

Piotr SOMMER

Selections from
Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, eds.
*Spolping the Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of
Communist Rule*
(Evanston: Northwestern U P, 1991)

Problems

Later, after such a little end of the world,
our wives have to hear it all
again, surprised why on earth
we talk so earnestly
about what any child knows although
he doesn't say it. So obstinate,
as if we wanted them to take the blame—
as if they were the state.

In the Provinces

The Municipal Office of Housing Development in Otwock
GREETS THE BROTHERLY PEOPLES OF SOCIALIST NATIONS
with each of forty-three letters mounted on a separate stake;
only the spaces between words don't have poles.
It's May eleventh, 1979.
The poles stuck in the grass make a pier.
The Municipal Office has been greeting the brotherly peoples for over
three weeks
but the peoples still don't know a thing about it.

Indiscretions

Where are we? In ironies
so fleeting and unstressed

that no one gets them, in foolish punch lines
that buy off metaphysics with ridiculous
details, in Friday, which falls
on February fifth, in the mnemonics of days.

You can give an example, or take it for granted,
or take it or leave it, or take it and run.

And you still like certain words and those, pardon the expression,
sorts of syntax that act like something's holding them together.
Man is wholly held within those intermeanings,
he creeps in wherever he can see a space.

Trust Me

Really you won't find a better place
for all your makeup, even if we
see our way clear to getting some bathroom shelves
and you stop hitting the bottles with the towel—
there'll always be a thousand reasons to complain,
and a thousand bits of glass on the tile,
and a thousand new worries,
and another morning making you get up

Medicine

I saw a rela lemon again.
Ania brought it back from France.
She'd been wondering: come home or stay abroad?
And come to think of it, what keeps her here—
a few faces, a few words, this anxiety?
The lemon was yellow, it looked like the real thing.
You didn't have to put it in the window
to ripen alongside our pale tomatoes.
Or as we ourselves ripen
growing up and growing yellow over years.
No, it was already entirely itself

when she brought it, not even yellow, but gold,
and a little rough, so I took it gratefully.

I want to wrap myself in the thick skin of the world,
I want to be tart, but good-tasting—
some child swallows me reluctantly
and I help to cure his cold.

1981—82

From Chicago Review 46/3-4 2000
New Polish Writing

Confirmation

for E.

and M.

I got drunk because of Stasio.
He was just a few hours old, and after a week
he was a week old, and squawked a bit
at home when he woke up,
before he was fed.

Why make things prettier
than they are? Starting with birth
when doctors and nurses
press on the helpless belly—
what other way is there?—
until death, with itinerant cancer
slowly taking over
the body, the skin
changing color in just seconds.
Until the latest possible death?

The past tense turns imperceptibly
into the present
continuous, as if it all were happening
in language: I have seen—
yesterday I saw —

forever means: I know.
Forever.....that is, for good?

Little head observed
through the crack in Marek's door,
who moved his work to the kitchen—
why make even prettier
what has already turned out pretty well?

Someone from another place
turns into a voiceless whisper,
while you're just pupating into words,
even if the day after tomorrow
they'll only hiss and bite,

the stomach fills up, the body,
in turn or simultaneously
remembers and betrays
more than you'd expect, cries,
wakes recklessly, and drifts into sleep.

(1986 – 1999)

BURIAL MOUNDS

I come to see Maciek after several years, and already they have a calm, healthy child, who sleeps and doesn't want to show her eyes. They call her Mary~ka.

Mary~ka has just turned thirteen days old, but then she's three weeks, and now she shows one eye, and peeks up, a little to the right. Maciek says "Mary~ka," "Marychna," as if he were getting used to it, gently, paternally, and Agnieszka, who has as many meat coupons as a miner, and who's dripping with milk, starts clucking her tongue at her.

The white of the other eye, the unfixated gaze, open mouth, tongue sticking out, the whole concentrated face. I look at the mystery of her navel, at the fleshy vulva, which seems disproportionately large— it will probably be Agnieszka who informs her about those things; Maciek doesn't like the

word “vulva,” maybe some bad experience. Milk pours into her mouth. Walking downstairs, we hear her choking, then she’s all right. We sit, we smoke—All Saints’ Day in three weeks.

A week or two after my son was born I kicked two of his mother’s aunts down the stairs, well, almost, no violence involved. One of them bent over him without taking off her coat, the other was ready, it seems, to give him a bath, or maybe just some advice. Everybody could see I was being rational, but our rations started to shrink soon after, to shrink before us, and in the back, whatever that might mean. What’s more, the one with the bath used to sell meat in a meat store long before they had coupons ho ho. Yeah, we used to be impulsive, and could really hold a grudge, solemn and brief, like a resolution to improve, until the judgment—or what do you call it—the fatal day!

Besides, we do need to forgive. How else could we survive, all swollen with pain that won’t condense or liquefy, but is always there— though one doesn’t have to say right away that one has forgiven. With Maciek, I either told him or somehow let him know, but if I had done to him what he did to me, I wouldn’t believe such declarations, either.

My thing is talking, but in fact I like to listen, that is, to ask things. And give names— when the time is right.

And me, where will I lie in the end? In Pow~zki, in France, in *Lód~*, in Otwock? Or perhaps, God only knows, since God knows everything, in some completely foreign country? Impossible. Lately I don't even want to talk about it, because we always fight, that is, if silence, or singing out of spite (tra la la), can be called fighting. Besides, is it worth it— and what if they ship me out to rest in Walbrzych?

Maciek wakes me up at half past ten.

I go back to bed for ten more minutes, and get up— at twelve.

Tea!

Bread (with cheese).

A sprint to the florist—a basket of violets for the doctor who operated on my mother.

We leave the hospital, arms locked, slowly, but— I'm forgetting, it wasn't such an easy surgery. At home my Mother lies down, and I go out to make calls, run errands, have coffee, I come back, and we have supper. Because there's still no

curfew, no gas rations yet, no passports needed to go from Otwock to
~wider, because the air is clean and it's evening, I go see Maciek.
Tomorrow Marysia will successfully complete her first half-year, or: will
begin, gloriously and without pain, her second six months.
Maciek turns on the light, I lean over the netting of her bed, and Marysia
smiles at me.

Of course, why should Maciek be wondering where Agnieszka will lie? Agnieszka looks good, she's
lost weight, has a new haircut with curls must have got it at Janek's, and she's excitedly telling us
how Jacek bawled her out.

One thing is certain: in Otwock, where else.

Jacek, no doubt, will lie somewhere in Australia, because there's lots of sun
there, and plenty of room, tra la la, unless he ends up in some West
Germany or other, together with his son and his wife, if she stays with him..
Translated by Jaroslaw Anders