to it. Thus speaks the narrator of Rafał Wojasiński's novel *Olanda*. Awarded the prestigious Marek Nowakowski Prize for 2019, *Olanda* introduces us to a world we glimpse only through the window of our train, as we hurry from one important city to another: a provincial world of dilapidated farmhouses and sagging apartment blocks, overgrown cemeteries and village drunks; a world seemingly abandoned by God — and yet full of the basic human joy of life itself.

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GŁOSY / VOICES

by Jan Polkowski



In December 1970, amid a harsh winter and an even harsher economic situation, the ruling communist regime in Poland chose to drastically raise prices on basic foodstuffs. Just before the Christmas holidays, for example, the price of fish, a staple of the traditional Christmas Eve meal, rose nearly 20%. Frustrated citizens took to the streets to protest, demanding the repeal of the price-hikes. Things took an especially dramatic turn in the northern regions near the Baltic shore — later, the cradle of the Solidarity movement, which would eventually spark the fall of communism in Poland and throughout Central and Eastern Europe — where the government moved against their citizens with the Militia and the Army. Forty-one Poles were murdered by their own government when militiamen and soldiers opened fire with live rounds on the crowds in Gdańsk, Gdynia, Szczecin and Elbląg.

Jan Polkowski's moving poetic cycle *Głosy* [Voices], presented here in its entirety in the English translation of C.S. Kraszewski, is a poetic monument to the dead, their families, and all who were affected by the 'December Events,' as they are sometimes euphemistically referred to.

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‘The world’s really not the way it is,’ says the eponymous Psychiatrist in Andrzej Kotański’s wildly popular *Poems about my Psychiatrist*, ‘it’s not what it seems to us to be / to tell the truth / the world doesn’t actually exist.’ This is problematical, to say the least. The world doesn’t exist? Well, here I am, and here is this book, real paper, which I hold in my real hands. If you’re confused, don’t expect much help to come from the book itself. Do we have two narrators here, or one? Is there a patient and a psychiatrist in conversation, or is the psychiatrist merely a projection of the patient’s own mind, a cry for help incarnate, from a person unable to deal with life? As ambiguity is at the heart of great literature, this is not a bad thing: it gives us, as readers, something to argue about, an elusive answer to chase down over successive, ever closer readings of a book made up of deceptively straightforward, lucid verses. The bigger problem is the staggering popularity of *Poems about my Psychiatrist*, recently reprinted in an anniversary edition that contains new poems added to the original cycle. Kotański’s work is a bestseller in Poland – a status of which few, if any, collections of poetry may boast. To what does it owe its popularity? Kotański’s incisive, bare-bones approach to poetry, which savours of the best compositions of Tadeusz Różewicz and Zbigniew Herbert, presents to us an unnamed anti-hero. Unlike Różewicz’s disillusioned soldier returning from the war, and Herbert’s *Pan Cogito* – that indefatigable defender of Mediterranean culture and human dignity in the face of totalitarianism – Kotański’s anti-hero is a neurotic sort, a jumble of complexes, who can be best compared to the twitchy protagonists of Woody Allen’s films. If we, as readers, identify with him, what does this say about ourselves, and our culture, now in the third decade of the twenty-first century? Here, reader, in the English translation of Charles S. Kraszewski, we present you with a mirror. Open your eyes, if you dare.

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