

I walked through my city without pleasure – as always. I had an errand to run. It was noon. Marszałkowska Street, Constitution Square – the architectural ghosts of communism. Except that in this present-day neo-capitalism, the dead had come a little to life. The square held rows of traders’ stands, signs, advertisements, a host of goods for sale. More colours. More life. I turned onto Wilcza Street – at this end, preserved in its pre-war form. Art Nouveau apartment houses, their frontages decorated with garlands, columns, cupids. I stopped. I took a look inside one of the courtyard entrances. And kept going. That’s how it started. I walked into the courtyard and followed the trail of the past: marble steps, bronze door handles, stuccoed vault ceilings, little windows of doormen’s lodges, little statues of the Virgin Mary in niches. Sitting beneath one, like a chaplain or guard, was an impressive, grey-brown cellar tomcat. I thought of life in days long since passed, of however many cursed generations that lived within these walls. A magical light revealed itself inside the dark, miraculously preserved recesses.

The city as a world. Its streets, alleys, squares, buildings, cafés, restaurants. People, atmosphere, history. The past stored up in walls, memory, customs. And something more! The radiation that creates the city. Because such a thing exists, without a doubt. Its influence on people, on language. A city is not only a material thing. It is also a spirituality. The spirit of the city shaping the identity of its inhabitants and its culture, creating conditions where their talents can thrive.

In the sky over the city, clouds arrange themselves in the shape of Pegasus. A boy gazes out of the window of his room at the mystery of these feathery clouds. An invisible painter keeps repeating the same motif. The boy feels a strange excitement. He has already been marked.’

This is what Marek Nowakowski wrote in his sketch *The City* about his Warsaw, which he also called ‘an Atlantis ravaged by hostile elements’. He searched for traces of it every day, industriously filling up pages that came together into a one-of-a-kind work. It was born in moments like when the two of us, having purchased a small bottle of vodka, entered an artisan’s workshop. Nowakowski said a warm ‘hello’ to the owner and a conversation began, interspersed with sips of alcohol. Suddenly this sorry-looking cramped interior was packed with people, acquaintances now departed, the neighbourhood’s former residents – ordinary, average, but through the power of performance suddenly particular, elevated by the spirit of the city where their lives’ good and bad times had played out.

In my city, Marek Nowakowski was a discoverer of the forgotten, above all of human characters, the personalities who pass away so quickly. That is why, when from time to time I would visit him and we’d strike up a conversation, I found it remarkable that he spoke so little of himself, of his writing. Sometimes

I felt as though he didn’t like talking about it. At such times we would plunge into tale-telling about writers from the past, about books that lit up the imagination or, on the contrary, turned out to be bitter disappointments. I saw them walking around Warsaw: there was Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer, who went insane at the end of his life, and the elegantly dressed Julian Wołoszynowski, surely thinking up yet another Podolian intrigue as he walked by. Meanwhile, Stanisław Rembek was feeding a fresh sheet of paper into his Monarch Pioneer typewriter to record what the next day of the German occupation would bring. We wandered through Odessa, Vladivostok, the Bieszczady Mountains and the spa town of Konstancin, spent time in the sewers of Paris, and in Prague, where the Golem was magically brought to life to defend the Jewish nation from persecution. In Berlin, Franz Kafka died of consumption; in Vienna, Joseph Roth knocked back yet another glass of cognac in a hotel bar; and Saul Bellow sat on a bench in a Chicago bathhouse with gangsters who regaled him with stories from their world. ‘Hey Saul,’ they’d say to the writer, ‘can a fella make a living doing that?’

Excerpt translated by Sean Gasper Bye



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**WOJCIECH
CHMIELEWSKI**

Born 1969

Magiczne światło miasta [The Magic Light of the City]

Publisher: Wydawnictwo Arcana, Kraków 2019

ISBN: 978-83-65350-39-8; 202 pages

Translation rights: Wydawnictwo Arcana
arcana@poczta.internetdsl.pl

Selected books

Belweder gryzie w rękę, 2017

Najlepsza dentystka w Londynie, 2014

Kawa u Doroty, 2010

Brzytwa, 2008

Biały bokser, 2006

Selected awards

Marek Nowakowski Prize for the best short story collection (2017)

Angelus Central European Literary Award (2011, 2017) – nominations

Józef Mackiewicz Literary Prize (2007) – distinction