

Witold Gombrowicz



Winner of The International Prize for Literature

"A sly, funny, absorbing novel,
lovingly translated by Danuta Borchartt."

—The New York Times Book Review



Cosmos

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*Translated from the Polish
by Danuta Borchardt*



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*To my husband, Thom Lane, with gratitude for his support, both technical and personal, in the course
of the translation*

—D.B.

Translator's Note

When I read *Cosmos* many years ago, I thought how beautifully it would read in English. I translated a couple of chapters and submitted them to Professor Stanislaw Barańczak. He was diverted to translating *Ferdydurke*, Witold Gombrowicz's ground-breaking first novel. Now I have come back to *Cosmos*, for which Gombrowicz won the Editor International Prize for Literature, second in importance only to the Nobel Prize, in 1967. This is the first translation of *Cosmos* directly from the Polish.

Cosmos is now considered by some to be the most private of Gombrowicz's works. It is a starkly self-revealing work by the man who, in his *Testament—Conversations with Dominique de Roux*, says about himself: "I am a humorist, a clown, a tightrope walker, a *provocateur*, my works stand on the head to please, I am a circus, lyricism, poetry, terror, struggle, fun and games—what more do you want?" This is what one faces in the process of translating his works, particularly *Cosmos*. The novel calls for empathy, focusing beyond the nitty-gritty of the narrative itself.

Gombrowicz's style has been described as "mad, breathless, sometimes jerky, sometimes lazy." Imagine the task confronting the translator who must find the appropriate words in order to accomplish, in English, what Gombrowicz has set before us, and for which, in the end, he provided no solution—only chicken fricassee for dinner.

Let me mention some of the dilemmas I encountered while translating this work.

Generally speaking, to convey the sense of the work (its characters, themes of darkness and obsessions) as it developed under his pen, Gombrowicz used long sentences, repetitions, lists of words, many of them without commas. I have left these elements unchanged.

Considering that departure from home is one of Gombrowicz's themes, the oscillation between the English "house" and "home"—the word in Polish, *dom*, being the same in both instances—requires particular attention.

The words "shame" and "embarrassment" are in Polish one and the same word, *wstyd*. It was important to decide which of the two nuances Gombrowicz had in mind when talking about Lena and her cat. She was, I decided, ashamed of the cat.

In order to develop the onanistic theme of the book, Gombrowicz chose the Polish expression *swego po swoje*, which he used to convey a succession of meanings. Literally it means "himself for his own for his own," and it refers to buying stuff from your own people—a distant cousin to "buy American," or, more personally, "getting one's gratification from one's own." It first appears innocently enough, in one of Fuks's remarks as early as the second chapter of the book, and then, in the second half, it gathers momentum and gravity as Gombrowicz gives it self-gratifying, onanistic implications. It seemed necessary to use a progression of English expressions—from Fuks's "whatever turns you on," to Venomie's "her own self, just for herself"—to achieve a satisfactory effect without violating the original text.

One of the central characters, Leon, uses many odd, even bizarre, inventions in his conversations. For example, he creates the nonexistent Polish word *mimli*, which hints at milk. I thought the "milkie" was, linguistically and phonetically, an adequate transposition into English. Another example is Leon's incorporation into certain words of the Latin *um*, which led me to such translations.

“miraculum miraculosum” to convey his “latinizing” tendency. Another of Leon’s oddities was the word *berg*. It does not exist in the Polish language and I left it untranslated in the English. In its multiple permutations it occurs in *Cosmos* more than one hundred times, as a noun, a verb, an adverb, etc. Leon not only uses it as a masturbatory word but also gives it other, though related, meanings, some of which I translated as “penal-berg,” “lovey-doveberg,” “pilgrimageberg.”

While translating the initial passages about Ludwik and his hand, I had to be aware that these were the foreshadowing of things to come, and to adequately convey their significance in my translation.

Gombrowicz said, “*Cosmos* for me, is black, first and foremost black, something like a black churning current full of whirls, stoppages, flood waters, a black water carrying lots of refuse, and there is man gazing at it—gazing at it and swept up by it—trying to decipher, to understand and to bind it into some kind of a whole . . . ”

As the translator of *Cosmos*, I have the hope of having transmitted no more, no less than what Gombrowicz himself had given us.

—D.B.

Cosmos

I'll tell you about another adventure that's even more strange . . .

Sweat, Fuks is walking, I'm behind him, pant legs, heels, sand, we're plodding on, plodding on, ruts, clods of dirt, glassy pebbles flashing, the glare, the heat humming, quivering, everything is black in the sunlight, cottages, fences, fields, woods, the road, this march, from where, where for, a lot could be said, actually I was worn out by my father and mother, by my family in general, I wanted to prepare for at least one of my exams and also to breathe in change, break loose, spend time in someplace far away. I went to Zakopane, I'm walking along the Krupówki, thinking about finding a cheap little boarding house, when I run into Fuks, his faded-blond, carrot mug, bug-eyed, his glasses smeared with apathy, but he's glad, and I'm glad, how are you, what are you doing here, I'm looking for a room, me too, I have an address—he says—of a small country place where it's cheaper because it's far away, out in the sticks somewhere. So we go on, pant legs, heels in the sand, the road and the heat, I look down, the earth and the sand, pebbles sparkling, one two, one two, pant legs, heels, sweat, eyelids heavy from a sleepless night on the train, nothing but a rank-and-file trudging along. I stopped.

“Let's rest.”

“How far is it?”

“Not far.”

I looked around and saw whatever there was to see, and it was precisely what I didn't want to see because I had seen it so many times before: pines and fences, firs and cottages, weeds and grass, ditch, footpaths and cabbage patches, fields and a chimney . . . the air . . . all glistening in the sun, yellow black, the blackness of trees, the grayness of the soil, the earthy green of plants, everything rather black. A dog barked, Fuks turned into a thicket.

“It's cooler here.”

“Let's go on.”

“Wait a minute. Let's sit down a while.”

He ventured deeper into the bushes where recesses and hollows were opening up, darkened from above by a canopy of intertwining hazel branches and boughs of spruce, I ventured with my gaze into the disarray of leaves, twigs, blotches of light, thickets, recesses, thrusts, slants, bends, curves, deep, I don't know what, into a mottled space that was charging and receding, first growing quiet, then, I don't know, swelling, displacing everything, opening wide . . . lost and drenched in sweat, I felt the ground below, black and bare. There was something stuck between the trees—something was protruding that was different and strange, though indistinct . . . and this is what my companion was also watching.

“A sparrow.”

“Ah.”

It was a sparrow. A sparrow hanging on a piece of wire. Hanged. Its little head to one side, its beak wide open. It was hanging on a thin wire hooked over a branch.

Remarkable. A hanged bird. A hanged sparrow. The eccentricity of it clamored with a loud voice and pointed to a human hand that had torn into the thicket—but who?

Who hanged it, why, for what reason? . . . my thoughts were entangled in this overgrowth abounding in a million combinations, the jolting train ride, the night filled with the rumble of the train, lack of sleep, the air, the sun, the march here with this Fuks, there was Jasia and my mother, the mess with the letter, the way I had “cold-shouldered” my father, there was Roman, and also Fuks problem with his boss in the office (that he’s been telling me about), ruts, clods of dirt, heels, pants, legs, pebbles, leaves, all of it suddenly fell down before the bird, like a crowd on its knees, and the bird, the eccentric, seized the reign . . . and reigned in this nook.

“Who could have hanged it?”

“Some kid.”

“No. It’s too high up.”

“Let’s go.”

But he didn’t stir. The sparrow was hanging. The ground was bare but in some places short, sparse grass was encroaching on it, many things lay about, a piece of bent sheet metal, a stick, another stick, some torn cardboard, a smaller stick, there was also a beetle, an ant, another ant, some unfamiliar bug, a wood chip, and so on and on, all the way to the scrub at the roots of the bushes—he watched as I did. “Let’s go.” But he went on standing, looking, the sparrow was hanging, I was standing, looking. “Let’s go.” “Let’s go.” But we didn’t budge, perhaps because we had already stood here too long and the right moment for departure had passed . . . and now it was all becoming heavier, more awkward . . . the two of us with the hanging sparrow in the bushes . . . and something like a violation of balance, tactlessness, an impropriety on our part loomed in my mind . . . I was sleepy.

“Well, let’s get going!” I said, and we left . . . leaving the sparrow in the bushes, all alone.

Further march down the road in the sun scorched and wearied us, so we stopped, disgruntled, and again I asked “is it far?” Fuks answered by pointing to a notice posted on a fence: “They’ve got rooms for rent here too.” I looked. A little garden. In the garden there was a house behind a hedge, no ornaments or balconies, boring and shabby, low budget, with a skimpy porch sticking out, wooden Zakopane-style, with two rows of windows, five each on the first and second floors, while in the little garden—a few stunted trees, pansies withering in the flower beds, a couple of gravel footpaths. But I thought we should check it out, why not, sometimes in a dingy place like this the food could be finger-licking good, cheap too. I was ready to walk in and look, though we had passed a few similar notices and hadn’t paid any attention, and besides, I was dripping with sweat. He opened the gate, and we walked along the gravel path toward the glittering windowpanes. He rang the bell, we stood a while on the porch until the door opened and a woman, no longer young, about forty, came out, maybe a housekeeper, bosomy and slightly plump.

“We’d like to see the rooms.”

“One moment please, I’ll get the lady of the house.”

We waited on the porch, the din of the train still in my head, the journey, the previous day’s events, the swarm, the haze, the roar. Cascading, overwhelming roar. What intrigued me in the woman was a strange deformity of the mouth in the face of a bright-eyed, decent little housekeeper—her mouth was as if incised on one side, and its lengthening, just by a bit, by a fraction of an inch, made her upper lip curl upward, leap aside, or slither away, almost like a reptile, and that sideways slipperiness slipping away repelled me by its reptilian, frog-like coldness, and, like a dark passage, it instantly warmed and aroused me, leading me to a sin with her, sexual, slippery, and lubricious. An

her voice came as a surprise—I don't know what kind of voice I had expected from such a mouth—but she sounded like an ordinary housekeeper, middle-aged and corpulent. I now heard her call from inside the house: "Auntie! A couple of gentlemen are here about the room!"

After a few moments the aunt trundled out on her short little legs as if on a rolling pin, she was rotund—we exchanged a few remarks, yes indeed, there is a room for two, with board, please come this way! A whiff of ground coffee, a narrow hallway, a small alcove, wooden stairs, you're here for a while, ah, yes, studying, it's peaceful here, quiet . . . at the top there was another hallway and several doors, the house was cramped. She opened the door to the last room off the hallway, I only glanced at it, because it was like all rooms for rent, dark, shades drawn, two beds and a wardrobe, one cloth hanger, a water pitcher on a saucer, two small lamps by the beds, no bulbs, a mirror in a grimy frame, ugly. From under the window shade a little sunlight settled in a spot on the floor, the scent of ivy floated in and with it the buzzing of a gadfly. And yet . . . and yet there was a surprise, because one of the beds was occupied and someone lay on it, a woman, lying, it seemed, not quite as she should have been, though I don't know what gave me the sense of this being, let's say, so out of place—whether it was that the bed was without sheets, with only a mattress—or that her leg lay partially on the metal mesh of the bed (because the mattress had moved a little), or was it the combination of the leg and the metal that surprised me on this hot, buzzing, exhausting day. Was she asleep? When she saw us she sat up and tidied her hair.

"Lena, what are you doing, honey? Really! Gentlemen—my daughter."

In response to our bows she nodded her head, rose, and left silently—her silence put to rest the thought of anything out of the ordinary.

We were shown another room next door, exactly the same but slightly cheaper because it wasn't connected directly to a bathroom. Fuks sat on the bed, Mrs. Wojtys, a bank manager's wife, sat on a little chair, and the final upshot was that we rented the cheaper room, with board, of which she said, "You'll see for yourselves."

We were to have breakfast and lunch in our room and supper downstairs with the family.

"Go back for your luggage, gentlemen, Katarina and I will get everything ready."

We returned to town for our luggage.

We came back with our luggage.

We unpacked while Fuks was explaining how lucky we were, the room was inexpensive, the other one, the one that had been recommended to him would surely have been more expensive . . . and also farther away . . . "The grub will be good, you'll see!" I grew more and more weary of his fish-face and . . . to sleep . . . sleep . . . I went to the window, looked out, that wretched little garden was scorching in the sun, farther on there was the fence and the road, and beyond that two spruce trees marked the spot in the thicket where the sparrow was hanging. I threw myself on the bed, spun around, fell asleep, mouth slipping from mouth, lips more like lips because they were less like lips . . . but I was no longer asleep. Something had awakened me. The housekeeper was standing over me. It was morning, yet dark, like night. Because it wasn't morning. She was waking me: "The Mr. and Mrs. Wojtys would like you to come down for supper." I got up. Fuks was already putting on his shoes for Supper. In the dining room, a tight cubbyhole, a sideboard with a mirror, yogurt, radishes, and the eloquence of Mr. Wojtys, the ex-bank manager, who wore a signet ring and gold cufflinks:

"Mark you, dear fellow, I have now designated myself to be at the beck and call of my better half."

and I am to render specific services, namely, when the faucet goes on the fritz, or the radio . . . I would recommend more sweetie butter with the radishes, the butter is tip-top . . .”

“Thank you.”

“This heat, there’s bound to be a thunderstorm, I swear on the holiest of holies, bless me and my grenadiers!”

“Did you hear the thunder, Daddy, beyond the forest, far away?” (This was Lena, I hadn’t seen much of her yet, I hadn’t seen much of anything, in any case the ex-manager or the ex-director was expressing himself with a flourish.) “May I suggest a teensy-weensy helping of curdled milk, my wife is a very special specialist when it comes to curdled milkie, and what is it that makes hers the *crème de la crème*, my dear fellow? It’s the pot! The quality of milk fermentation depends on the lacto attributes of the pot.” “What do you know, Leon!” (The ex-manager’s wife interjected this.) “I’m a bridge player, my dears, an ex-banker, now a bridge player in the afternoons as well as Sunday nights by special wifely dispensation! So, gentlemen, you are here to study? Quite so, perfect, peace and quiet, the intellect can wallow like fruit in a compote . . .” But I wasn’t really listening, Mr. Leon’s head was like a dome, elf-like, its baldness riding over the table, accentuated by the sarcastic flashing of his pince-nez, next to him Lena, a lake, and the polite Mrs. Leon sitting on her rotundity and rising from it to preside over supper with self-sacrifice, the nature of which I had not yet grasped, Fuks saying something pallid, white, phlegmatic—I ate a piece of meat pie, still feeling sleepy, they talked about the dust in the air, that the season had not yet begun, I asked if it was cool at night, we finished the meat pie, then the fruit compote made its appearance, and, after the compote, Katasia pushed an ashtray toward Lena, the ashtray had a wire mesh—as if an echo, a faint echo of the other net (on the bed), on which a leg, a foot, a calf lay on the wire netting of the bed when I had walked into the room etc., etc. Katasia’s lip, slithering, found itself near Lena’s little mouth.

I hovered over it, I, who after leaving the other, there, in Warsaw, now became stuck in this, here, and I was beginning to . . . I hovered for one brief moment, but then Katasia left, Lena moved the ashtray to the center of the table—I lit a cigarette—someone turned on the radio—Mr. Wojtyś drummed on the table with his fingertips and hummed a little tune, something like ti-ri-ri, but then it broke off—drummed again, hummed again and broke off. It was cramped. The room was too small. Lena’s mouth closing and parting, its shyness . . . and that’s it, goodnight, we’re on our way upstairs.

We were undressing, and Fuks, shirt in hand, resumed his complaints about his boss, Drozdowski. He moaned whitely and wanly, carrot-like, that Drozdowski, that at first they got along famously, then something or other went sour, one way or another, I began to get on his nerves, can you imagine, I get on his nerves, let me move a finger and I get on his nerves, do you understand that, to get on your boss’s nerves, seven hours a day, he can’t stand me, he obviously tries not to look at me for seven hours straight, and if he happens to look at me his eyeballs skip away as if he’d been scalded, for seven hours! I don’t know—Fuks went on, his eyes fixed on his shoes—sometimes I feel like falling on my knees and crying out: Forgive me, Mr. Drozdowski, forgive me! But forgive me for what? And it’s not even his fault, I really do irritate him, my friends at work tell me shush, stay out of his sight, but—Fuks ogled me sadly, fish-like, with melancholy—but how can I keep in or out of his sight when we’re together in the same room seven hours a day, if I clear my throat, move my hand, he breaks out in a rash. Maybe I stink? And in my mind I associated the lamentations of the rejected Fuks with my departure from Warsaw, resentful, disdainful, both of us, he and I, dispossessed . . . the resentment . . . and so we went on undressing in this rented, unfamiliar room, in a house found by a fluke, by accident like two castaways, spurned. We talked some more about the Wojtyses, the family atmosphere, I felt

asleep. I awoke. It was night. Dark. Buried under my sheets, a few minutes passed before I found myself again in the room with the wardrobe, the night table, the water pitcher, until I found my bearings in relation to the windows and the door—which I managed to do thanks to a persistent though silent cerebral effort. I vacillated for a long time, what should I do, go back to sleep or not . . . I didn't feel like sleeping, I didn't feel like getting up either, so I mulled it over: should I get up, or sleep, or lie here, finally I stuck out my leg and sat up on the bed, and when I sat up the white blotch of the curtained window loomed before my eyes and, stepping up to it barefoot, I drew the curtain aside there, beyond the little garden, beyond the fence, beyond the road was the spot where the sparrow was hanging, hanged among the tangled branches, the black soil below it, where the bit of cardboard, the piece of sheet metal, the strips of lath, were lying about, where the tips of spruce were basking in the starlit night. I pulled the curtain back but I didn't move away because it occurred to me that Fuks might be watching me.

In fact, I couldn't hear him breathing . . . and if he wasn't asleep he must have seen that I was looking out the window, which in itself wouldn't be anything perverse were it not for the night and the bird, the bird in the night, the bird with the night. Because my looking out the window must have had something to do with the bird . . . and this was embarrassing . . . but the silence had lasted far too long and was too absolute, bringing me to the certainty that he was not there, that he had not been there at all along, that no one lay on his bed. I drew the curtain back again, and by the glow of the starry swarms I saw a vacant space where Fuks should have been. Where did he go?

To the bathroom? No, the hum of water from there was solitary. But in that case . . . what if he had gone to see the sparrow? I don't know why I thought of it, but I knew right away that this was quite possible, he could have gone, he had been interested in the sparrow, he was in the bushes looking for an explanation, his carrotty, phlegmatic mug was just the thing for such a search, it was just like him . . . to ponder, to scheme, who hanged it, why did he hang it . . . and, maybe he chose this house, among other things, because of the sparrow (this would be stretching it a bit, but the thought was there additionally, in the background), anyway, he had awakened, or maybe he hadn't gone to sleep at all and, his curiosity piqued, he got up, maybe he went to check some detail and to look around in the night? . . . was he playing detective? . . . I was inclined to believe it. More and more I was inclined to believe it. His doing this did me no harm, on balance, but I would have preferred not to begin our stay at the Wojtyśes' with such nocturnal escapades and, furthermore, I was a bit irritated that the sparrow was emerging again, bothering us, and it seemed to fluff its feathers, put on airs and pretend to be more important than it really was—and if this moron had actually gone to it, the sparrow would become a personage accepting visitors! I smiled. What next? I didn't know what to do, yet I didn't feel like going back to bed, I put on my pants, opened the door to the hallway, stuck out my head. There was no one, it was cooler, in the wan darkness I was aware of a little window to the left at the top of the stairs, I listened but heard nothing . . . I went out into the hallway, but somehow I didn't relish the idea that a short while ago he had silently gone out, and now I'm silently going out . . . In sum, our two exits were not quite so innocent . . . And when I left the room I re-created in my mind the floor plan of the house, the branching of the rooms, the arrangement of walls, alcoves, passages, furniture, and even people . . . all unfamiliar, I was barely becoming acquainted with it.

But here I was in the hallway of a strange house, in the dead of night, in just my pants and shirt—this peeked at sensuality, it was like slithering toward Katarina with the same slipperiness as her lip . . . where was she sleeping? Sleeping? As soon as I asked myself that, I became someone walking toward her in the night, down the hallway, barefoot, in just my shirt and pants, the tiny, just-a-tad twirl-up of

her lip, slippery and reptilian, together with my cold and disagreeable rejection and estrangeme from those I had left behind in Warsaw, drove me coldly toward her swinish lust which, somewhere here, in this sleeping house . . . Where was she sleeping? I took a few steps, reached the stairs and looked out the little window, the only one in the hallway, it looked out from the other side of the house, the one opposite the road and the sparrow, onto a wide space surrounded by a wall and lit by swarms and multitudes of stars; here was a similar little garden with gravel footpaths and frail little trees, passing farther on into a vacant lot with a pile of bricks and a small shed . . . To the left, next to the house, was an addition, probably the kitchen, the laundry, maybe it was there that Katasia rocked to sleep the frolic of her little mouth . . .

Moonless star-filled sky—stupendous—constellations emerged out of the swarms of stars, some I knew, the Big Dipper, the Great Bear, I was identifying them, but others, unfamiliar to me, were also lurking there, as if inscribed into the distribution of the major stars, I tried to fill in lines that might bind them into forms . . . and this deciphering, this charting, suddenly wearied me, I switched to the little garden, but here too the multiplicity of objects such as a chimney, a pipe, the angle of a gutter, the cornice of a wall, a small tree, as well as their more involved combinations like the turn and disappearance of the path, the rhythm of shadows, soon wearied me . . . yet I would begin anew, though reluctantly, to look for forms, patterns, I no longer felt like it, I was bored and impatient and cranky, until I realized that what riveted me to these objects, how shall I put it, what attracted me was the “behind,” the “beyond,” was the way that one object was “behind” the other, that the pipe was behind the chimney, the wall was behind the corner of the kitchen, just like . . . like . . . like . . . supper when Katasia’s lips were behind Lena’s little mouth when Katasia moved the ashtray with the wire mesh while leaning over Lena, lowering her slithering lips close to . . . I was more surprised than I should have been, at this point I was inclined to exaggerate everything, and besides, the constellations, the Big Dipper, etc., amounted to something cerebral, exhausting, and I thought “what are these mouths, together?” I was particularly astonished by the fact that both their mouths were now, in my imagination, in my memory, more closely linked together than then, at the table, I tried to clear my head by shaking it, but that made the connection of Lena’s lips with Katasia’s lips even more clear-cut, so I smirked, because truly, Katasia’s twirled-up lasciviousness, her slipping into swinish lust had nothing, absolutely nothing in common with the fresh parting and innocent closing of Lena’s lips, it was just that one was “in relation to the other”—as on a map, where one city is in relation to another city—anyway, the idea of maps had entered my head, a map of the sky, or an ordinary map with cities and roads, etc. The entire “connection” was not really a connection, merely one mouth considered in relation to another mouth, in the sense of distance, for example, of direction and position . . . nothing more . . . but, while I now estimated that Katasia’s mouth was most likely somewhere in the vicinity of the kitchen (she slept thereabouts), in fact I wondered where, in what direction, and at what distance was it from Lena’s little mouth. And my coldly-lustful striving in the hallway toward Katasia underwent a dislocation because of Lena’s incidental intrusion.

And this was accompanied by increasing distraction. Not surprisingly, because too much attention to one object leads to distraction, this one object conceals everything else, and when we focus on one point on the map we know that all other points are eluding us. And I, gazing at the little garden, at the sky, at the “beyond” duality of the two mouths, I knew, I knew that something was eluding me . . . something important . . . Fuks! Where was Fuks? Was he “playing detective”? I hoped this wouldn’t end in a big mess! I was disgruntled about having rented a room with this fish-like Fuks whom I hardly knew . . . but there, ahead of me was the little garden, the trees, the footpaths passing into

field with a pile of bricks and all the way on to a wall that was incredibly white, but this time it appeared as a visible sign of something that I could not see, namely the other side of the house, where there also was a bit of a garden, then the fence, the road, and beyond it the thicket . . . and within the tension of starlight merged with the tension of the hanged bird. Was Fuks there, by the sparrow?

The sparrow! The sparrow! Actually neither Fuks nor the sparrow was of much interest to me, it was the mouth, quite plainly, that really intrigued me . . . or so I thought in my distraction . . . and as I let go of the sparrow to concentrate on the mouth, a tiresome game of tennis evolved, for the sparrow sent me to the mouth, the mouth back to the sparrow, and I found myself between the sparrow and the mouth, one hiding behind the other, and, as soon as I caught up with the mouth, eagerly, as if I had lost it, I already knew that beyond this side of the house was the other side, that beyond the mouth was the sparrow hanging all alone . . . But worst of all, the sparrow could not be placed on the same map as the mouth, it was totally beyond, in another realm, it was here quite by chance, ridiculous actually, so when it was cropping up, it had no right! . . . Oh, oh, it had no right! Had no right? The less justification I had the more strongly it inflicted itself upon me and became more intrusive and more difficult for me to shake off—if it had no right, then the fact that it was pestering me was all the more significant!

I stood a while longer in the hallway, between the sparrow and the mouth. I returned to my room, lay down, and fell asleep faster than one would have expected.

The next day we took out our books and papers and went to work—I didn't ask him what he had done during the night—I felt reluctant to recall my own adventures in the hallway, I was like someone who had succumbed to fanciful extravagances and now feels awkward, yes, I felt awkward, but Fuks looked sheepish too and mutely turned to his calculations, which were laborious, on numerous scraps of paper, he even used logarithms, his goal being to develop a method at roulette, a method that would be, without the slightest doubt—and he knew it—humbug, tommyrot, but on which he focused all his energies because he had nothing better to do, nothing to keep him busy, his situation was hopeless, his vacation would be over in two weeks, he would then return to his office and to Drozdowski who would make superhuman efforts not to look at him, but there was no way around it because, even if he were to carry out his duties diligently, this too would be unbearable to Drozdowski . . . Exuding yawns, his eyes turned into tiny slits, he even stopped complaining, he was the way he was, who cares, all he could do now was to taunt me about my aggravation with my family, that's it, see, everyone's got his troubles, they're bugging you too, shit, I tell you, it's horrible, it's all a sham!

In the afternoon we went by bus to Krupówki, did some shopping. Supper time came, I had been waiting for it impatiently because I wanted to see Lena and Katasia, Katasia with Lena, after last night. In the meantime, I restrained myself from thinking about them, first, let me see them again, then think.

But what an unexpected upset of the apple cart!

She was a married woman! Her husband showed up after we had started eating, and now he was bringing his longish nose to his plate, while I watched this erotic mate of hers with a distasteful curiosity. What confusion—not that I was jealous, it's just that now she seemed different, totally changed by this man who was so alien to me, yet privy to the most secret closings of her little mouth—it was obvious that they were only married recently, he covered her hand with his hand and looked into her eyes. What was he like? Quite a big man, well built, on the heavy side, intelligent enough, an architect working on the construction of a hotel. He spoke little, reached for a radish now and then—but what was he like? What was he like? And how were they with each other when alone, how was he

with her, she with him, the two of them together? . . . ugh, to bump into a man at the side of a woman who turns us on, that's no fun . . . worse still, such a man, a total stranger, suddenly becomes the object of our—compulsory—curiosity, and we have to keep guessing his personal likes and dislikes . . . even though it disgusts us . . . we have to experience him through the woman. I don't know which I would prefer: alluring as she is, that she should now turn out to be repulsive because of him, or that she also become enticing because of the man she has chosen—awful possibilities either way!

Were they in love? Passionate love? Sensible? Romantic? Easy? Difficult? Not in love at all. Here, at the table, in the presence of her family, it was just the casual tenderness of a young couple that one could not, after all, watch at will, but only by stealing glances, by applying a whole system of maneuvers “on the border,” that would not transgress the demarcation line . . . I couldn't very well stare him in the face, my inquiry, ardent yet somewhat disgusting, had to be limited to his hand as it lay on the table in front of me, near her palm, I looked at this hand, big, clean, fingers not unpleasantly, nails clipped . . . I continued watching it, and I became more and more infuriated that I had not been able to penetrate the erotic possibilities of this hand (as if I were her, Lena). I found out nothing. Actually, the hand looked decent enough, but what of it, everything depends on the touch (I thought), on how he touches her, and I could perfectly well imagine their touching each other to be decent, or indecent, or dissolute, wild, mad, or simply conjugal—and nothing, nothing is known, nothing, because who couldn't shapely hands touch each other grotesquely, even astraddle, what assurance was there? Yet it was hard to imagine that a hand, so healthy and decent, would indulge in such excesses. Really, but suppose that it “nevertheless” did, then this “nevertheless” would become yet one more depravity. And if I could not have any certainty about their hands, what about their persons, in the background where I hardly dared to look? And I knew that a single, clandestine, barely visible hooking of his finger round her finger would be enough for their persons to become infinitely licentious, even though he, Ludwik, was just at that moment saying that he had brought the photos, and that they had come out very well, he'll show them after supper . . .

“What a comical phenomenon,” Fuks was finishing his account of finding the sparrow in the bushes on our way here. “A hanged sparrow! Who would ever think of hanging a sparrow? It's like flavoring borscht with two mushrooms instead of just one—it's too much!”

“Two mushrooms, two mushrooms indeed!” Mr. Leon politely assented, happy to agree. “Two mushrooms, now you figuree that, if you please, fiddle-de-dee, but what sadism!”

“Hooligans,” opined Mrs. Roly-Poly curtly and picked a thread off his cuff, while he instantly and happily agreed: “Hooligans.” To which Roly-Poly replied:

“You always have to contradict!”

“But Marysweetie, I say yes, hooligans!”

“But I say, hooligans!” she exclaimed, as if he had said something different.

“That's right, hooligans, I say, hooligans . . .”

“You don't know what you're saying!”

She straightened the border of the handkerchief sticking out of his breast pocket.

Katasia emerged from the pantry to clear the plates, and her twirled-up, slippery, darting lips appeared near the mouth that was across the table from me—I had been anxiously awaiting the moment while at the same time restraining myself, turning away from it so as not to influence anything, or interfere . . . so that the experiment would come off objectively. Mouth immediate

began to “relate to” mouth . . . and I saw that just then her husband was saying something to her, and Leon was butting in, and Katarasia was busy walking around, and all the while mouth was relating mouth, like a star to a star, and this mouth constellation corroborated my nocturnal escapades which I’d rather be done with . . . yet mouth with mouth, that slithering away disgusting twirled-up lips slipping away with that soft and pure mouth closing-and-parting . . . as if they really had something common! I lapsed into something like a trembling incredulity over two mouths having nothing common yet having something in common, this fact overwhelmed me and actually plunged me even deeper into unbelievable distraction—and it was all suffused with the night, as if steeped in yesterday’s murky.

Ludwik wiped his mouth with a napkin, and, setting it aside in an orderly fashion (he seemed to be very neat and clean, but his cleanliness could actually be filthy . . .), and he said, in his bass-baritone voice, that about a week ago he too had noticed a hanged chicken on a spruce by the roadside—but he had not given it much thought, anyway after a couple of days the chicken was gone.

“Oh, wonder of wonders,” Fuks marveled, “hanged sparrows, hanging chickens, maybe it’s a sign or omen that the world is coming to an end? How high up was the chicken hanging? How far from the road?”

He was asking these questions because Drozdowski couldn’t stand him, because he hated Drozdowski, because he didn’t know what else to do . . . He ate a radish.

“Hooligans,” repeated Mrs. Roly-Poly. She adjusted the bread in the basket with the gesture of a good hostess and provider of meals. She then blew off some bread crumbs. “Hooligans! There are lots of kids around, they do whatever they please!”

“That’s right!” Leon agreed.

“The crux of the matter is,” Fuks wanly remarked, “both the sparrow and the chicken were hanging at the reach of an adult’s hand.”

“Well? If not hooligans then who? So you think, siree, that it’s some weirdo? I haven’t heard of any weirdos in this vicinity.”

He hummed ti-ri-ri and with great attention turned to making bread pellets—he lined them up in a row on the tablecloth, watched them.

Katarasia pushed the wire-mesh ashtray toward Lena. Lena flicked the ash from her cigarette, which within me her leg responded on the wire netting of the bed, what distraction, mouth above mouth, bird and wire, chicken and sparrow, she and her husband, chimney behind drainpipe, lips behind lip, mouth and mouth, little trees and footpaths, trees and the road, too much, too much, without rhyme or reason, wave after wave, immensity in distraction, dissipation. Distraction. Tiresome confusion, then in the corner was a bottle standing on a shelf and one could see a piece of something, maybe of a cork stuck to the neck . . .

. . . I glued myself to the cork, and thus I rested with it until we went to bed, then, dreaming while sleeping, for the next few days nothing, nothing at all, a mire of activities, words, eating, going up and going down the stairs, though I did find out this and that, *primo*, that Lena taught foreign languages, she had married Ludwik merely two months ago, they went to Hel Peninsula, now they’ll live here until he finishes their little house—all this Katarasia told me, kindly, happy to oblige, dustcloth in hand, from one piece of furniture to another, *secundo* (this from Roly-Poly) “it needs to be cut again, the cloth sewn up, the surgeon told me, an old friend of Lena’s, I’ve told Katarasia so many times that I’ll cov-

the costs because, you know, she's my niece even though she's a simple peasant from the country near Grojec, but I'm not one to disown poor relatives, and besides, it's not aesthetic-looking, offends one's sense of the aesthetic, really, it's just gross, how many times have I told her over the years, because it's already been five years you know, since the accident, the bus ran into a tree, luckily nothing worse happened, how many times have I told her Kata, don't be lazy, don't be afraid, go to the surgeon, have it done, look at yourself, fix your face, but no, well, she's lazy, scared, days pass, once in a while she'll say I'll go, auntie, I'll go right away, but she doesn't, and now we're used to it, until someone reminds us, then it stares us in the face again, and even though I'm sensitive to the aesthetic, imagine the drudgery, cleaning, laundry, do this and that for Leon, then Lena wants something, then do something for Ludwik, from morning 'til night, one thing after another, while the operation waits, there's no time for it, when Ludwik and Lena move to their little house, maybe then, but in the meantime, it's a good thing that at least Lena has found an honest man, well, let him go and make her unhappy, I swear I'd kill him, I'd grab a knife and kill him, but thank God so far it's not bad, it's just that they won't do anything for themselves, neither he, nor she, just like Leon, she's taken after her father, I have to take care of everything, remember everything, hot water this, coffee that, do the laundry, socks, mend, iron, buttons, handkerchiefs, sandwiches, paper, polish this, glue that, then she won't do a thing, steaks, salads, from morning 'til late into the night, and, on top of it, lodgers, you know yourself how it is, I'm not saying anything, it's true they pay, they rent rooms, but I still have to remember things for this one and for that one, have it all on time, one thing after another . . . ”

. . . a multitude of other events filling, absorbing me, and every evening, as unavoidable as the moon, supper, sitting across the table from Lena, Katarina's mouth circling around. Leon manufacturing his bread pellets and lining them up in a row, with great care—watching them intently—then after a moment's deliberation impaling a pellet on a toothpick. Sometimes, after reflecting for a while, he would pick up a little salt on the tip of his knife and sprinkle it on the pellet, watching dubiously through his pince-nez.

“Ti-ri-ri!

“Grażyna* mine!” he said, turning to Lena, “why don't you toss your Daddydaddy some radish foodie food? Toss it!”

Which meant that he was asking her to pass him the radishes. It was difficult to understand such gibberish. “Oh Grażyna mine, your Daddy's princess beautiful!” “Roly-Poly my petite, what are you dawdling over, can't you see I want sucko!” He didn't always speak in “word-monsters,” sometimes he began crazily and ended quite normally, or vice versa—the shining roundness of his bald dome, his face stuck below it, his pince-nez stuck to that, hovered above the table like a balloon—his mood often turned humorous, and he would crack jokes, mommydear, easy does it, you know the one about the bicycle and the tricycle, when Icyk* sat on a bicyk, what a tricyk, yahoo! . . . While Roly-Poly would smooth out something around his ear or on his collar. He would sink into a reverie and braid the fringe of a napkin, or push a toothpick into the tablecloth—not just anywhere but in certain spots only to which, after lengthy reflection and with knitted brow, he would return.

“Ti-ri-ri.”

This irritated me because of Fuks, I knew it was grist for his Drozdowski mill, the mill that kept grinding him from morning until night, because he could not escape returning to his office in three weeks, and then Drozdowski would stare at the heating stove with a martyr-like expression, because Fuks said, he even gets a rash from my jacket, he's grown sick of me, it can't be helped, he's grown

sick of me . . . and Leon's eccentricities somehow suited Fuks because he watched them with his yellow, pallid, carrot-like look . . . and this pushed me even further into resenting my parents, into rejecting all that was there, in Warsaw, and I sat with resentment and hostility, halfheartedly watching Ludwik's hand that I couldn't care less about, that repulsed me, that riveted me, compelling me to penetrate its erotic-tactile possibilities . . . then there was Roly-Poly again, I knew, overflowing with activities, laundry, sweeping, mending, tidying up, ironing, etc., etc., and so on and on. Distracted by Swish and swirl. I would find my piece of cork on the bottle, watch the neck and the cork for the sake of I suppose, of not watching everything, the cork became in a way my bark on the ocean, even though only a distant hum reached me from the ocean, a hum too universal and too general to be really audible. And that was all. Several days filled with a little of everything.

The sweltering heat continued. What an exhausting summer! And so it dragged on with the husband, the hands, the mouths, with Fuks, with Leon, it dragged on in the sweltering heat, like someone walking down the road . . . On the fourth or fifth day my eyes strayed, not for the first time actually, far into the room, I was sipping tea, smoking a cigarette, and, having abandoned the cork, fastened my eye on a nail in the wall, next to the shelf, and from the nail I moved on to the cupboard, counted the slats, tired and sleepy I forayed into the less accessible places above the cupboard where the wallpaper was frayed, and I went trudging on to the ceiling, a white desert; but the tedious whiteness changed slightly farther on, near the window, into a rough, darker expanse contaminated with dampness and covered with a complex geography of continents, bays, islands, peninsulas, strange concentric circles reminiscent of the craters of the moon, and other lines, slanting, slipping away—sick in places like impetigo, elsewhere wild and unbridled, or capricious with curlicues and turns, breathed with the terror of finality, lost itself in a giddy distance. And dots, I don't know what from not likely from flies, their origins totally inscrutable . . . Gazing, drowned in it and in my own complexities, I gazed and gazed without any particular effort yet stubbornly, until in the end it was as if I were crossing some kind of a threshold—and little by little I was almost “on the other side”—took a gulp of tea—Fuks asked:

“What are you gawking at?”

I didn't feel like talking, it was stuffy, the tea. I replied:

“That line there, in the corner, behind the island, and that sort of a triangle . . . Next to the straits.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“What about it?”

“Well . . .”

After a long while I asked:

“What does it remind you of?”

“That smudge and the line?” he took it up eagerly, and I knew why so eagerly, I knew this would distract him from Drozdowski. “That? I'll tell you, just a minute. A rake.”

“Maybe a rake.”

Lena joined in the conversation because we were playing at guessing, a parlor game, easy and keeping with her shyness.

“What do you mean a rake?! It's a little arrow.”

Fuks protested: "Nonsense, it's not an arrow!"

A couple of minutes filled with something else, Ludwik asked Leon, "Would you like to play chess, father?" I had a broken fingernail that was bothering me, a newspaper fell to the floor, dogs barked outside the window (two little dogs, young, amusing, off their leashes at night, there was also a cat), Leon said, "One game," Fuks said:

"Maybe it is an arrow."

"Maybe an arrow, maybe not an arrow," I remarked, I picked up the newspaper, Ludwik rose, a bus rolled down the road, Roly-Poly asked "did you make that phone call?"

*The name of a beautiful princess and also title of a poem about her by Adam Mickiewicz.

*A variation on the name Isaac.

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