

PENGUIN CLASSICS

THE PENGUIN BOOK OF POLISH SHORT STORIES

Edited by
Antonia Lloyd-Jones

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Antonia Lloyd-Jones has translated works by many of Poland's leading contemporary novelists and reportage authors, as well as crime fiction, poetry and children's books. Her translation of *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* by 2018 Nobel Prize laureate Olga Tokarczuk was shortlisted for the 2019 Man Booker International prize. For ten years she was a mentor for the Emerging Translators' Mentorship Programme, and is a former co-chair of the UK Translators Association.

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The Penguin Book of Polish Short Stories

Edited and introduced by
ANTONIA LLOYD-JONES

With a preface by
OLGA TOKARCZUK

With translations by Tul'si (Tuesday) Bhambry, Stanley Bill, Sean Gasper Bye, Jennifer Croft, Bill Johnston, Madeline Levine, Antonia Lloyd-Jones, Eliza Marciniak, W. Martin, Jess Jensen Mitchell, Ursula Phillips and Anna Zaranko

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Preface

Novels are good for inducing a state of trance, immersing you in an alternate reality; while short stories are good for gaining insight, situating you in reality. That would be my most concise functional definition of the short story.

Writing a solid short story requires discipline, clear thinking and self-control. To write a short story you must cast aside everything that's superfluous in favour of a precise message and a distinct main point, reining in excess of any kind: of words, images, or the temptation to introduce too much of yourself. It means constantly asking yourself the question: 'What's the point I'm trying to make?' and assiduously finding the most perfect form of expression possible. In good hands, the content of a short story alone can map out and define its form. The short story is the haiku of fiction; it is the concentrated spirit of the narrative.

For the reader a good short story can be a hallowed experience. It can change our perspective, it can amaze us, move us, or make us laugh. It can sink so deeply into our memory that it starts to function as a model of literary experience. We can read a short story in a discrete, tangible space of time, in one unbroken sequence – on our way to school or work on the bus, for instance, or over dinner or at bedtime. Reading in this way helps us to understand that the short story is a psychological whole, integrating the conscious and unconscious. Short narratives can have great force, and are sometimes far more powerful than long novels, because they focus on things and bring them closer, giving us a view of reality as if through a microscope. I use 'reality' very broadly here – meaning everything we take part in psychologically, even if we 'only' imagine it. A short story acts with force: it releases energy, accumulates and brings that energy to a climax, and finally quenches it therapeutically, creating a minor catharsis. A good short story stays in the memory, and sometimes can be recalled just as intensely as a personal recollection.

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We can all remember several short stories of this kind, even if we read

them years ago. The image and memory of them remains invariably strong and fresh, and the denouements still prompt a shiver. Sometimes we've forgotten the author's name, which gives the stories the character of universalizing parables in the reader's reception of them. Perhaps this is the greatest compliment we can pay to a literary text – to forget who wrote it, but have a perfect memory of its mood and content. Great literature can be anyone's; it can be the voice of a generation, of the general public, the community, society or even the collective unconscious.

Short stories are sometimes unfairly regarded as a less refined form of literature. We're usually waiting for our favourite writer to 'finally' produce a novel. Compared with a novel's heft, a short story seems flimsy, inconspicuous, nothing but literary frippery. But that's not true. These small pieces have dazzling strength, and their power relies on the fact that they can shock us and change the synaptic connections in our brains.

I'm pleased that publishers and readers have been returning to short stories lately. Perhaps it's to do with our love of scraps, this new skill we've been taught by the internet – stopping on details, crumbs, and miraculously combining them into a network. I'm seeing more and more short stories in bookshops, not just collections by a single author, but various kinds of anthology, resulting from the intellect and creativity of the editors of these collections and proof of the publishers' courage.

In this selection of Polish short stories compiled by Antonia Lloyd-Jones we won't find the ones that are studied at school and regarded as the flag-bearers. This original, detached view of Polish short-form fiction offers us a completely different perspective. Lloyd-Jones has chosen texts that show us a very wide variety of literary excellence, presenting a range of aspects from a sensibility that I don't want to call 'Polish' because of its universal human qualities.

Lloyd-Jones has also given up on schoolbook chronology or boring alphabetic order, and has introduced an order of her own, far from stereotypes and officious historical associations, far from martyrology and mechanical patriotism. Here the leading players are animals and children, human couples and inveterate individualists, soldiers and survivors of the horrors of war. This is a rebel order, but one that alters the standard view of my country in a wonderful way. In this constellation the power of literature is revealed, capable of changing the smallest and most

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trivial events in our lives into an expressible particle of universal human experience.

I am particularly drawn to the fact that Lloyd-Jones has accepted a seemingly impossible challenge. For this collection she has chosen stories by authors that were written over a space of almost a hundred years, and thus cover periods in the history of Poland and of the Polish language that differ greatly from each other; they were created under different legal, political and ideological systems, and also to some extent within different linguistic environments, demanding of the translators unusual contextual knowledge and a good ear for language. The texts in this anthology tell us about times of great change, brought about by the First World War and the realia of the Second Republic (the short, almost twenty-year period of Polish independence between the two world wars); they also survey the events of the Second World War and the occupation of Poland, as well as the Holocaust. Others are set in the postwar reality of the communist era, and finally the most recent explore the democratic transition that took place after 1989 and our modern times. Lloyd-Jones and her cohort of translators have the magical power to understand all these eras and voices, offering the English-language reader one of the most intrepid journeys imaginable – across many styles of the Polish language and through the history of Central Europe – something that really would be impossible to relate in any other form than this sort of miscellany. It's worth knowing that these radically separate, objectively short periods that I have mentioned are in fact entire epochs within the history of Polish statehood and literature. As much happened in these one hundred years as in several centuries in the history of other countries and geographical regions less tried by fate. And that, as a result of these rapidly changing circumstances – fundamental in effect for the average resident of these lands – borders, ideas and languages were constantly undermined and invalidated for altogether four, or maybe five generations of people living here. At a meta-literary level, the stories in this collection refer to a time of constantly changing reality, which is hard for the British or American reader to imagine. They immerse us in a Poland (or, as some would say, a nowhere) that's multinational and multilingual, far from unequivocally defined identities and statehoods.

They also employ many linguistic forms and draw on many experiences. It's quite impossible to compare the vision-like, oneiric fiction of Bruno

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Schulz, a Polish Jew murdered in Drohobych (in today's Ukraine), with the documentary language of Tadeusz Borowski, an Auschwitz prisoner who committed suicide a few years after the war. Nor can one find parallels between Stanisław Lem, a writer who created extraterrestrial worlds, and Miron Białoszewski, a great innovator in literary Polish, whose works rarely move beyond a small flat in a remote district of Warsaw. There's also nothing in common between the works of Marek Hłasko, the depraved, tragic tough guy of the communist era, and the socially committed attitude of Irena Krzywicka, one of Poland's first feminists. The classical and positivist writers, Maria Dąbrowska and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, cannot be compared with the farcical Sławomir Mrożek or Witold Gombrowicz, for whom nothing was sacred. How can one think of the presence, in one and the same place, of authors as diverse as Zygmunt Haupt, in whose lifetime just one collection of stories appeared and whom we have been rediscovering after several decades of almost total obscurity, and the famous Tadeusz Różewicz, poet, dramatist and prose writer, who for many years was tipped as a candidate for the Nobel prize? Can you place the work of authors canonical for my generation and much younger authors – some still labelled 'promising' – alongside each other in a single volume?

I could carry on leading you along this historical-and-biographical path for some time, because this anthology includes thirty-nine stories in all, but, as I tried to show at the start, Antonia Lloyd-Jones has managed to create such an unusual and, in a very subtle sense, representative work, that it is not its apparently mutually exclusive qualities that determine the unique nature of this undertaking. You may have random and unrelated cause to remember these stories many years from now, even if you've forgotten the names of their authors, and the impressions they leave will allow you to see Polish literature as an integral, rather than a peripheral part of the world's humanist-and-cultural heritage. This is thanks to the universality of these texts, their literary impeccability in an infinite variety of tones, like the unbridled imagination of their creators, their multiplicity of themes, and the originality and precision of their expression.

Hold tight, here we go – welcome to Poland!

Olga Tokarczuk, March 2025

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Introduction

This is a book for any English-language reader who likes short stories, and who is interested in exploring Polish short stories in particular. No knowledge of Polish literature is required. It aims to be entertaining, thought-provoking and informative. Polish literature, and especially fiction, is not very familiar to English-language readers, despite three Nobel prizes in literature since 1980. Olga Tokarczuk's Nobel in 2018 has improved the landscape, but there is much more yet to be discovered.

I was asked to compile this anthology because I have been translating Polish literature for the past thirty-five years. But I haven't made an academic study of the Polish short story, I simply know what I enjoy reading. I started reading Polish literature in 1983, when, in an effort to teach myself the language, I bought Polish novels and their English translations to read in parallel. I also read *The Modern Polish Mind*, an anthology of fiction (including extracts from novels as well as short stories) and essays in English translation, compiled by the writer Maria Kuncewiczowa and published in 1962 – the year I was born. I had only heard of one of the twenty-eight writers in the collection, Stanisław Lem. Ten of these writers' stories are in the anthology you're now reading, and there is also one by Maria Kuncewiczowa. Forty years on, I'm still drawing inspiration from her anthology, which steered me towards many outstanding authors at the start of my career. In turn I hope this anthology will inspire readers to explore the work of the authors they find here, and in particular that it will encourage present and future translators to investigate the unfamiliar or little-translated authors.

The Stories

Editing this anthology was a huge responsibility: here was a rare opportunity to showcase the best of Polish writing and to promote deserving

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Polish writers. It would have been impossible to read every short story ever written in Polish, so I started by setting a few criteria.

First I set a time limit: the oldest story in this book ('A New Love' by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz) was written a century ago, in 1925, and the newest ('The Isles' by Dorota Masłowska) was written especially for this anthology in late 2023. Thus the collection bridges two periods of Polish independence, with the Second World War and the communist era in between.

Then I made a very long list of authors whose work I thought should be included; it was a good starting point, though the final, much shorter list would eventually include some writers of whom I was ignorant at the outset. Next I consulted people who were well placed to advise me, including Polish literary critics, other translators, writers, scholars, publishers and librarians. And of course I read every anthology and individual collection of stories I could find, which gave me an excuse to explore second-hand bookshops and book stalls in several Polish cities.

The authors included in this book are a diverse group: there's a contemporary reggae star, a pioneering 1930s women's rights activist, a 101-year-old Holocaust survivor (among several others), a wild child of Polish literature who wrote a bestseller aged nineteen, a Nobel laureate, two former Home Army partisans, authors who were banned or censored and many more.

The thirty-nine stories I eventually chose consist of nine that were already in translation, and thirty new translations, by myself and other translators. Only two of these thirty had ever been translated into English before. Of the nine previously translated stories, seven are by classic authors who couldn't be omitted, such as Stanisław Lem, Bruno Schulz and Witold Gombrowicz; all or at least some of their stories or novels have already been translated. The other two are by living authors Maciej Miłkowski and Julia Fiedorczuk. Most of their work has yet to be translated.

Reading the existing Polish anthologies showed me that women writers are badly under-represented, so I made an effort to redress the balance; one third of the stories in this book are by women. I discovered that during the communist era their short stories were rarely published, let alone translated.

Beyond that, I purposely chose excellent authors whose stories have hardly been published in English at all. Some of the remaining thirty authors are known in translation for their novels (e.g. Jerzy Andrzejewski,

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Marek Hłasko, Magdalena Tulli, Paweł Huelle, Olga Tokarczuk, Michał Witkowski and Dorota Masłowska), fiction and poetry (Tadeusz Różewicz and Jacek Dehnel), plays (Sławomir Mrożek) or non-fiction (Margo Rejmer). But even if a story or two of theirs has appeared in translation, most of their short fiction is unfamiliar to the English-language world.

Inevitably, in any anthology there are limits on word count and budget, and there must be omissions. For readers who are familiar with Polish literature, and who are disappointed not to find their favourite in here, I'm truly sorry. Early on, a friend asked if I was including Polish authors who wrote in languages other than Polish: Yiddish, for instance, Silesian, or Kashubian, among others. But the commission was for stories written in Polish, so these stories were not included, though it would be an interesting project to compile an anthology of Polish authors writing in other languages.

The short story is not the most widely practised genre in Poland, which is a land of poets and novelists; and generally publishers tend to prefer novels to short-story collections, which they find hard to promote unless the author is already an established novelist. But recently Polish literature has produced plenty of good collections of short stories. I was obliged to be selective in my choice of stories by contemporary authors, and was sorry not to have the space to include more of the well-known novelists and poets who also write short stories. I have listed a number of the existing translations of their story collections in the Further Reading section at the end of this book. I hope readers will want to read more by the authors whose stories catch their imagination.

Story Categories

Rather than list them chronologically, I decided to group the stories under loose headings, to help readers who are unfamiliar with Polish literature to find their way around. Researching the book showed me that a large proportion of the most powerful Polish short stories written from the 1940s to the late 1970s and beyond are about the Second World War and the Holocaust, as literature tried to make sense of the nation's appalling experiences. Every Polish home has a personal story to tell from this period, every one

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is different, and they are all shocking and moving. Nothing could matter more, and the stories, whether true memoir or fictionalized experience, need to be told. That said, it worries me, as a promotor of contemporary Polish literature, that the general perception among English-language readers is that Polish books are about nothing but the Second World War.

So I was determined to make sure this anthology would illustrate a much wider, more respresentative range of Polish literature over the past one hundred years. I have placed most of the stories about the war and its consequences within the categories called 'Soldiers' and 'Survivors'. In some cases, I found excellent stories of survival – by Irena Krzywicka, for instance, whose wartime wanderings were extremely dramatic, but I preferred her delightful sketches about the animals she had lived with at various points in her life, and chose one of those instead. I found many stories about childhood or from the point of view of children, most of which are grouped under the heading 'Children'; these and the ones in the 'Animals' category probably say something about my personal taste. I wanted to include plenty of comedy, both abstract and realistic, love stories, stories about family life, village life and society. In any case, the categories are designed more for amusement and as an aid to exploration than to give any individual tale a label. The stories are arranged chronologically within each group, and each one has an introduction that will provide literary and historical context.

The Translators

It is a joy to be able to display the work of some of the world's best translators of Polish literature in this book. I am sorry not to have been able to include more of them. Translators are key to the publication of literature written in little-known languages. To me it is tragic that many readers rarely venture beyond the safe and well-promoted zone of books written in English, or translated classics. Translators from less familiar languages often champion their favourite authors, seeking English-language publishers for their work and then producing superb translations with the same power as the original. I sincerely hope that this anthology will be a source of ideas for both readers and other translators, now and in the future.

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I'm extremely grateful to all our living authors, who in many cases answered my questions about the inspiration for their stories, and provided some corrections to them too. Many thanks to Anna Pawlikowska for her help with Beata Obertyńska's very difficult text, and to Mariusz Tukaj for his help with Adolf Rudnicki's story. And to Jan Chodakowski for his expert help with the historical timeline.

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Historical Timeline

Polish literature has often had to serve a national cause, and is frequently caught up in the machinery of political events. Once a large and powerful country stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, by the end of the eighteenth century Poland had been carved up by the neighbouring empires who took advantage of its fractures.

1795–1918 Poland was partitioned by the neighbouring empires and disappeared from the map of Europe. Warsaw and the east were engulfed by Russia, Poznań and the west by Prussia, and Kraków, Lwów and the south-east by Austria-Hungary. Each partition suffered repression, to which the Poles responded with regular insurgencies. This was a period of Romantic literature, when poets such as Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki rallied to the cause of independence and were forced to live in exile. Polish culture fought back doggedly, as the Poles refused to lose their identity.

1918–1939 Following the First World War, Poland regained its independence and returned to the map as the Second Polish Republic. The interwar period was a boom time for literature, when many writers could finally express themselves and be published freely. The earliest stories in this anthology appear at the start of this new resurgent period, and several of the authors featured here belonged to Warsaw's lively literary environment.

1939–1945 When the Second World War began, Poland was invaded and occupied by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Few nations suffered as badly; Poland's many Jews were herded into ghettoes before some three million were annihilated in Nazi concentration camps. About two million non-Jewish Poles were incarcerated and murdered too, while others were forced to work as slaves in German labour camps and factories.

To the east, the Soviet invaders arrested many members of the Polish

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officer class, imprisoned them inside Russia, then assassinated them at sites remembered collectively as Katyń Forest; their families and hundreds of thousands of other Poles, including escaping Jews, were deported to labour camps and primitive collective farms in remote parts of the Soviet Union. When Germany attacked the USSR in 1941, the Soviet occupiers released the Poles and allowed them to gather in the south of Russia. Some 125,000 emaciated Poles made perilous journeys to join what became 'Anders' Army' (the Eighth Army under Polish officer General Anders), which travelled through Iraq, Iran and Palestine, ultimately to fight the Nazis in Italy, notably at the Battle of Monte Cassino. These Poles were given refuge in Western Europe, and a large number settled in the United Kingdom.

The Poles who remained in Poland included members of the dominant resistance movement, the Home Army (Armia Krajowa), who fought as partisans. Many civilians conspired against the Nazi occupation in other ways (e.g. by hiding Jews and other victims of repression). Many Polish military personnel who left at the start of the war fought with the Allies, including as pilots in the Battle of Britain.

In spring 1943 the brave but doomed Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was followed by the liquidation of the ghetto. In August 1944, as the Red Army stood at the gates of Warsaw, the desperate citizens staged the equally doomed Warsaw Uprising, after which the Nazis destroyed most of the city before withdrawing.

By the time of the Yalta Conference in February 1945, communists backed by the Soviet Union had already established a Provisional Government of the Republic of Poland. The Allies agreed to shift Poland's borders westwards; Poland lost land to the east to the USSR, and gained an area of formerly German territory to the west. A great migration took place as Poles from the eastern Borderlands were transferred to the so-called Recovered Territories, from which the Germans were deported. Poland lost the cities of Wilno (now Vilnius in Lithuania) and Lwów (now Lviv in Ukraine), and gained Wrocław (formerly German Breslau) and Gdańsk (formerly the Free City of Danzig).

1945–1989 The Polish People's Republic (PRL) was Poland's official name in the era when it was dominated by the communist Soviet Union.

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This meant a new form of oppression: under Stalin, many who had fought for Poland in the Home Army were arrested and imprisoned as opponents of the new communist regime. Culture was expected to extol the virtues of communism as ruined cities were reconstructed. The Palace of Culture and Science, Stalin's 'gift' to the Polish people, would soon dominate the Warsaw skyline.

Stalin's death in 1953, followed by the political thaw of 1956, brought the worst repression to an end, though censorship continued throughout the communist era.

In 1970 poor living conditions prompted public protests, including strikes by shipyard workers. Dozens of protestors were killed in the streets by the state militia. A new communist government then boosted the economy, but did so by relying heavily on foreign loans.

In 1980 soaring prices and political iniquity led to a wave of strikes, culminating in the foundation of the nationwide Solidarity trade union movement and wide-ranging demands for democratization. In December 1981 the Soviet-backed authorities responded by imposing martial law; many people were arrested, but the effort to restore the unlimited power of the communist order failed. Despite repression, Solidarity was never entirely crushed.

1989 to the Present Day The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 heralded the Third Polish Republic, and Poland became an independent democracy again. In the 1990s, economic 'shock therapy' (measures designed to arrest hyperinflation and liberalize the economy, but with tough consequences in the short term) and freedom for private enterprise gradually turned the country's fortunes around, though not without public hardship. In 2003 Poland was economically stable enough to become a member of the European Union. Since democracy was restored, the country has been politically divided, and is now split between the conservative, Catholic right (represented by PiS, the Law and Justice Party), and the progressive, liberal, centre-right and centre-left (represented by KO, the Civic Coalition, which combines three parties). In 2023 the Civic Coalition won the parliamentary elections and took power by a narrow margin.

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ANIMALS

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IRENA KRZYWICKA

1899–1994

In the words of her biographer, Agata Tuszyńska, Krzywicka was a woman of action; if she wanted to do something, she just did it. This freedom of spirit resulted in a colourful life story – retold in her 1992 memoir, *Wyznania gorszycielki* (*Confessions of a Scandalous Woman*) – just as it ensured her legacy as one of the loudest and most risqué feminist voices of the interwar period.

Krzywicka, née Goldberg, spent most of her childhood in a tolerant, socialist and highly cultured household in Warsaw. While a student, she began publishing poetry and essays in prominent journals, orbiting within and around the Skamander group of experimental poets and other artistic circles of the interwar period. She inspired not one, but four, portraits by Witkacy, which she criticized with honest charm (publicly, in the literary magazine *Przekrój*, in 1956).

Then as now, Krzywicka was identified as a pragmatic advocate for sexual freedom; she openly advocated for polyamory, family planning and abortion. Shortly before her 'marriage of friendship' to Jerzy Krzywicki, she converted to Lutheranism to guarantee her right to a divorce. While expecting her first child, Krzywicka interviewed the celebrated translator and literary critic Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński for the journal *Wiadomości Literackie*, leading them to form a romantic partnership that would last until his death in 1941. While happily married to other people, they appeared together publicly and even opened a non-profit women's health clinic.

'Life and Love in the Hen House' is taken from *Mieszane towarzystwo* (*Mixed Company*), an impressionistic short-story collection from 1961 inspired by various domestic animals. Inseparable from the author's bold enjoyment of life's incongruities and (non-)human foibles, the

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collection is likewise informed by the tragedy of the Second World War; it is impossible not to detect hard-earned wisdom in tales of perverse ducks, beloved squirrels and cats on heat. A year after the collection's publication, Krzywicka left Poland with her son, and spent her later years drinking coffee, eating almond cake, and listening to audiobooks in Bures-sur-Yvette, France.

Jess Jensen Mitchell

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Life and Love in the Hen House

Translated by Jess Jensen Mitchell

If you think that poultry lead boring, monotonous lives, entirely focused on their eventual ascension to the platter, surrounded by potatoes and spinach, and seasoned with dill – you'd be wrong. A fowl's life is like any other life, full of fuss and bother, and romance, either ordinary or bizarre. That solemn moment of hatching from an egg, that moment at which a domestic bird exerts a strong effect on the human imagination, is quite unparalleled. It's not at all ugly, bloody or painful, as it is for mammals, it's nothing but fun, a surprise, a sort of silly but charming joke. A live creature coming out of an egg – a little oval box – is almost like pulling a rabbit from a hat. It's basically a circus. Just holding a warm egg to your ear to hear if there's any tapping, if there's life in there, has something supernatural about it, something like what Pygmalion must've felt when a living being started to appear to him from sculpted stone (in fact she came to life later on, but no matter). Knock-knock, the delicate pink mineral of the beak emerges from the mineral of the shell – a toy from a toy – and then here it is, first a little embryo, wet and crumpled, then a little ball, a puffed-up dandelion clock, something between a hairy fruit and a flower. How much prettier, more tasteful and more charming it is than for mammals, who . . . but again, never mind about that. And if hatching from an egg is at once mysterious and infantile, are these two things really contradictory?

Then comes a period of great beauty and grace, of inspiring examples of motherly love and the hatchlings' equally inspiring obedience. Yellow, black and fluffy, the little nestlings maintain an egg-like shape for a long time. They stay yellow, but get bigger, with long necks, flat beaks and webbed feet, clumsily plodding to the pond, where they will soon blossom, like

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giant marsh marigolds – there is nothing edible or useful about them yet, everything is still within the realm of aesthetics. Let's not talk about what will happen later, though isn't it all the same? Death in a roasting pan or death in any other form?

In the hen house, the days go by with sobriety and foresight; the greatest attention is devoted to food, some to love, and besides that to trifles such as pecking the weak and warding them away from the trough even when it's full, or a sand bath, or dividing into groups that either tolerate or loathe one another. Nothing new there. There's nothing new when it comes to love, either. Some birds stay in pairs, but usually polygamy prevails. And, from time to time, there are strange kinks. One of the pigeons fell in love with a cockerel, a big one, with long, thin legs, a dumb face, and a rump covered with sticking-up feathers. The pigeon would fly down to the cockerel and coo, overcome by passion, walking in circles around him, puffing out his feathers, spreading his tail like a fan, and circling, circling. The cockerel would stand in the middle of the pigeon's magic circle, his neck extended, crazy-eyed, understanding nothing and afraid to move. And the pigeon would keep on circling, ever closer, ever more magically, ever more irresistibly, droning hypnotically, his outstretched wings scouring the earth. And I don't know what would have happened if mortal fear had not forced the cockerel to pull himself together, break the magic spell, and take off, head over heels, blindly, tossing his long, naked legs high behind him. Nothing came of their love, the gulf between them was too deep, because it was, after all, a mismatch of species, age and maybe even gender. But love, whatever the obstacles, is love, and the pigeon would always fly down to the same cockerel to try his charms. In vain. Death – as it always does in great tragedies – soon settled the matter: the cockerel was browned in a skillet and the pigeon lost his dream lover, then either got married, or died of despair.

More successful was the duck's equally bizarre love for the rooster. Despite everything, this love proved mutual. The enamoured duck promptly became the favourite, the maharajah's most adored wife, and she always walked just behind the triumphant, crested rooster, just behind his splendid, fluttering tail. She'd follow him, quacking, dragging her rump over the ground and waggling her hips, which must have depressed the hens. None of them dared to give her a stealthy peck; they advanced meekly in

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a dense, dull flock awaiting their master's favours, a crumb of love. But his favour was always bestowed on that outsider, that harlot, that home-wrecker. The rooster would pounce on her like a conqueror, from above, in a cloud of dappled feathers, like a sort of avian Zeus, while she, flattened to the ground, quacked lovingly and let him do as he wished. The hens, petrified, stood meekly to one side and waited their turn. But after this lightning blast of pleasure, the rooster would shake down his feathers, step aside, scratch his lowered head with a claw, and ravenously start to eat grain. The wives had to wait. Finally, after a long period of procrastination, the rooster would fulfil his marital duties, but it was clear that they were only duties, and nothing more. As for me, I was waiting impatiently to see what would emerge from the eggs laid by the perverse duck. None of them hatched. In terms of production, it was a total flop.

So, to conclude the deviancy – which as we can see, is something that affects not just humans but also animals – there was another hen who crowed and had the stump of a rooster's tail, but still laid eggs. There was also a shy, bashful rooster who stuck to the sidelines, steering clear of the chickens, and delighted in sitting in a basket reserved for laying hens. He would sit there for no more than a few hours, then he'd get up, look for a time with displeasure and shame at the basket's empty straw bedding, and sometimes even investigate with his beak to see if one of his imaginary eggs might be hidden somewhere. And then he'd leave, pensive and sad, to stand by the fence and crow in a brief, anguished falsetto, though he had already reached adulthood. His sorrows and uselessness were so abundantly clear that his young life ended in a broth.

Anyway, the hens were hopelessly, totally stupid, if you can put it that way; reaching any sort of an understanding with them was out of the question – they came when they were called, and that was all. It's just there were those heartbreaking moments when my housekeeper, Marynia, would chase after a hen or rooster destined for slaughter. 'What a base creature!' she would shout. 'What villainy! It refuses to be butchered.' To someone who didn't know what she was chasing, her exclamations might have sounded strange.

So to finish with the chickens, here's a nice story: once upon a time, one of the speckled hens disappeared. Either she was stolen, or a dog tore her to pieces. She was long gone. But then, suddenly, two months

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later, in the strawberry patch, by then fully exploited and overgrown with weeds, a charming parade appeared: the missing hen followed by sixteen little chicks. Greeted enthusiastically by the household, she marched at a dignified, matronly pace to the hen house, apparently having decided she'd had enough rough living and sleeping under the stars, and that the kids needed some comfort. Plenty of crushed egg shells and a carefully lined nest remained among the strawberries, which restored my respect for domestic fowl as natural birds, and not just potential roasts grubbing around in the hen house. You have to appreciate her strength of character: after laying an egg, a hen, as we know, lets out a hysterical scream, announcing her extraordinary good news to the world. Spotty, however, didn't scream, or wail, or yell, or else she'd have been discovered. She suppressed her joy and triumph, she refused to undersell herself, disdained the easy advertisement, and then showed the world her ultimate, monumental accomplishment. She proved she could choose a life of freedom, outside the hen house, in primitive conditions, in hunger and rain, without any help, encouragement or conveniences. At the end of the day, you could say she hadn't done anything new because, well, she was just a chicken, but she did it on her own, and that is why the name Spotty lingers in my memory and why I will always utter it with respect.

But that's enough about chickens. *Basta*. More than one kind of poultry has passed through my life. A turkey and a gosling proved especially memorable. They tried to live human lives, but such ambitions are unhealthy for poultry.

Thirteen baby turkeys hatched, so there were fourteen of them including their mother. All of them survived, which was no minor feat of animal husbandry, given that young turkeys are unusually delicate. They're afraid of the damp and they die if their legs get wet. Only in their youth, of course, then they toughen up, forget about their exotic origins and bravely withstand every downpour. But while these ones were small, we – as well as their mother – diligently protected them from the damp. Whenever it started to rain, she would race into the bushes, huge, her wings and warty neck extended, the little ones racing after her, stretching out their long, dark, girlish legs in skimpy knickerbockers, tensing their sparsely feathered bodies. They were terribly ugly, and haughty too, they kept their distance from the other fowl. Besides, they couldn't stand the hen house or the

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barnyard, so first thing in the morning they'd go, solemnly, all their ducks in a row (turkeys in a row, we should say instead), to the wooded part of my garden. Eventually they got tired of that too and took up residence on the main patio, where we also spent most of the day. The house was in the modernist style with a round patio, encircled by a low wall of three different heights. The turkeys would sit along the wall and watch our life in silent contemplation. We had fourteen witnesses of our joys and sorrows, arguments and reconciliations, work and idleness. Twenty-eight eyes glued on us without a break. It was enough to send you mad. Nothing could drive them away. Those shooed off the lower wall settled on the higher wall, while those on the highest wall closely followed what was happening beneath them. Black, shining, rather blue, with wispy clip-on earrings and beads decorating their heads and necks, they watched us like ravens, like vultures, and were just asking in no uncertain terms to leer at us and say in a funereal tone, 'Nevermore'. Except we were the ones threatening them with slaughter, not the other way round. Staring, motionless, they contemplated their inevitable, tragic fate. And we looked so innocent, so happy, so cheerful, we were definitely more interesting than the chickens and ducks, and yet we were so ominous. I envied the turkeys their blissful ignorance, their illusions, although I was just as stupid as they were, just as unaware of my future. They didn't know they'd end up on a platter because it didn't enter into their ways of thinking, and in much the same way, I couldn't have known at the time that the Nazi occupation lay ahead of me, something just as inconceivable to a civilized person as a platter to a turkey. But, full of typical human pride, I looked down on them with pity, envy and an appetite. Here begins a sad tale, my most shameful moment.

You'd be wrong to think there aren't individual differences between animals – there are, even among birds, even among the carp swimming in the bathtub, awaiting their central place on the Christmas Eve table. There are vigorous and enterprising carp who perform a range of leaps in the tub, jumping above the water's surface, and who swallow chunks of bread roll with gusto. There are others, indifferent and lifeless, who lurk at one end of the tub, barely moving their fins, with a look of distaste on their wide mouths, utterly tired of life. There are also . . . but never mind. We were talking about the turkeys. So here's the story: it cannot be denied that one of them distinguished herself by a remarkable individualism, by

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her capacity for independent thought and by getting up to extraordinary mischief. Having broken free of the motionless circle of her brothers and sisters who would sit for days on end observing us from the walls of the round patio, one day she let out a hoarse scream – although it came out like a gurgle – awkwardly waved her wings, jumped into the middle of the patio, ran up to the table where a guest was sitting and eating cake, snatched a piece from his hands, and wolfed it down, googly-eyed, as if she were about to choke. And she never returned to her family again. She was alienated from her species, race and class, she went rogue, she became human. Generously rewarded with cake for her nonconformist relationship with the other poultry, she never went back to the wall, from where her family would watch her, astounded. Instead, she took up a regular post at the table, and whenever I headed for the garden, she would follow me, rhythmically bobbing her warty neck and spitefully jabbing with her beak to keep away the dog, who – in her opinion – offered us entirely unnecessary company. 'Turkey, Turkey!' we'd call out, and eventually she understood we were talking to her. Unfortunately, her bird brain was not capable of anything more than following a human step by step and snatching food from our guests, which prompted everyone to feign their delight, as at the high-jinks of insufferable children, in order to make the parents happy. In any case, she stood out positively from the company of the other young turkeys and even won a certain renown for herself within literary circles.

One by one her brothers and sisters disappeared, like people in times of tyranny. Every Sunday, every holiday, there'd be one fewer of them, simple as that. When autumn came, we'd return to the city for the winter, and the summer house would be locked up tight. It's a shame to say it, but one day, Turkey's time came too. What could we do? We couldn't possibly take her to Warsaw . . .

The moral of the story is: don't make friends with fowl.

'Stosunki w kurniku'

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ANNA KOWALSKA

1903–1969

In Poland, Anna Kowalska is perhaps best remembered for her long-term relationship with the more famous novelist Maria Dąbrowska. But Kowalska was a gifted writer of novels and short stories herself. Published in 2008, the diaries she wrote from 1927 until her death in 1969 have re-established her as a notable literary figure. This frank self-portrait is an intense testimony to historical events and literary life, and to Kowalska's love for Dąbrowska as the object of fascination as well as fear and torment. 'How unusual, beautiful, singular and tragic our friendship and life together was,' she wrote in 1967. At the time of writing, an edition of their prolific twenty-five-year correspondence is due to appear, heralded as further evidence of Kowalska's writing talents.

As a student of classical philology at Lwów University she fell in love with her professor, Jerzy Kowalski, and began her literary career co-authoring novels with him. Her close friendship with Dąbrowska developed in Lwów and in Warsaw during the Second World War, and was marked by complications arising from their existing liaisons with men and their own strong personalities. Although Kowalska and her husband had formerly devoted themselves to travelling for research and other creative work, in 1946 Kowalska gave birth to a daughter; according to Kowalska's biographer, Dąbrowska felt betrayed. After her husband's death Kowalska and her daughter went to live with Dąbrowska, an inevitably complex domestic arrangement.

Kowalska came into her own as an author in 1949, with the publication of *Opowiadania greckie* (*Greek Stories*), followed by autobiographical fiction about her youth in Lwów, historical fiction and other short stories and novels on themes including the emotional life of the Greek poet Sappho.

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Kowalska preferred short narrative forms, and wrote in a restrained, lucid style, often about love and passion as a destructive force. The story that follows illustrates her head-on presentation of runaway emotions and their effects, but also shows her sense of self-irony.

Antonia Lloyd-Jones

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Horses

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

I have weak lungs, I explained. Could I have said I'd come to this village in Podlasie to cure myself of jealousy? No one believes the truth unless they've been prepared for it well in advance. I know something about it: for twenty-five years I've been a teacher. I should say: a teacher by vocation. In my boyhood I used to say: I am a human being by vocation. Now I avoid big words. Anyway, I do have weak lungs. So what I'm saying isn't a lie, but it's not the relevant truth.

On my first day here, I wondered what my dear Doctor Grącki found so delightful about the place. Pine trees, sand, a long way to the river. And that stream beyond the village? It's horrid! It flows through the middle of some boggy meadows, among alders, it's black and teeming with leeches. The village is very large and rich, the houses are well kept. It's strange there's no lighting and no pharmacy. They say they're going to have both. As it is, it could be 400 years ago. Those ten kilometres from the railway station do their bit. It's the back of beyond, buried in the woods. I should add that it's one of those villages inhabited by the impoverished gentry – a 'noble backwater'. The phrase sounds comical nowadays, but that's exactly what it is.

It's not just the woods that preserve the local antiquity, but the lack of roads too. Unfortunately, every car gets bogged down. Unless you drive straight after a downpour. Otherwise the wheels get stuck in the sand and you're immobile. Only a horse can manage it.

I spend whole days in the woods. I pick mushrooms, bilberries and juniper. Some of the locals recognize me by now. They know I'm strapped for cash and that I have 'weak lungs'. One time I got lost. Far from human habitation, the forest is quite different. There are no broken branches. The

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amanitas and russulas are intact, not crushed or kicked. The moss is star-studded with orange chanterelles. Lovely penny buns with dark-red caps. Dead silence, then a whirr and a wail in the silence. The pine boughs creak in a creepy way. I was beset by fear. And those monotonous tree trunks, black and tan, eerie in their monotony. I turned and fled back along my own tracks. Eventually I was relieved to see a hay wagon. The horses were driving themselves home. A boy was asleep on the hay. I shouted with all my might, but I couldn't wake him. He was fuddled by the scent of hay. Finally he sat up in shock. He didn't know where he was or what was happening. He looked at me mistrustfully.

I can't understand how I failed to see how beautiful it is here immediately. If I'd only happened to spend a single day here, I wouldn't have known what it's really like. So I'd only have been here on the surface. You don't just have to be prepared to recognize the truth, but to see beauty too. Perhaps that applies to everything, including every relationship with another person.

I revel in the silence, except that I can hear my own heartbeat more clearly in it, and the whistling in my chest. I can also hear my own thoughts. Sometimes I stop on the path and say to myself: 'I'm not going to think. I want to rest. I want to be rid of the anger that's tormenting me.'

There are moments of great sweetness. Yesterday I sat out on the balcony for a couple of hours, feeling a rare sense of peace. The moon illuminated nothing but the sky, the garden was drowning in darkness, and just the tops of the birch trees beside the house shimmered. Cows lowed and sheep bleated *fortissimo*. It was an unlikely concert. At the neighbours', below, there was hustle and bustle, nailing things and pouring water, as if everyone were washing and scrubbing themselves. Someone came slowly along the road, loudly singing an unfamiliar song to an unfamiliar tune. To the right, in the garden undergrowth, owls wailed insistently in a summoning tone. Then dogs replied to each other from various ends of the village. It felt good, I desired nothing, I awaited nothing.

Almost every day I go and visit the pines around the sand dune. They grow in isolation, and have done for ages. I don't think I've ever seen such beautiful pine trees before. Giant, elegantly shaped. And each one is

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different. And what luxuriance, what vivid colours. A truly heavenly corner of the world (if it weren't for the ants). Everyone I encounter there says: 'You've chosen the right spot for yourself. The air here is good for you.'

And the people are nice-looking. Especially the men. Well-built, tall, narrow-hipped and broad-shouldered. They bear themselves with dignity. There are surprisingly few children. That's why the village is quiet. For so many generations they've intermarried. Perhaps that leads to infertility. So says my landlady, Miss Marta Terlikowska.

I bought some liquid paraffin, for burning. If I have tea, bread and butter, I need nothing more for complete happiness. Good old Grącki gave me his spirit stove. He knew what he was doing. Miss Marta doesn't like me entering the kitchen. I make my own tea and it does me good. We hardly see each other at all. But she keeps an eye on me, the rascal. Whenever I go to the well she spies on me from the veranda, and when I go to the WC she watches, hiding behind her myrtles.

I can't say I find this overzealous attention particularly pleasant, and at first I wondered whether to move to the teacher's house, but I would be sorry to lose the balcony. In fact it's scary to sit on it for long, because the beams are rotten, but for all that I'm almost in the crowns of the birch trees, and I can see the songbirds close up. It's their favourite place. At the top of the birches, even long after sunset, the pink afterglow takes forever to fade. Every day I look out for this moment. Teresa always accuses me of preferring to be where I am, as that's where I happen to be. She regards it as naivety, banality, in short, something truly awful. She mainly prefers to be where she is not at the present moment. Oh, Teresa, Teresa. I'm still mentally in dispute with her, trying to explain things to her, or to justify myself. Mainly I justify myself. It sounds funny, but I feel guilty. Feeling guilty means admitting that the other person is right, not that they're in a stronger position. It's one of a teacher's professional skills to be able to distinguish being right from having the advantage.

I've aged so much with Teresa that none of my newer acquaintances could possibly guess that I'm fourteen years younger than she is. It was my fault that I felt my youth to be an advantage. I was so sure of myself: that's to say, sure about Teresa. When she dropped Tadeusz for me, I thought it obvious. Now that Teresa has lost her head over Jacek, I'm stunned. Stupefaction, fury, laughter, tears. A hundred times I've killed them both

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in my mind, a hundred times I've committed suicide. I can honestly say: the melodrama is me.

The funniest thing is that actually I have nothing to be jealous about. Nothing has happened. *Non est consummatum*. Teresa only sins visually. But the way she looks at him! And the way she says: 'Jaceeek . . .' At the thought of it I feel acute pain in my left lung. I only exist to hear about Jacek, his virtues and his charm. I've come to hate the French language. I hate so many things. My entire life with Teresa, our work, the books we read, the walking tours, even the friendships are now tasty morsels to feed to Jacek whenever he comes for his lesson.

'Emil, tell Jacek what it was like in Grenoble, Emil, tell the joke.' Emil this, Emil that. Whenever there's a damned French lesson I sit in the kitchen reading the papers. Sometimes I'm summoned by Teresa to perform a minor task and after the lesson I serve them tea.

Teresa persuaded me ages ago that I liked cooking, serving at table and going shopping. For years I thought I did too, but now I have no idea what I like and don't like. Teresa was horrified when I tripped and poured boiling water into Jacek's lap. And the crockery, the most valuable kind we had, was scattered all over the room. Teresa turned to stone, then began to shake and gasp so hard that I felt ashamed. Meanwhile Jacek, like the gentleman in a comedy, started apologizing to me. I had tripped over his bloody briefcase. I had to pull the trousers off him. He wasn't too badly scalded. The worst thing of all is that I'd really like Jacek if Teresa weren't so infatuated with him. The lad does indeed have lots of fine qualities. So what, when his gentility has come to sicken me, and his grinning civility has driven me to sadism. I fell so low that I kicked his dog, Mars. I, who love animals and have longed all my life to have a sheepdog like Mars. Teresa has always refused to hear of having any dog at all. The animals in books by Colette are enough for her. When I kicked Mars, I realized there was something wrong with me. And good old Grącki said: 'Run for it, brother, while there's still time!' And that lady doctor of nervous diseases of his was horrified. I'm curious to know what sort of a face she'd make if I were to tickle the sole of her foot like that.

When I was young, I couldn't imagine wanting to be alive after the age of fifty. How different it looks now!

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So far I've been lucky with the weather. I rest and I walk about. I want

to walk off all the nonsense. 'Neurosis,' says Teresa. I feel ashamed when I hear that word. Teresa likes elegant expressions. The last time I heard it, I was afraid I'd do her an injury.

Sometimes Miss Marta Terlikowska, whom I think of by the name Klara, breaks the rules of her enclosed order and, simpering and sniggering as if she were being tickled, comes up to me with a blade of grass and asks its name. I don't know why, but she has assumed I'm a botanist. She encourages me to pick the black berries in the garden. They really are huge and sweet. I plucked a few, out of politeness.

'*Myrtalos, myrtalos*,' she cried over my head as I was picking them. She giggled as she said it; for her it was an indecent word.

Miss Marta starves herself. But she feeds up the birds. The garden is huge and has gone wild. There are few places with as many birds as this garden. In fact there are weasels, martens and squirrels too. There's a family of squirrels nesting in the attic. Miss Marta puts out bowls of water for them in the garden. She's done it ever since one of them drowned in the well. All day she talks aloud to herself, to the birds and the squirrels. She's a bit like a squirrel too – ginger-and-grey, timid and brazen.

Since her sister's death she has lived in complete isolation. Sometimes in the summer one of the family comes to visit. It must be hard to keep going here in winter. Being alone is a shock. When you live among others, you think being alone is the same as your present state, except free of people tiring you. But being alone is disastrous. Suddenly there's no one there. There's nobody looking at you, so you too cease to exist. Nature becomes hostile through its indifference. The earth is lying in wait to swallow you, so are the maggots and the little blades of grass. The birds don't stop. They fly away to places you won't reach. Whatever once connected you with others starts to seem an illusion. You remain in suspension – it's a dreadful state. Only after some time does an isolated man start to keep himself company as if he's someone else, but by then he has gone across – to the other side. To the other side of what? There is a border of this kind, but I don't know what to call it. The man becomes an oddball, a lunatic. He'll talk to a bucket, a spade or a candle. He communicates with things, with trees. Once he has personified everything around him, he's not himself any more. That's when animals start to come to him. The loner is occupied all day long, passionately interested. Especially if he's poor and has

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to save on clothes and equipment, in other words, must keep repairing them. Mending things becomes an obsession. It gives him the satisfaction of being a sportsman and a collector. The perfect loner changes into the perfect miser. He's like an ant tirelessly building an anthill – for himself, that's to say for nobody.

Whenever someone visits the loner, especially someone from the 'outside world', the loner impatiently waits for the visitor to clear off as soon as possible. Nothing that the visitor says is of any use to the loner. The guest's presence merely prevents him from carrying out hundreds of his favourite, and at the same time agonizing, duties. Loners come across as bigheads who take revenge by ignoring the world to which they've lost access. Above all, they have filled the void with themselves. And something that's full can't be filled any further.

I don't have much contact with Marta-Klara, but I seem to know quite a lot about her. Once, when her bucket fell into the well, she declared that she'd sell the property and move to Warsaw, she'd live like a human being. Poor thing! She loves every little pine tree here, every clump of moss. Her father was a teacher in Warsaw. He came from this village and built the house here for his old age. Miss Marta is comical, unbearable, a real fright, but she moves me. I ventured to tell her never, ever to sell the place, and that it's beautiful here. After this conversation, when I returned from my walk to my room in the garret, I saw a pot of myrtle on the windowsill by the bed. I don't like pots of myrtle, but I appreciated the meaning of this botanical gesture.

Once a week, at first light, a cart appears outside our house full of fresh bread. They're off to the market in town. The smell of loaves, rolls and croissants is so strong and delicious that it'd satiate all Olympus. Meanwhile it feeds me instead of all those defunct gods. I'm fond of that aroma, and I rejoice as I run downhill to the gate. On the spick-and-span cart, covered with new tarpaulin, sit a very neatly dressed, robust-looking woman and a splendidly youthful farmhand. I didn't need Miss Marta's meaningful looks to guess that these two are lovers. Once laden with bread, I don't leave the gate immediately, but gaze after them as they drive along the wide forest road. I stand and watch, and I envy them so badly. I'd like to be that lad, or even that oldish woman. I watch, and my heart aches with sorrow.

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Teresa and I were happy. Poor, but so happy. There would be long months when we had no dinner. We hadn't the time or the money. Tea, bread, something to go on the bread, and that was it. Now with irony, oh, with flirtatious irony, Teresa is telling Jacek about our happiness. But our happiness looks like my eccentricity. Teresa and I are no longer a couple. I have become a harmless witness to Teresa's new happiness. Now Teresa says happiness is a misconception. It's Jacek who has converted her to this new fashion.

I can't stop thinking about Teresa. It's so exhausting. Sometimes when I'm in the forest it's as if Teresa and Emil are walking ahead of me. I can see them. I'm halted in my tracks when I remember that Emil is me, watching them. And that those two no longer exist and never will.

Our nearest and in fact our only neighbours are also called Terlikowski, but whenever my Miss Marta mentions them it's as if her mouth were full of vinegar. She regards herself, poor wretch, as being infinitely superior. She doesn't like seeing me drop in on our neighbours, not just for milk, but for a chat too. The housewife is named Bogusława, and her husband is Bogusław – Bogusia and Boguś for short. There are lots of families with the same surname in this village, so first names matter here, in the old-fashioned way.

I like Bogusia very much, though I'm not attracted to such ginormous women as she is. Nor do I like those large, buck teeth and her noisy laughter, which rolls around the yard like whinnying. And yet she emanates something that delights me.

I've no thought of love affairs. All I can dream of now is someone who was Teresa, but who's not like today's Teresa. Bogusia delights me the way trees or horses delight me.

This morning it rained, and Miss Marta took me to the woodshed to search, in her presence, for a nail. It's full of awful junk, but in incredible order. For a while I was shocked: only insanity can force someone to collect and sort out torn leather straps, little bits of metal, the caps off tubes and broken clay pots. Sometimes the quantity shifts – into insanity. I began to heap praise on these collector's treasures.

'I'm not mentally ill,' she said calmly. And I felt so dreadfully ashamed

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that instantly I was twelve years old, and there before me stood my uncle's cook, a good, saintly woman, who had caught me scoffing the jam.

'I'm not mentally ill,' she repeated. I can't remember how we came to be sitting in the woodshed on a small bench, gazing at a moving curtain of rain.

'Does Bogusia please you?'

'I like her,' I replied simply.

'Nowadays Bogusia's a woman like any other, but . . .'

'I don't think she is like any other.'

'Mr Emil, I know what I'm saying. You should have seen her five or six years ago before she got married! Lie down, Kruczek!' she shouted at her dog, who had put his head on my knee. 'From childhood Bogusia has always loved horses. I've never seen anything like it. Everyone here likes horses, I used to in the past,' she said, sighing. 'But to like them as much as Bogusia does is . . . Lie down, Kruczek! Bogusia can't walk past a horse without patting it, and there's no horse that won't look round at her. If you were here for longer you'd understand what I mean. Not that there's anything wrong with it . . . Why are you looking at me like that?' she giggled, and I got goosebumps. 'Polikarp Lipko's son was in love with Bogusia. His name's Maciej. Probably the best-looking boy in the village, though he's small. Cheerful, skilful, one of us, so to speak. He and Bogusia were often seen together from when they were tiny, and mainly around horses. Maciej was poor, Bogusia wasn't rich, Maciej was little, Bogusia was large. But they were oddly well-matched. Old Boguś – he was her great-uncle, well, not quite, but almost – lost his wife. Great wealth; in fact Maciej didn't just help Boguś with the horses, but did what was needed in the house. But you can't get by without a woman. Nowhere are a master and a mistress, a husband and wife, as necessary as in a peasant household.'

'But they're gentry,' I said, laughing.

'They are, my dear sir,' she replied through clenched lips. 'But the household is a peasant one. Anyway, the Lord God groomed Adam to be a serf. Lie down, Kruczek!'

I bent over to do up a shoelace.

'You can laugh all you like. I'm not bothered. I know I'm laughable, but I understand myself, which isn't true of everyone, you must admit.'

'I'm very sorry, Miss . . .'

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'Marta,' she prompted angrily.

'So what happened to Bogusia?'

'Everyone in the village was wondering who would be a suitable wife. There were two widows and some girls a little older. One day Boguś asked Bogusia if she'd marry him. And just for a laugh, she said that if he gave her his chestnut mare, Jaskółka was her name, then maybe she would. That very afternoon he brought the horse to Bogusia's father's stable. They were married. At the wedding Boguś said: "I know I'm old and sad. Bogusia loves horses, and I love horses. Maybe life won't be unkind to us." The priest from town said that for a Catholic wedding there was too much talk about horses. And that they weren't pledging their love to horses. And he was right. But the priest himself has the soul of a cavalryman.'

'What?'

'He's a decent man. A native of Podlasie.'

'And then what?'

'Bogusia respects her husband, Boguś takes care of his wife. Sometimes people marry out of great love, and then hate each other. It's different for Boguś and Bogusia. They weren't in love, but they thrive on their love of horses. They talk about horses. The only worry is that they haven't any children.'

'What about Maciej?'

'Haven't you heard of him? He became a jockey. He's famous.'

I thanked her for the chat and went to my room. I was feeling rather restless and couldn't decide whether to read or go for a walk. I took off my sandals and lay on the bed, if that flat box on wobbly legs can be called a bed. On my very first day I had an exchange of views with Miss Marta on the subject of what defines a bed. I did not emerge victorious from this attempt. The famished patron saint of squirrels looked me up and down, then her gaze stopped on my belly. She'd have been a good actress! Well, well, so I stopped wondering what defines a bed. On the sly I set out four mouse traps and hung up six fly papers. My Marta-Klara defends the life of the tiniest midge. She's afraid the birds won't have enough flies. I feel guilty for disturbing the natural order. Anyway, now it's quiet in my little room, there's no more buzzing, no more scratching. So I fell asleep almost at once, as soundly as if I'd taken a miraculous drug.

'Mr Jurasz? Emil Jurasz?'

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I opened my eyes and replied mechanically: 'Emil Jurasz, teacher.'

Beside the bed stood the postman.

I heard Miss Marta's indignant voice: 'Professor, not teacher.'

'He probably knows what he is,' the postman scolded her.

'Bah,' snapped the old maid sneeringly.

'Please sign here. No. Below.' A blue-eyed boy with a lovely, tanned face was looking at me suspiciously. My hands were shaking. I'm like that these days – whenever I'm suspected of something, I actually become suspicious, or at least anxious. Dr Grącki laughs at me. He says that if anyone were to accuse me of eating my own grandmother in tomato sauce, they wouldn't have to torture me to get a confession of guilt out of me, or at least readiness to analyse my feelings for my grandmother. Teresa said of me with pride: 'Idiot.' I am an idiot. Of the plainest kind, not some literary hero.

With a copying pencil I signed: 'Jacek'. And did so under the intent gaze of the young postman, for whom the art of writing is not a banal, soulless function, a mechanical habit, but a feat of which he and his family are proud.

'Are you making fun of me? Jacek or Jurasz?' he cried in an offended bass and frowned like a militiaman reminding you of the penalty for obstructing him in carrying out his important duties.

'Jacek or Jurasz?' he repeated.

'He's got a lung disease. Leave it. I'll vouch for him.'

'Thank you,' I said, and burst into tears, to my own immense surprise.

'You see, the poor fellow's ill,' said Miss Marta indignantly. 'Mr Emil, I'll bring you some wild strawberries. Please calm down. Everything's going to be all right.' This was the voice she used to address a squirrel with an injured leg, or an owl with a broken wing.

I turned to face the wall, holding the envelope, on which in huge red letters was written 'Registered Express'. I didn't sleep any more, but I daydreamed. It happens to me. For a year I've had sub-febrile states. At any rate, whenever I'm tempted to take my temperature, it turns out to be 37.5.

I finally hauled myself out of bed and opened the balcony door. The most innocent of azure skies appeared before my eyes. The world looked heavenly, enticing. I went out, having eaten the bowl of delicious wild strawberries with cream and sugar and a thick slice of bread fragrant with fennel seed. I was in such a light-headed mood that I kissed Miss Marta

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on the hand. It would seem to be nothing. But I held her hand to my lips for too long. I saw her eyes and felt afraid she was ready to set out with me.

'Off to the forest?' she asked.

'There's too much rain dripping off the trees. I'll go towards the meadows.'

'Good luck,' she quipped through clenched lips.

'Goodbye!' I called from the doorway, and only then did I hear that 'Good luck' of hers. I'm often so scatterbrained that I only hear what's being said to me a moment later. As my mother used to say: 'For Emil, the bells are behind time.'

It must have been the most beautiful afternoon since the world began. The colours and radiance were a thrill to behold, and my heart was full of joy. Every pine needle, every little bilberry leaf, every blade of grass shone, bathed in celestial dew. Not a soul in the vicinity, so I started to hum my favourite song:

> How am I to see you, lassie,
> How am I to see you,
> When from the sunlit cottage
> The fathers will not free you?

At first I hummed, and then, feeling the desire, I 'shattered the silence of the forest' with loud singing, something we always forbid our pupils to do. I only stopped singing when I saw Kruczek. Several times I've treated him, behind Miss Klara's back – I mean behind Miss Marta's back – to the sausage that I brought with me.

'Off you go, Kruczek. That'd be better for both of us.' And when he didn't go away, but just gazed at me beseechingly, I stamped my foot and shouted: 'Go home!'

I crossed the footbridge over a drainage ditch, jumped two more, and found myself on a large common where horses were grazing. I leaned against a fence and rested, drinking in the brightness of the sky and the pure green of the common. A light wind carried a bitter scent of willows, fanning my brow with pleasantly crisp air.

On seeing Bogusia, who appeared beside me out of nowhere, I pointed at a foal and said: 'It'd be nice to be a horse.'

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Bogusia turned her eyes on me, and a blue flame flashed across to me.

'You too?' she whispered in terror and joy. 'You too?' she said in amazement. 'And all my life I thought it was just me.'

For some time we said nothing, staring into space, no longer seeing anything. And I couldn't tell if it was a dream or reality, if it was I, or someone I was dreaming about. Bogusia took me by the hand and led me to a grove where her favourite mare, Jaskółka, was grazing. Bogusia laughed that laugh of hers like whinnying. Bogusia, Bogusia, you wonderful force of nature.

I almost forgot to say. In that express letter of hers Teresa wrote that Jacek has won a scholarship and is going abroad. He has given us his sheepdog, Mars. Teresa writes that she's pleased my wish will finally come true: I'll have a dog.

I'll write back to her. I don't know what I'll write. My poor old lady. How badly I've treated her!

'Konie'

Published as part of the collection *Kandelabr efeski* (Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1960).

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KORNEL FILIPOWICZ

1913–1990

Writer, poet and screenwriter Kornel Filipowicz has been called the bard of the Polish provinces and a master of the short form. He grew up in the small, provincial town of Cieszyn and went on to study biology in Kraków. He was a keen fisherman and kayaker – his expeditions involving family and friends were organized, to their amusement, with military precision.

During the war, Filipowicz had been imprisoned in Gross-Rosen and Sachsenhausen, and the experiences of that time, and of the wartime fates of those known to him, certainly form part of the themes that he takes up in his short stories. Filipowicz was adamant, however, that he was not a writer who explored human psychology; he felt that the inner person was almost impossible to access. He never moralized, but approached human beings through their relationships with other humans, with objects and, as in the story that follows, with animals. His training as a biologist made him a careful observer; in this particular story, the cat's point of view is consistently foregrounded, though in his writing more generally Filipowicz closely examines the decisions made by human beings. He does it with such formal restraint and discipline that the reader often feels compelled to reread the story, as the balance of the scales clearly tipped somewhere, but when exactly did it happen? Filipowicz has been called an existentialist writer and is sometimes compared to Camus; it is true that the existentialist project – human existence as a drama of freedom, with the human being in a constant act of self-creation in which each decision counts – is an underlying feature of his work. There is also a clear sense that human beings do not live apart from their environment and that the real danger is not so much in the face of external pressures as in internal acquiescence, so that the loss of liberty is ultimately barely noticed or even a matter of concern.

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Filipowicz's own cat, Mizia, appears in his stories and was also immortalized in poems by Tadeusz Różewicz and, perhaps most famously, by Wisława Szymborska in her poem 'Cat in an Empty Apartment'.

Anna Zaranko

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Cat in the Wet Grass

Translated by Anna Zaranko

It rains and rains and rains. It rains by day and by night. And it's cold to boot. Old tomcat Murder – with his great square head, small, somewhat battle-mauled ears, and thick, short tawny fur that always manages, despite everything, to remain carefully groomed – naps deep in a cellar window. Unobserved himself, he can at any moment see everything that goes on around him. He sits in the position that takes up the least space, ensuring him the most perfect stillness, to pass as something wholly unmenacing, and on days as cold as today, to best keep himself warm. Murder the cat is perfectly still, but he is not a brick, a stone, a log. Nor is he a pigeon, a crow, a dog. He has a very strong sense that at this moment he is precisely this cat and no other. What's more – he does not lose awareness of who he is even when faced with a human being. He has, then, a very strong sense of identity.

I called Murder an old cat. It's true. Murder has a few years under his belt, but that means nothing, for Murder does not age. Admittedly, he was once, long ago, a small, quietly miaowing kitten, but later, when he grew up, he came to a halt and ceased to change. He did not moult, grow bleary-eyed or fat, he didn't bulge around the belly, unlike many of the neighbourhood dogs, for example. His body remained lean and lithe, his fur stayed smooth and shiny. The pupils of his eyes are pure as the sky at sunrise. Murder looks with those eyes and sees everything, by day and by night, from an ant walking along the ground to the owl that has perched on the edge of a roof. Murder devotes a lot of time to looking. He looks when he hunts, but he looks too for the sake of looking. He looks as if, for all the world, what he saw – the grass, the houses, people, trees – were also his sustenance.

Who knows why, in the house of a certain university professor where Murder had lived for several years and where life was pretty good – he'd

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been dubbed a 'murderer'? Murder the cat is no more a murderer than anyone else. How many times had he witnessed the professor's wife, with the help of the servant, killing a great fish, wrestling with it and shouting all the while at the top of her voice! Murder saw it all from where he sat under the sideboard. And not just once or twice. And where did those mountains of red meat on the kitchen table come from, those chickens and broilers, rabbits and pheasants? The heaps of white bones? The bloody little livers sizzling in the pan? Ever since the professor and his wife and servant had disappeared from the house and their furniture, smelling of cedar, had been arranged on a great horse-drawn cart and departed – the door of the house where Murder lived had been closed to him forever. Forever? Murder often sat at those doors, waiting for them to be opened and attempting to slip inside, but every time he was chased away. He tried to endure this change of fortune and could be seen peacefully dozing, for days at a time, on the windowsill in the stairwell, but the professor's furniture never returned. It was a most distressing business, but Murder considered it a temporary state of affairs. He never ceased to consider the professor's flat his own, just momentarily inaccessible – not to speak of the building and its immediate vicinity. He would not have relinquished them at any price. That was badly put: nothing, not even the highest price could come into play, since such an intention had never entered Murder's head, not even the thought, not even the whim. If there was some force capable, against his will, of transporting him 500 kilometres from home – he would have done everything possible to return to this house and his neighbourhood. He would have walked day and night, through rain and scorching heat, across country and forests, sneaking past the edges of towns and housing estates by night. And he would have got there. And if not, then only because he had perished, torn apart by dogs or run down by cars on the great highway, but in any event on his way home.

Murder cannot bear din and bustle and above all the screech and scrape that iron vehicles produce. The endless noise the town emitted, striking iron against stone from morning until evening and even into the night, this he'd grown used to – of necessity. Because he had to live in this town, because he'd lived here since he was born. He'd learned not to hear these nasty sounds. Or, to put it better: he had the ability to separate and isolate them from the ones that he found pleasant or simply needful in life:

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human footsteps, the quick scamper of rats, the chirping of nestlings, the scratching of mice, the rustle of leaves.

So here is Murder, who did not need to return from somewhere because no one had taken him anywhere by force, sitting inside the cellar window and seemingly deeply happy with the fact that he is who he is, and with the precise place in which he has found himself. Could he have been happier still, if the place he was in had first been taken from him – and if he had then regained it? Who knows. It seems to me that he would be just as happy, neither a little more nor a little less. Because Murder the cat's aim was, is, and always will be to return to the very same place – no matter if the return should be from next door's garden or from the next province, or even country. For it is his greatest joy and satisfaction to constantly check that the principal elements of the world surrounding him – trees, stones, bushes and fences – are, so to speak, in their proper places. Only with the sense that he is who he is and in familiar surroundings can Murder the cat live and function. Against the background of the unchangeable, and without changing himself – he can see and understand better what changes persistently, grows, moves, repositions.

The rain was slowly beginning to ease, the cold wind too was dying down. It gave a final gust as though just to shake the drops from the trees, to stir and part the stalks of grass, to agitate the tiny leaves of bushes – and then came silence. Murder went on sitting in the window frame a long while yet, but at a moment entirely of his own choosing, he made a decision and acted upon it at once: he jumped lightly and very carefully onto the ground. As carefully as though he were jumping not from a height of half a metre, but from the first floor. He stood a moment, looking and listening, to make sure that his movement had not caused any commotion hereabout. But nothing was happening. Peace reigned, with only occasional dripping from the trees. As was his habit, to provoke any change that might be lurking somewhere under cover of peace and quiet and unexpectedly threaten him, he himself energetically swished his tail two or three times. Then he stood, looked, and listened. It took some time, but Murder was patient. Patience was his chief attribute. Murder never had the feeling he was wasting time, a feeling that accompanies even the most patient people at times of waiting, for example for a train that has been delayed, or when engaged in some dull, monotonous activity. When, sitting or standing motionless,

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he would stare into the dark mouth of a burrow from which a mouse might emerge at any moment – the time never dragged for Murder. Immobility, endurance, waiting was the same to Murder as running, flight, pursuit, battle, and therefore no waste of time. It was simply a slightly different but equally valuable way of being in time and space.

Now Murder was moving through the grass, which reached to his back; he went slowly, at a lazy pace, as though he were very tired. He skirted the tall clumps of weeds to avoid rubbing against the wet leaves, which he did not like. Murder generally disliked any contact with water. A great drop had fallen onto him a moment before, unexpectedly, from a tree, the pain of it piercing him like an arrow. Murder twisted his head and licked his coat on the spot where the drop of water had struck him. Murder disliked water intensely – but he succumbed to something more powerful: a great passion for fishing. Had Murder been born near a river, he would have hunted fish for sure. True, it's hard to imagine, but it's common knowledge that many of Murder's relatives fished with great success. Let us not be surprised, then, that when hungry, Murder hunted in all conditions, even in wet grass. Lo and behold: suddenly, his head still twisted half around and tongue out, from the corner of his eye Murder saw, or perhaps only surmised, some movement at the foot of the fence. He turned his head, froze to the spot, looked. His mouth remained half-open, the pink tongue protruding slightly. His ears, too, were cocked in the same direction as his watchful eyes, attempting to assist them. Along the fence, from the side of the wall, a great grey-brown rat ran in the direction of the concrete litter bin. He moved none too quickly; he was busy sniffing. Near the concrete he turned, ran back the same way, and disappeared. Murder stood as though turned to stone, but only on the face of it; inside, he was raging, agitated, trembling. An encounter with a rat was something more than hunting. It was a battle, sometimes a matter of life and death. Once – it was winter at the time – while hunting mice in the cellar, Murder the cat had been attacked out of the blue by several rats and had been close to death. He was still very young then, and inexperienced. He fought desperately, rolled about among the rubbish, coal, broken bottles, trying to jettison his attackers, to push them away with his legs, shake them off. He killed two or three. But other rats were clinging to his ears, his tail, pouncing at his throat. He was saved by a sudden light and the entry of a

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human with a spade. Rats feared people; he, Murder, feared them too, but a little less. To tell the truth, Murder the cat had suffered much at the hands of humans: children threw stones at him, adults set their dogs on him. But on the other hand, he'd also met much kindness from humans. There were those who gave him saucers of milk, tossed him meat or a bone. At the professor's flat, as mentioned before, he'd led a perfectly comfortable life. Murder preferred, however, to keep out of humans' way. He observed them, rather, from a distance and tried to guess their intentions in advance, since they were as a rule unclear, inconsistent, difficult to predict. Of rats he remained wary from the time of his youthful escapade. When he had the advantage – he fought and killed them, bit them to death (but did not eat them, they disgusted him). He fled them when they had the upper hand, when he noticed that they were trying to creep up from behind, to surround him, cut off his retreat. Murder generally learned to be vigilant in all circumstances, by day and by night, awake or asleep. There was only one place in which Murder felt secure and slept in safety (not counting the smack across the head with a cloth which he got after bringing in a mouse, but that was a long time ago): the home of the university professor. After sleepless spring nights, after hunting, wandering and brawling, he could curl into a ball on the wardrobe, on a chair, sometimes even on the desk, and sleep like a log, oblivious to conversations, clattering, or singing. Touched occasionally by a hand, or even stroked, he'd raise his head, look at the human, then arrange his head even more comfortably on his own fur and sleep on. But unfortunately, the cedar-scented furniture was no more. Someone else was living in the professor's house. Murder would sometimes raise his head and look at the windows on the second floor, but he saw strangers there, alien faces, other shapes and colours. Murder never stopped believing, not for a moment, that he'd return there someday. Believe? It wasn't faith; it was a deep conviction that the familiar-smelling furniture would be moved back into the apartment on the second floor and that the people who called him 'Murder' and were kind to him would enter once again. Kind meant that they were not mean – nothing more. That was enough for Murder; anything more would not be to his liking. Because Murder did not wish to feel obliged in any way to people. Though, pardon me: one fine day he did bring a mouse in his mouth and placed it carefully, half alive, on the floor. The offering presented by Murder to the

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professor's household was not well received, however, and Murder never repeated it.

Murder the cat stood still a long time, staring at the place where the rat had run past – but the rat did not appear again. The tiresome sounds of the town had completely abated, as though all the windows opening onto that alien world had been tightly shut. Another moment's waiting, and Murder moved on, deeper into his world. He advances, moving noiselessly. He lifts his left forepaw to step over a twig lying across his path, a twig which, had he touched it, would have made an unnecessary sound. Then he steps across the twig with his left back paw, without touching it, without looking around, as though that paw possessed an eye. Of course, one cannot see with a paw, but what of it? Murder the cat's back paw executes precisely the movement necessary in order not to touch the twig – and that's that. Because in each and every movement – stepping, stopping, a turn, a leap – Murder the cat must be absolutely perfect. Murder's world, in its constancy and immutability that Murder values so highly, is nonetheless very diverse, so diverse that it seems always to be changing. In order to exist in this world, Murder must be soft and supple, his movements must be fluid, they must never repeat themselves. Each movement must be different, but always precise. Murder's body cannot be hard and angular like the edge of concrete steps, like a window frame, like an iron handrail. Murder was not made by a human, whittled of wood or sculpted in stone. On the earth and under the sky, among plants and animals, Murder is a part of the whole world (and perhaps the universe?), but a concentrated, self-contained and enormously independent part, and this precisely is Murder's existence. But does Murder the tomcat know anything of this? Murder doesn't need to know, because he is this life, he is precisely this existence. It's enough, as I've said already, if he retains the sense that he is nothing and no one other than himself. That he is authentic, as people say. That at any moment, whenever he likes, he can do what needs to be done. Here, for example, out of the grass right beside Murder, a small four-legged creature suddenly jumped, rose into the air and fell back into the grass. Murder froze, but only for the blink of an eye; this was not a creature that Murder hunted. He let it slip away. It was simply a frog, a slightly comical being (when he was younger, these creatures used to put Murder in a good mood, he'd lie in wait for one, pretend to attack, and toss

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it up with his paw). Besides, it was soft and slippery, but so tightly encased in such tough skin that neither claw nor tooth was any use. So, Murder let the frog quietly depart. He glanced once more in its direction: it was squatting in the grass, propped on its front legs, and watching him with bulging wide-set eyes. Murder turned his head and continued on his way, in the direction of the brick and stone rubble. He kept to the tall wet grass all the time, flinching, giving a shake, but on he went. He was approaching the place where the grass was short and sparse, the ground strewn with gravel and tiny stones, overgrown with scanty yellowed chamomile. Something would often happen in this place and before he approached, Murder habitually observed it from a distance for a moment. One should never be too hasty with expectation, but nor should one rule anything out. One should be ready for anything. Lo, Murder sees, hears and senses: in the very middle of this bare clearing there is indeed a mouse. It stands on its hind legs and in its forepaws holds a piece of bread, the crust, and nibbles it. It looks around constantly as it does so, but it doesn't see Murder. Murder, meanwhile, sees it perfectly, though hindered a little by the blades of grass. Murder is hungry, he hasn't eaten anything for three days, maybe four. To get close enough to the mouse to execute a leap, Murder must submerge himself in still thicker and wetter grass, he must circle the mouse from behind. Murder turns his head to the right and then to the left, he checks what is happening all around, takes in the world surrounding this most important event of the moment: the mouse nibbling bread. Murder, turning his head in both directions, wanted to see everything surrounding this scene which at this moment was after all the very centre of the world. And perhaps the universe? Murder the cat was also looking about, while unobserved by the mouse, to confirm that nothing in turn was threatening him. Was he, while hunting, simultaneously the object of someone's observation and desire? The mouse, too, darts glances to the left and right, because while eating it wants to know, must know, if it is in danger. Murder the cat had one more, seemingly comical reason for turning his head away from the mouse: he wanted to be sure the mouse was not an illusion. The mouse was no illusion, it was a real phenomenon: without relinquishing the bread in its paws, it was looking now to the right, in the direction of the lilac; something had clearly alarmed it. But it was no more than an instant; the mouse resumed eating its bread. Murder pressed on, then, half

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his usual height, almost crawling on his stomach in the cold wet grass whose touch made him shiver. In this position he was absolutely invisible and only someone looking from above could see him, but at that moment Murder didn't care. He was also inaudible, for he moved so cautiously as not even to hear himself. If he could not hear himself – would anyone hear him? Murder was hungry and perhaps for someone else in his place impatience would have long since prompted a mistake, a carelessness – some impatient movement, a premature leap. But that would not be Murder the cat. He grew more cautious as he drew nearer, more intent, his movements were now so slow that they ceased to be movement. He was very close now. Just two more steps, muscles readying for the leap, just a pause, finding the best position to push off from the hind legs – when suddenly something happened: the mouse disappeared, as though in a puff of wind. But it was not he, Murder, who had frightened it. Something trembled, clattered in the air; Murder paid no great heed to the sound, but the mouse had seemingly heard it a fraction of a second sooner – and Murder saw the discarded bread crust, the empty ground, the motionless stones, the still trembling blade of grass. A woman was walking across the garden with a pail in her hand, approaching the concrete bin. She tipped out her rubbish and returned in the direction of the wall where there was a door. She paused in the doorway, switched the bucket from one hand to the other, and closed the door behind her.

Murder the cat stood there a long time yet, without moving, then he ventured onto the open space, to the place where the mouse had been a moment ago. He shook off the drops bedewing his fur. He was cross and agitated and twitched his tail nervily. From the city, from the alien world, came sounds that Murder could not bear: whistling, jangling, grating. Murder had to restore some order to the world before he could move on, immobilize the trams and cars, separate uproar from tranquillity. It took some time. The failure he had suffered just a moment ago was gone from his mind. Failure, anyway, is nothing more than something that brings success closer. Even if he fails ten times, or twenty – Murder the cat will not stop hunting. For hunting is his passion and necessity.

I've said that Murder the cat is old. But Murder will never die, or at least he won't die of old age, like those ugly, fat and indolent dogs who will eventually have to be put to sleep at the vet's. Murder will never die, unless

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somebody kills him or a car runs him over. If Murder does not die a violent death, no one will ever find his body. Not a single bone of his will be left behind, nor a scrap of fur. Murder will simply disappear. One day I shall not see him sitting deep in the window or slowly traversing the orchard. No matter how hard I stare, I shall not see that place where earthly matter is so miraculously concentrated and so perfectly formed into a mobile, living, sentient and seeing being. In the deserted air I shall see only ground, stones, grass. If I cease to see what I previously saw, it will be as though something that I previously had has been taken from me. And I shall be sad.

'Daddy, cats are evil, devious and bloodthirsty, aren't they?' Andrzej said to his father. He stressed the word *blood-thirs-ty*, lingering over the sounds . . .

'What's that?'

'Cats are devious and bloodthirsty,' Andrzej repeated, turning his head to look at his father. To move his head, he had to tear away his cheek momentarily from the butt of the airgun propped on the windowsill. His eye stopped seeing the front sight, rear sight and target. His father sat in the armchair, newspaper on his knee, watching the television screen where a newsreader with a parting in his hair was talking about the catastrophic fall in pound sterling, the slight rise in the rate of the dollar and the boom in gold. The newsreader turned over his sheet of paper and began to talk about something else, the war in Africa. The father looked at the son and said:

'Be careful where you shoot, my boy, don't hurt anyone!'

'There's no one there,' replied Andrzej. He looked into the garden again. From the second floor, it was visible in its entirety: trees, bushes, ground covered in grass, clumps of nettles, a heap of rubble at the foot of the fence. But the target at which he had been aiming had moved and Andrzej had to adjust the barrel of the gun likewise, a centimetre or so.

'Kot w mokrej trawie'
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