

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Marek Nowakowski Literary Award is a wonderful way of supporting those who write short stories, a form favoured by the Award's patron, the writer Marek Nowakowski, who died ten years ago. Nowakowski made his debut with the short story *Kwadratowy*, published in *Nowa Kultura* in 1957. His first book, *Ten stary złodziej*, appeared a year later. Today's award is being granted in recognition of the work *Ostatnia sarna na ziemi*, the first book by Piotr Pazdej. But in fact, Piotr Pazdej has been writing and publishing short stories in literary journals for several years already – works such as *Maski*, published in *Twórczość*.

The publication of *Ostatnia sarna na ziemi* is to be welcomed, because short prose forms have a much lower standing in our country than thick crime novels, multi-volume fantasy sagas and pseudo-historical works with magical episodes in them. Piotr Pazdej's stories read very well – there is a palpable sense of space in the prose, as if it is waiting for the reader's imagination to fill it. The author doesn't try to mystify us, nor does he try to explain the world at all costs. Instead, he tells us stories where the complex relations between a father and son come to the fore. More often than not, unfortunately, those relations are toxic, with far-reaching consequences, such as in the tale of two brothers in the aforementioned story *Maski*, which opens the collection. Now, as adults, the brothers cannot get through to each other, although they seem to try after one of them returns to his home country after years living in emigration. There is a love story here, as well as a cruel childhood flashback that is pivotal to the narrative – a scene on a hunting trip involving a deer, which somehow determines the future fate of the two brothers.

The figure of the father is very important in these works. It evolves from story to story. In the story entitled (...) *Jętność* we see a spiteful old man who, at the end of his life, is left all alone in a cluttered flat and is only able to salvage his skewed relationship with the world through his bitterness. Is he perhaps the father with the double-barrelled shotgun from the first story? Or is he the same man who, in the brutal title story *Ostatnia sarna na ziemi* – clearly the standout piece in the collection – fails to see that his behaviour towards his child is inappropriate and in fact rather pitiable? The father's grotesque escape into the woods in the epilogue is like the end of childhood, the burial of a world that will never return.

In Piotr Pazdej's stories, the world – our world – is dying. It is becoming a post-apocalyptic rubble. Most of the stories in this volume are set in Poland. But this is not today's Poland, but rather some future Poland, after a cataclysm. Has there been a war? A climate catastrophe? A virus? The author intertwines motifs in order to present the fate of his characters in the ruins of what was once the country on the Vistula. Clearly, the author has diligently studied Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, Steven Soderbergh's film *Contagion* and perhaps even good old books such as *On the Beach* by Nevil Shute – or the harrowing 1959 film of the novel – and Roger Zelazny's *Damnation Alley*. A post-apocalyptic world has become a fixed element of pop

culture, especially since the COVID-19 epidemic – although it should be noted that, reassuringly, Piotr Pazdej's stories are not part of that culture.

The epidemic undoubtedly changed us, and this change in our perception of the world is present in this book. Reading Pazdej, I sometimes have the impression that he has written a catalogue of our fears, as if the epidemic caused us to lose our foothold and our faith in a humanity that is flourishing economically and technologically. Or perhaps it is his hometown, Pabianice, a city that has experienced such profound changes in recent decades, above all the collapse of numerous industrial plants, unemployment, increased crime and drug abuse, that sets the tone for his writing? How does he describe it? Let us listen to his words:

"The war in the East, pandemics, the migration crisis, the demographic crisis and now the climate. Poland will not rise again. The world you know, the world you were born into, no longer exists. You need to adjust..."

"The metallic rasp of a sliding gate. He looks at the silhouettes standing in line. Clothes covered in white, all seemingly oversized, stretched, hanging off stooped shoulders. In the background the ruins of the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Rosary, scouring with its jagged edges the fat flesh of the dull grey clouds, moving just above the ground. Just two soldiers in uniform and a doctor in overalls, looking as if they have found themselves here by chance. They are clean and clear, transposed from another equally terrifying reality."

Or again:

"The woman sat on an old swivel stool. She did not look him in the eye. He sat down on the other side of the small desk and opened up the questionnaire she had filled out a few weeks earlier. Anna Wilewska, born 2021 in Pabianice. A husband and three children, all dead. War. Body of the eldest daughter never found. No next of kin. In the box marked "Reason" she had written in somewhat chaotic handwriting: "I don't want to waste anything anymore. Giving me food, water and oxygen is just a waste" [...]. He wanted to say something but a familiar memory stopped him. Anna's eyes were dead, her soul had long since departed her body."

As we have heard, the author follows the conventions of realism in his descriptions, even while describing two different realities – one that already exists and one that probably does not yet exist. Or perhaps it does already exist in our neighbour, Ukraine. The protagonists in Pazdej's stories are at the edge of their limits, struggling to survive, like those in the story *Monidło*, a married couple slowly dying in a dilapidated block of flats, or the body-burner in *Saudade*, for whom intimacy with another being, a woman, must end in the complete degradation of his already dying world. Ruined houses, the gloomy hospital where the story *Acedia* is set, littered stairwells, smoky, dust-covered streets, people wandering around with masks stuck to their faces – whose masks have in fact become part of their faces – a man shouting something in an incomprehensible Middle Eastern language: such is this world.

The protagonists of the final and longest story, *Ostatek*, are a father and son – the most important figure in Pazdej's stories returns with insistent, significant frequency. Although this short story abounds in violent episodes, it seems to me that a certain breakthrough occurs in the story, or perhaps, better, a redemption of guilt. The father begins to play the role of the protagonist again, and the nine-year-old child trusts him implicitly and enjoys being cared for by him. The author is clearly making a reference here to Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*. Marek Nowakowski was familiar with the work of McCarthy, who died last year in June, and I remember that he spoke highly of the novel *Blood Meridian*, for example. This dream about the relationship between a father and son – a dream that is fulfilled – although it takes place against the backdrop of the end of our civilisation, may indicate the existence of hope against hope. Could this be the hidden narrative in Piotr Pazdej's work?

Finally, I would like to quote Marek Nowakowski in his short story *Fabuła*:

"My only wish, as someone addicted to writing, is to plunge into the vast, deep, fast-flowing river of fiction. Into a kind of Cheremosh River of events drawn from life, but lifted up. To create a world detached from the bonds that tie it to the earth, a world full of fantasy and momentum, a world that is amoral, nihilistic even. This desire throbs persistently in me. Find a framework, a structure, an axis. Arrange a sequence of events. Slowly and carefully fill in the delineated area. I hope for a revelation – I already have some raw material, scraps of events, images. They are in storage, waiting. [...] An abundance. Only the method, the overarching idea is still missing. The plot – that will-o'-the-wisp that appears over the swamp and then disappears again. I would like, like Cervantes, to write and then read each chapter of my great tome to my cellmates."

Piotr, may that will-o'-the-wisp appear before the eyes of your imagination as frequently as possible.

Wojciech Chmielewski