

POEMS

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Washroom

We take turns washing in the plastic basin
 and fly wet towels from the mast of the kitchen clothes line –
 a banner of suds, moisture and body odors.
 Warm currents above the boiler stir the air
 and incline us to frivolous acts.
 Our fingers are dull as wooden spoons.
 Our skin is deaf as wax.
 The window panes are mired in steam and feel ill.
 We're matted by steam and feel ill.
 Wet, we fold ourselves in four and lie down to sleep.

(translator:

Tadeusz Pioro)

The laundry

We've washed, in turn, in a plastic bowl, dried ourselves,
 and we're hoisting the towel up the mast of the kitchen laundry-line –
 the flag of suds and dampness and our body smells.
 Warm currents from the stove stir the air around,
 inducing us promptly to indecent displays.
 Our fingers are blunt like wooden tableware.
 Our skin is deaf like wax.
 The window panes have hazed with steam and are feeling sick.
 We've become dull with steam and are feeling sick.
 We fold ourselves into squares, wet, and go to sleep.

(translator:

Katarzyna Jakubiak)

Ikarus^{1*}

It's full, barely a few people
 in bright clothes, talking quietly:
 but the engine is temperamental and shreds
 of poplar pollen a-plenty – hence the hubbub and agitation.

A young woman with an infant tries to catch these shreds:
 it's for luck, if I catch enough of them
 I'll be happy; maybe so,

¹ * Ikarus is a make of bus, common in Poland.

but you can't rock

and sway like this on a creaky seat,
eat fucking sweets. Do I have to think
about every single weakling? For a minute I can't see the ground
as I look behind me through the window – strips of mud fall off the tires

and in the air a bright streak between chestnut boughs.

(Translator: Tadeusz Pioro)

The Ikarus

is jam-packed, only a few people
wearing light-colored clothes, talking softly;
but the engine is impetuous and the tatters make a whole
mass of poplary fluff – hence so much humming and stirring.

A girl with a baby is grabbing at these tatters:
what luck, if I catch enough
then I'll be happy; if only –
but it's impossible to shake like that

and rock back and forth in the squeaking seat,
and eat the damn candy. Do I have to think about
every cripple? For a moment the earth disappears as I look
through the rear window – band of mud trail from the tires, and

a contrail hangs in the air, luminous, among the chestnut branches.

(Translator: Ela Kotkowska-Atkinson)

Kitchen

(Towels hang from the door like celery leaves

shoes in the middle of a sand arena like parsnips
 the gas cylinder is a wheel of virgin cheese)

-- a great refrigerator

Fish Tank

July swelled suddenly, still+ed.
 Sweat beads on everything: cabbage leaves,
 drains, even what's left of the air;
 plaster warms to damp blushes.
 Sleep's out of the running. Only towards dawn
 cold wakes under the floor, hugs walls
 and climbs them like a slug. The fish tank
 can barely breathe, it darkens and stinks.
 In the garden, pods rot, beans and peas,
 in homes, TVs choke and die:
 conversations lead nowhere.
 And storms? Like geese, they traverse the sky,
 mindful only of measured intervals.

Leaves

Shake themselves off trees so violently
 that drifts rise along curbs
 in alleys and under building walls.
 Trams plod through strewn streets
 lose sight of their tracks and you see them
 later roaming the greens
 snouts down by the cold earth. The sky
 looks at itself in a shop window and everything
 is written in a thin, lined notebook. My
 well is full of twigs and dust, the tap chokes
 on an ice-cube: who sent

these tight clothes to get me?

How to Walk Downstairs

How to walk downstairs older
 by a bell's ignored chirp
 by a note I leave on the door?

In a stranger's house, banisters
turn their backs on me.

Pact

Late February evening: I open the kitchen window
and air out the steam left

by the laundry drying above the boiler.
From the hall, a glow of light

I turn on every evening to spite bugs,
reveals things which are not reflections of any

better things: the well's casing raised just a foot
above ground, the rosebush, the path imposed on the beds.

The wind drags a leap off the doormat, whirls and lets it go.
The world and I take each other into unlovely arms.

(Translated by Tadeusz Piore)

There is a Hydrant on Lachowicka Street

like a statue of a boy in a beret, with arms severed.
Last year's grass dries out, grows into the tied-up knees, and

you can hear the threads of the rust uniform cracking.
The green-eyed slits in the road, the humming

deep in the sewage; a little moved we're stuck here, waiting for transmission,
the kitchen door ajar – an amplifying station for alluring sounds. That direction

a load of leftovers in a plastic bag went off today –
after meals, after the morning ritual, empty, filled with smell

of toothpaste and coffee. A different one, addressed anew each
time, we'll soon be ourselves: you, me, a couple of bags, shrunken speech.

Marlewo

In winter, when frost penetrates the walls,
holes in the sweater, the skin,
you won't escape from here –
although the city calls out the loudest.

Nor in spring. And spring will rouse the small-town robbers,
 then the mosquitoes,
 and change finally into the severest of all – summer.
 In fall, dampness in the corners –
 behind the wardrobe, behind the sofa paint and stucco peeling off,
 a stench that makes your head ache.

To the outhouse, the well, and the garbage hole –
 three narrow paths trodden in the grass

- you won't escape in fall.

Sediment

Residue growing on the kettle walls,
 yellow sediment on the teeth, dust in the mouth,
 dust in the throat and on the clothes –

our life in a poem.

Thaw (version 2)

The thaw has brought relief to the famished birds.
 Sparrows swarm over a bag full of defrosting scraps,
 frozen to the border of a ditch, as if held by customs officers.
 The wind locates its whistling in lower registers. The house,
 which I've been heating since the first days of September,

let go of the dampness: leaving with its bags, it tripped and fell.
 Fungus's rebellion has weakened, oppressed by the thick-layered paint.
 The sheets, when tucked into the sofa, start rustling
 like a beetle, trying to get out of jail. The air
 is drier and lighter, and slowly turns

its stench into scent, no odor, finally vanishing.
 The snow rots. The gutter like a saxophone of a sore-throated musician,
 spits out streams of saliva, bubbles of air, and dull voices.
 I've come up to the window, safe. Tightly closed,
 Nautilus sinks deeper and deeper.

Night. A Little Store at the End of the Line

It's night, and suddenly it helps you out –
 this little store at the end of the line; here – even at night –
 you can buy everything that fits in jacket pockets
 (phone cards, matches, Kleenex,
 chewing gum), even play Powerball – let's say,

just by “quick pick,” for the least you can pay.
The rest will be no trouble. For instance, the slant-eyed
merchant and that pathetic offer from afar (from beyond the Oka?)

lying right in front of him on scraps
of newspapers and plastic, under a layer of dust
and fluff of blooming poplars. Or say, the brown spines
of tram cars behind the depot grate (on one – from the vines
of the metal arm almost to the roof edge – a tube of toothpaste,
on another a toothbrush and the company’s name; the phrase
will come from memory: “the world’s number one,”
or: “let your smile last a lifetime”.)

Further, across the street, the terrace of the bar
which you see every day, getting off the tram car,
which you sometimes visit, and which never asks if you’ll stop by
again: the boss’s name – Galczynski, painted on the sign,
and the way Galczynski nurses the sleeper on the table
guarantees it. There’s also night, and though it’s not always able
to come at the right time to the one who waits – nor you to recognize it –
that thing that helps you out; now stuck like this

from elbows to ears in darkness, you quickly accept it –
and right away you want to stand on this fortified patch,
and before you start to sway again, to add another block.
So it is night, and before it’s day and night again and so on
in the same pattern, you want to enjoy the ceaselessness
of at least some fragments of the game – rather a game of “ness”
than the one which imposes itself here – through the order of effects
[and causes,
as well as other ties (knots on the flesh of the tongue?); while the case is:

it has to last you a long time, so focus your will, your mind,
and enjoy. It’s night. A page. A little store at the end of the line.

(Translated by Katarzyna Jakubiak)