

‘Another vodka?’

‘Hit me.’

Steel fingers grip the delicate glass with surgical precision. There are special programs to support the motor skills required for vodka drinking.

Of course, they cannot really drink vodka, and the drinks are mere mock-ups. They cannot drink anything, they cannot eat anything – quarter-tonne mechs in the Chūō Akachōchin bar. All they can do is perform these gestures of life, laboriously repeating the customs of bygone biology.

A barman in the shell of a mechanised barman pours out the Smirnoff. His three-jointed arm brushes against the polymer mitt of a transformer-playing bar customer with the same desperation. The grating sound is audible even under Hauer’s monologue.

That’s the real curse, thinks Bart. Metal on metal, heart on heart, and every awkward moment multiplies the pathos of loneliness a thousand times. As if under a microscope. As if projected on a hundred-hectare screen. We are monstrous shadows and scrapheaps of human beings, the molybdenum despair of empty hearts.

Manga blues – they sit on the Chūō Akachōchin terrace, under the last red lanterns, sad robots regaling one another with legends.

The first legend is about man.

‘It had wings like a butterfly’s dream,’ says Dagenskyoll, his shoulder speaker crackling slightly on the sibilant consonants. ‘Propellers that whirred into light-blue rainbows. Dawntreader XII, all nanofibers and carbon fibre, an angel stingray cross,’ he continues, his chest screen displaying sketches and schematic diagrams of the plane ripped from Google caches. ‘Wingspan: 78 metres. Mass: 1.64 tonnes. It had just been serviced; they kept it in a hangar at the airport in Dallas. When the Death Ray hit the other hemisphere, they had enough time to load their families, some provisions, and equipment. They took off with a several-hour head start on the Meridian. The Earth rotates at a speed of 1,674 kilometres an hour – but that’s at the equator. The Dawntreader couldn’t go faster than 300 kilometres an hour, so in order to keep ahead of the Death Meridian, they had to stay above the eightieth parallel. Of all the solar aircraft, only the Dawntreader could manage it.’ Dagenskyoll displays the structure of the photoelectric cells that cover the wings and fuselage of the plane. In the pictures they really do shimmer like butterflies in the sun. ‘By their second circuit they were flying above an Earth roasted clean of all its organic life. Only machines answered their radio calls: the automatic systems of airports and armies. When the Ray died out after one hundred and seventy-seven hours, they could only reach this conclusion from the information being transmitted by machines from the other hemisphere. They made no contact with any transformers; they did not go online. They flew on. Votes were held on board the Dawntreader: to land or not to land? Should they land for a short

while, stock up on provisions and then fly on, or wait and find out whether the Ray had really died out? In the end they split up. After two weeks, some of them had had enough, so they touched down somewhere in the north of Greenland, on a runway near an ice settlement, stocked up on water and food, offloaded the unwilling, and took off again.’ Dagenskyoll raises one of his four skeletal-mosaic arms and points to the zenith of the starless sky over Tokyo. ‘They’re still up there, flying, circling above us in the transoceanic heights.’

Excerpt translated by Stanley Bill



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**JACEK
DUKAJ**

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Selected works

Po piśmie, 2019

Wroniec, 2009

Lód, 2007

Perfekcyjna niedoskonłość, 2004

Inne pieśni, 2003

Xavras Wyżryn, 1997

Selected awards

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2000, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2010)

European Union Prize for Literature (2009)

Polityka’s Passport Award (2004, 2008) – nominations

Nike Literary Award (2008) – nomination

Kościelski Foundation Award (2008)

Jerzy Żułowski Literary Award (2008)

Foreign language translations

Rights to the *Old Axolotl* have been sold to Hungary, Russia and Ukraine.

Rights to the full English translation by Stanley Bill available.

Other works by Dukaj works have been published in Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Macedonia, and Slovakia.

The UK edition of *Lód* is in progress.